Summary

Former houseboy Arno must learn to survive the French Revolution, and learn the price of pursuing an ideal no matter the cost.
Versailles, December 27, 1776

"Arno..."

"Can't I go with you, père?"

"Courage, my boy. You just wait here. I will return when this hand reaches the top."

"... That's forever."

"Hmph, not as long as all that. And when I get back, we'll see the fireworks."

... 

"And Arno? No 'exploring', hmm?"

"Oui, père."

Élise de la Serre was eight years old, and she was going to be the next Templar Grandmaster. Her mother was Julie de la Serre and was the most amazing person in the whole world. Her mother told her not to act like court ladies, to watch and listen and to think instead of obsess over fashion. Her mother brought Weatherall to teach her about swords. Élise already knew she was much smarter than that bratty ten-year-old Carrol girl, and she'd already had two adventures! Her mother and Weatherall had beaten back a blood-thirsty wolf, and there was that very scary incident in a back alley of Paris. With an assassin! It... it had been scary that time but her mother was clearly, objectively, the most amazing person ever!

The de la Serre were different from everybody. That made it hard, of course, but it also made them special. Nobody else could say their women could protect themselves, and no one else could say they were destined to lead the world. Élise had special training that nobody else did, she was the only girl in the entire world who knew swordsmanship, Weatherall was very particular about that, and she knew more about how France was governed than any girl her age. Her job, when she was older, was to get people to do what she wanted, because she was going to quietly be the next advisor of the King, and she had to get the King to do as she wanted. For the good of France.

She had been happy when her father told her she was going to Versailles – another adventure! But she learned very quickly that the adventure was for her father and not for her. How boring!

"And Arnaud, no exploring, hm?"

Élise perked to hear the sentence. It sounded so like a father. Was there another child nearby? Someone she could play with? She darted down a hall and hid behind a corner, peaking her head out... there!

"Oui, père," a boy said, sullen. How wonderful, the same age as her! This would be exciting.

Élise held her breath once, twice, waited for the boy to be bored, saw him turn and look at the painting above him. Perfect!
She let herself giggle slightly, waited for him to hear it. She watched him perk, and the chase was on.

How fun it was, darting through the elaborate halls of Versailles, ducking under the lowly servants and even knocking over something – what noise it made! What a reaction from the staff!

"Gardes, arrêtes-les!"

"Where'd they come from?"

"... Isn't that the de la Serre girl?"

"Allez!" she called back, looking over her shoulder. The boy was smiling, too, enjoying the adventure Élise had concocted, and soon they were in some kind of courtyard, the air chilled immediately, and she was thankful for the many layers of her dress. There was a table full of foodstuffs. Perfect!

Élise turned around, cheeks rosy from the run and the chill, and gave her best smile. "Bet you can't steal one!" Would it work? Would he do as she said? She darted back to the door of the courtyard and waited to see what he would do. The boy gulped and shifted his weight from one side to the other, hands worrying. A coward? But no, he took a deep breath and snatched an apple. Wonderful! Just like Mère had said! People were easy to control. Her new power flooded her tiny body, and she was hopping up and down on her feet and clapping her hands at her success.

Which was, of course, why one of the palais' guards turned around. His face was instantaneously livid.

"Thief! Put that back, these are for his Royal Highness, not the likes of you! Do you know what the penalty is for stealing?"

Élise lost all color and quickly darted behind the doorway she had been waiting at and slapping her hands over her mouth.

Nothing happened, however, and she dared to look around again. The boy was crouched behind a hedge, white as a sheet, but the apple was still in his hand. Goodness, the boy was good!

It took several minutes, but the boy remustered his courage and was able to dart towards her. Élise pulled him through a few more halls, backtracking slightly. When they were both safe, panting from excitement, they caught each other's eyes and they both laughed.

"Did you see their faces when we stole those apples?" she asked.

They both giggled.

"I'm Arnaud," the boy introduced himself.

"Élise," she replied.

"I'm here with my père."

"So am I," Élise said. "He has 'important business' with the king."

"What should we do now?"

Élise was about to answer when she heard something, a sound far away. She put a finger to Arnaud's mouth, shushing him. "Listen," she whispered, and the noise slowly got louder.
Footsteps, hurried, moved down the hall, and the pair stared at each other, wondering if they really were going to get in trouble. "Don't worry," Élise said, trying to shake it off. "They'll never think to look for us in here." ...Right?

"This way, this way!" someone said, gruff voice. Another set of footsteps were moving, this time heavier and much closer.

And, to Élise's shock, the boy, Arnaud, stepped forward. "It was my fault," he said. "I'm the one who took the apples."

A boy under her power and now honorable as well? Élise liked this boy even more!

But the guard shoved Arnaud aside – quite harshly, how rude! - and Élise realized another adventure was about to happen. She grabbed Arnaud's arm. "Let's see where they're going!" Oh, this was going to be exciting. Hopefully not scary like that time in a Paris alley, truly exciting. Élise delighted at the idea. Could she use her new powers there, as well?

Through an atrium, into a music room of some kind, around a corner, and look! Back in a hall, and there was a crowd of people! Surely there were more people here Élise could tell what to do. She pushed through a few pairs of legs, tugging Arno with her. "Excuse me, Monsieur," she said in her most polite voice, tugging on the culotte of one of the men. "Monsieur," she said again.

"Élise! Come here, girl, now!"

Élise started, looked over to see her father marching towards her, the most awful look on his face. She quickly turned to Arnaud, wondering if he would defend her honor again, but realized belatedly he was no longer holding her hand. He was staring beyond all the legs, and only then did Élise realize there was a body on the floor.

François de la Serre shook hands with M. Franklin, the old Englishman – no, the old American, he would have to get used to that now – all smiles and convivial amiability. The Rite had a chance, a real chance, to meet their goals in the colonies, and he knew Maître Kenway was more than capable of ushering in the New World to the New World. The man perfectly emulated the values of the Order, and François would be certain France supported the Americans. Louis had always been malleable in that respect, and the idea of sticking it to England was an added bonus.

"I'll do everything I can, Monsieur," he told M. Franklin. "You have our unwavering support."

"Thank you, Monsieur de la Serre," Franklin replied. "Here's hoping to a long friendship."

That was when they heard the first scream.

François snapped to attention – Franklin did, too, of course – but François had seen that maverick Irishman Cormac. If that loose cannon did anything to hurt the negotiations...! They moved out into the hall, lush red carpet glowing in the late afternoon sun, the gold trim shining as the magic hour hit its zenith, but on the floor was a blemish of darkness, a body lying there on its back. Red sash at his waist... Oh, no...

Quickly, he leaned in to the American to do damage control. "Monsieur Franklin, I sincerely hope this unfortunate affair does not darken your opinion of our nation."

"Monsieur, if we judged nations by the character of their criminals we should all be called barbarians."
François quickly hid his sigh of relief, and then almost immediately swallowed it as he realized his daughter was not where he left her. Sudden panic flushed through him, remembering Julie's horrifying story from a several months ago. Calm, remain calm, the girl had obviously run off, meaning she would be nowhere near here, meaning she was safe. Cormac wouldn't harm a Templar, loose cannon though he was, he treasured the Order and wouldn't dare invoke the wrath of a Maître. Breathe, François, just breathe... *Nom de dieu* the trouble that girl was in...!

Ah, but there was the bright green dress and red hair, moving immediately to the crowds. "Élise!" he said firmly, "Come here, girl, now!"

"*Père*?"

François froze, his eyes finally ripping away from his daughter to see another child, likely the same age, staring.

"*Père*!"

The boy pushed his way through and stared at the body. His face was totally blank of expression, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. Something fell out of his hand, the clatter on the carpet muted. François looked to his daughter.

"Do you know his name?" he asked.

"Arnaud," she answered.

What a grizzly business. Cormac. He had to do something about Cormac. No, the child came first.

"Arnaud," he said gently.

The boy stood mute, staring, unable to look away, most likely locked in his own little mind. Oh, the poor child, to be so young... "Arnaud," he said, louder, with a hint more force. "Look at me."

The boy looked up, eyes so wide, face so pale. Élise might have looked like that, if things had gone differently at the alley. *Merde*, his heart bled for the child. Someone would have to look after him until they found the mother. François offered his hand. The boy, mute, took it. Perfect. He yanked Arnaud back, guided his face to his waist, anything to turn the child away from the cadaver. Élise was at his other hip, watching with her ever intelligent eyes.

"*Monsieur* Franklin," he said softly, "Perhaps you could help me find a room for the children?"

"Yes, of course, *monsieur*," Franklin said. He put on a tight smile. "What's your name, girl?"

"Élise," she said carefully, eyes darting to Arnaud and the body. "What's your name?"

"Oh, my name is Benjamin."

"Ben... Benja..."

"You may call me Ben, child, I know English names can be hard on young mouths."

It was, oh, hours later. The royal guards had their hands full: handling the body, interviewing witnesses, trying to identify the cadaver. François did not see Cormac, but he found a page and sent him to find his friend Chrétien with a missive to find Cormac and hold him until he could be spoken to. The hardest part had been the interview with the boy. The guards tried to be gentle, of course, but an eight-year-old boy so recently traumatized was difficult to deal with. François sat
with him, Élise on his other side, and he did all he could to coax the boy into talking.

Charles Dorian was the man's name. They had just come back from Africa, and Charles had to give a report. Nobody could find out who he was reporting to, and Arnaud didn't know. He spoke in small, soft mumbles that the guards could barely understand. Élise, eager to help, repeated what he said in a much clearer voice, and François guided her with looks and nudges on when to talk and when to be quiet. Where was the mother? Gone for a long time, since Arnaud was four. Where did he live? Arnaud didn't know, he'd been abroad for two years. A house with three floors and a lot of books, he knew that much. Servants? A cook who would slap his hands with her spoon if he got too close, that made the guard chuckle.

But that was all they could get out of him, and François was quickly coming to realize that the boy had nowhere to go, and François himself didn't exactly know how to contact his mortal enemies to let them know one of theirs had been orphaned. The maître knew what the odds of an orphan were in Versailles, let alone Paris.

"I'll keep him for a few days," he said softly to one of the guards. "Until arrangements can be made."

"Oui, Monsieur," the guard said. "We'll begin our investigation at once."

Arnaud had fallen asleep, and François picked him up – they were heavy at this age – and watched the boy curl naturally into his shoulder. Élise looked up, jealous, but François silenced her with a look. The carriage was waiting for him, and he settled in with the boy on his lap. "Arnaud is going to stay with us for a while," François told his daughter. "The boy's been through a tragedy, and we need to help him as principled people."

Élise's mind was working, a small frown on her face. "Is this because he doesn't know his mam'en?"

"Oui."

"So he has nowhere to go?"

"Non, he doesn't."

And suddenly her face split into a delighted smile. "Then we can keep him?"

"Élise, he isn't a pet."

"But I got him to do what I wanted, just like Mère said I could, and then he defended my honor. He can be my chevalier in shining armor!"

"This isn't a fairy tale, Élise," François scolded. "The boy has just lost his père."

Élise pouted of course, but this late at night she fell asleep quickly.

Julie, bless her, saw the child when he came in and didn't even blink, calling for Olivier and telling him to set an extra bed. She and François put the children to bed, Julie putting an extra warming pan in the boy's, and François explained what had happened at the palais.

His beloved clucked her tongue. "Are you certain it was Cormac?"

"An Assassin is dead. I know of no one else so zealous as to perform such a task at Versailles."
"I assume that was why Chrétien stopped by earlier."

"Oui. He has Cormac?"

"Oui. The man thinks you've arranged a meeting."

François' face darkened. "In a way, I have. I'll want him here early in the morning, before the children wake up. I don't want them hearing this."

"I'll have Olivier set it up. For now, let us to bed. I am very tired."

They held each other that night. Julie fell asleep easily – sharp as her mind was her body was beginning to fail – but François was up for a very long time, thinking about children, about responsibilities, about the future.

Cormac came at six in the morning, the sky only barely beginning to lighten and even then, it was a dark overcast that forced lamps to stay lit. His black and red overcoat were gaudy in such a noble house, his scar and age lines making him look like a mercenary, a cold blooded killer. And he was.

"Come with me," François said.

"If it please ye," Cormac said in his accented French.

"None in the Order can deny your expertise, monsieur, nor your thoroughness. Your work in the Colonies has been stalwart and beyond reproach. I saw you in the palais yesterday, but you did not announce your business with me. Why were you there?"

"Master Kenway sent me," Cormac said. "The Assassins had a box from Those Who Came Before. I came here to retrieve it."

"And did you?"

"Yes. The journey was very productive."

"Monsieur, in that we quite disagree." François opened a door, holding a finger to his lips to ensure silence. Cormac looked in, saw little Arnaud sleeping, still pale even now. Cormac frowned, looking at François in obvious confusion. The Maître closed the door. "That boy," he whispered, "Is named Arnaud. You have succeeded in making an orphan."

Cormac's face did not change, save for a slight widening of he eyes. "He's an Assassin?"

"Non," François corrected. "He is a child, and now he has nothing and no one to turn to, vulnerable to the world the way you were."

"Not like I was," Cormac corrected, voice dark and low.

"Does it matter?" François countered. "An Assassin might not think twice about who he orphans, but the Templars are of a higher morality than that. Tell me, would you have killed the man in front of that child's eyes? Would you have killed the boy if he was a witness?"

"I."

"Non, monsieur. I have said my piece. This is why one contacts a maître before running around half cocked. I could have told you who was at that meeting if you had let me know about it. I could have given you help in eavesdropping or following the attendants. I would have told you
what a damned fool idea it was to murder someone in Versailles. Whatever value Maître Kenway sees in you is now forfeit in this country. You are no longer welcome in France Monsieur Cormac; I've already written the other Rites. As a courtesy of your service we will provide for your transport back to England, but that is the extent of my kindness. Do you understand, monsieur?"

Cormac's face was flat, composed, but the slight lowering of the corners of his mouth spoke volumes. "I understand, Master Serre," he said in English.

François deliberately did not see him out, instead tending to Julie, who had watched from another room, silent support and ready warrior if things went badly. Both breathed a sigh of relief when Olivier said the carriage had left.

"We have another problem," Julie said over breakfast.

"Yes, I know. The boy himself."

"It is as you told Élise," Julie said, "and as you told Cormac. We are of a higher moral principle."

"Élise?" François asked.

"She's listening behind the corner, François," Julie said with a small grin. "Have you not noticed?"

The girl was smart enough to come as soon as she was discovered, taking a seat at the table.

"Well," the Maître said. "Seeing as I am clearly outnumbered, it would appear that we are, in fact, 'keeping' him."

Élise, of course, was delighted, sunshine immediately emanating from her face, but Julie simply put a hand on her to curb her reaction. "How do we integrate him?" she asked. "A servant? He is young for that. Can he read?"

"Most certainly," François said. "He's an Assassin."

"We cannot ignore his schooling," Julie said, "But the question is how much he should receive? What station should we place him, what trade?"

François had been pondering that late into the night. "Our first priority is to see how smart he is. If his mind is as keen as is usual for his kind, then perhaps we can use it to our benefit."

"You mean turn him," Julie said, the distinct look of disapproval on her face. "François..."

"He obviously knows nothing of his heritage," he said quickly. "There would be little fear of betrayal, and Maître Kenway has proven to be a ringing endorsement of the process."

"Oh, François," Julie said, taking two fingers to her temple. "You've no idea of the human condition. Maître Kenway was deeply scarred from the murder of his father, and he has spent most of his life looking for the killer. Imagine what would happen if he ever learned we were the ones who killed his père, let alone that he was an Assassin? A man of his skills would be a force to be reckoned with, and he would know all of our innermost workings and plans. It is too dangerous to turn him. Ignorance, as they say, is bliss."

"I don't want him a Templar," Élise added. "I can't practice my powers if he's supposed to be like me."

François shook his head. "I am outnumbered," he said, sighing, leaning back. "We'll install him as
a servant, a page for now until he's older. *Monsieur* Weatherall can assess how smart he is. Élise, go tell Olivier what I've just said."

"*Oui, Père!*" the girl replied, all but popping out of her seat and darting off to do her task.

Julie, of course saw through the dismissal. "You still want to turn him."

François nodded. "You have a point about the human condition," he acquiesced. "I fear to guess how long it will be before he can say more than bare mumbles, or how long the grief will hold him. Gentle hands will be necessary for this, and trying to induct him at so sensitive a time would be ludicrous."

"But you are not saying no."

"*Non,* I am not," François said. "*Je suis désolée,* Julie, but every time I look at that boy I think about what could have happened to you and Élise in Paris and." His voice cracked.

"Sh," Julie said gently, reaching across the table and taking his hand. François blinked, not realizing how moist his eyes were. Damned weather, to be sure. He rubbed at them. "I understand," she said, thumb rubbing his knuckles. "You see a dark possibility, and you want to erase it. I foresee you doting on him as you do Élise, a second child and a son for you to pamper."

"I wouldn't dare go that far," François said. "He is not family, you and Élise are."

Julie smiled, softly – that knowing smile that he so loved about her. This was not their bed chambers, where he could express his inner-most self without fear of servants coming in, but she saw everything on his face, as she always had done, and she told him everything with her bright eyes. Scandalous as it was, he leaned over the table and kissed her, giving her his gratitude.

François pulled the staff aside the next day to discuss little Arnaud.

"The child has suffered a loss. He found his father's body. No one knows where his mother is. We will be doing our best to find his family, but he has traveled so much and the shock has made him very quiet. Without any information, we'll install him as a house boy for now. Give him small tasks to do and keep busy. Keep his mind off his tragedy." From there it was shorter conversations individually. Élise was currently the only other child in the house, but staff had had children before. One of François’ best friends growing up had been a child two years younger than him that had been the son of the cook. François had rewarded that friendship and service and that boy now kept the family house in Paris with his young bride.

François then spoke with Weatherall. The Englishman would be in charge of assessing young Arnaud. Given the boy's heritage, François had some very specific expectations. There was no doubt the boy would have some level of physical skills – useful in his new role as part of the staff – but how far did that training go? Did he have any fighting skills? Could he be trained to be a bodyguard for Élise? Or would he simply be better off in the stables? François reminded himself not to make decisions without more information. And by far the most important thing to learn was the boy's intelligence. Being an idiot would limit positions, after all. But the Assassins, for all their backwards thinking, proved to be cunning as well. Their philosophy ignored the very foundation of what humanity was like, but it was a philosophy, proving that the Assassins had many deep thinkers to even generate a philosophy – inane as it was. Arnaud would likely be able to read and write, François was certain of that. But how adept was his mind?

Still, the assessments would be made by Weatherall and the staff would look after him. So François
A week later, after the turn of the new year, Weatherall made his report. As François expected, the boy was already strong for his age and had knowledge of the first lessons of fencing and swordplay. He could read and write and when he spoke it was clear he could pick things up swiftly. In fact, an interesting tidbit that Weatherall mentioned was that they had been spelling the boy's name wrong. It was not the proper French Arnaud. Instead, the spelling was Austrian: Arno. Julie had frowned at that, though François couldn't understand why, but she could provide her own observations, such as how little Arnaud – Arno – understood basic politics of the staff. What was sad, however, that both Weatherall and the staff mentioned was how reticent the boy was. Many of the women had tried to offer solace to the child, but it seemed he didn't respond. Only sat there quietly. Élise had come to him, frowning, asking why her powers didn't seem to work anymore, or was it that Arno was broken and how to fix him. With so many pleas, François realized he couldn't just let the boy disappear into the staff. He would have to speak to him again.

So he called the boy up to his office.

"Arno," François said softly. He sat at the settee with a cup of coffee, looking at a long night ahead of him with secret Templar communications – he wanted this to be brief, had squeezed it in after dinner. Haytham was getting a man to deal with that troublesome Washington, and while it was too early for a report, François wanted to review how things were going. After all, Haytham had lost another of his subordinates to the Assassins earlier that year, a man named Hickey. It seemed Haytham was either incompetent and didn't know who the Assassin was yet after losing so many Templars, or more likely he knew damn well who it was and wasn't sharing.

"Monsieur," Arno greeted quietly, still standing.

"Bonsoir," François refocused. He didn't offer a seat. Staff didn't get that privilege. "I know losing family is difficult," after all, he still dreamed of when he almost lost Julie and Élise, "You've been here a week now. I thought I'd see how you were doing."

"Everyone has been very kind," Arno said softly, looking down to the floor.

That should have been enough. Arno was doing well, send him on his way, get to work. But François hesitated. Arno wasn't fine. That was why he'd called the boy up.

"Arno," he said softly. "Come sit with me."

The boy hefted himself onto the seat, staring down at his lap.

François thought for a moment, wondering what approach would work best. His experience with Élise wouldn't work given how direct she was when upset. Finally though, he decided to be direct, as he would with the rest of the staff. "What's bothering you?"

Arno said nothing for a long time. Eyes fixed on his hands, François considered asking again, but he saw a tear fall. Then another. And another.

Finally the boy was quietly sobbing, trying to hold it in with little success and rubbing at his eyes. François didn't think. He stood, stepped over, and sat by Arno, sweeping into a hug as he would with little Élise. The sobbing continued and François felt nothing but sympathy. It seemed that the boy hadn't let this out since his father had died. The least François could do was weather the storm and let Arno feel with the loss.

Some time later, Arno's tears were finally starting to abate. By then, François had rung the staff and
asked for some chocolate and sweets which he gave the boy to eat.

"Sorry," Arno mumbled, red-faced and staring down to his lap.

"It's quite alright," François replied. "As I said, a loss is a difficult thing."

"'s my fault," the boy mumbled, face somehow getting even redder.

"Come now," François automatically said, "you didn't-"

"I left."

And all at once, François understood. It wasn't just grief. The boy was facing guilt as well. That was a heavy burden to bear. He couldn't help but recall what he'd told Élise the previous year. That people didn't want freedom and responsibility because it was too great a burden to bear, that only the strongest minds could do so. Arno's mind wasn't a strong one. It weighed grief and guilt and came up with strain. François hugged the child tight. Élise had proven to have a strong mind, she had survived the attack on her and her mother and showed no ill affect. Arno hadn't faced such violence, had only discovered the loss, and he was already crumbling.

Julie was right. Arno wasn't ready to be indoctrinated to the Templar order. His mind was too weak.

But...

Perhaps...

No. François would follow Julie's wishes on this.

"It's alright," he said softly to the young boy.

"Non, it's not," Arno insisted softly. "Father told me to wait. No 'exploring'. We would have been gone." The child's face scrunched up into a fresh round of tears. "B-but I left. I disob-beyed. It's all my fault!"

François pulled Arno close again, feeling tears in his own eyes. He remembered the attack on Julie and Élise. One thing going wrong... And a child, even one as competent and formidable as Élise, could make a mistake. Something as simple as wandering away. He gave an extra squeeze for the despondent boy in his arms.

"Let's get one thing straight, Arno," François said firmly. "You are not to blame for being a child. You are not to blame for putting a blade in your father. You are not to blame."

"But I m-made a choice," Arno mumbled. That damn Assassin philosophy. "My ch-choice... My fault..."

So François hugged him.

François had promised himself that he wouldn't take an interest in Arno or in training him. Julie had insisted that it wasn't their place, and that Arno would not be a good fit. But after that night, François couldn't help but notice. He would look up and smile or offer kind words if Arno came in to deliver something or to do some small, menial chore. He paid attention, as he always did with Élise. But he kept to that promise.

But the new year had dawned with Arno coming to them and Julie became ill with it.
A lingering illness that slowly wasted her away.

He sat with her often at first. Offering words of support, vowing that this would get better. Doctor after doctor was called. Élise would sit with her mother for hours at a time. Weatherall as well, and his cheeks were always tear-stained afterwards. François could not afford to spend so much time as he wanted with his beloved wife. He was still Grandmaster. He had an Order to run. A king to manage. Aristocrats to keep in line. So many little things.

And, to his private and personal shame, it was easier.

As Julie became more and more skeletal, as her complexion paled to translucent, he mourned the loss of his wife before she was even gone.

He wanted to remember as he knew her best. Strong, capable, quick-witted, and wise.

He did not want to remember the remains of her that still held breath.

So it was easier.

It was easier to start teaching Arno.

Teaching him the sword. Teaching him maths and sciences. Getting him to the same lessons as Élise and reviewing it with him.

Arno was still a member of the staff. He had tasks to do, chores to accomplish. But François... found it easier to dote on the boy than to dote on his failing wife.

And when Julie died...

Élise did what was expected of a young lady of her station. She was sent to boarding school, but François insisted that Weatherall accompany her. Partially as bodyguard, partially as continuing teacher, partially to get rid of a man who loved his wife as much as François did but was able to stay.

So François focused on little Arno.

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Life moved on.

Arno became a member of the household, and François remained somewhat proud of how the boy had come along. Granted, the majordomo Olivier seemed to have nothing but contempt and scorn for the boy, but François put that to not caring for children in general. Olivier also seemed unhappy with Élise, though he was far more reticent about it, whereas Arno was within his control, or lack of it. François took this in stride. That young Assassin had such a keen mind and was finally smiling so much that he brushed aside such criticisms. He matched well with Élise's sharp wit and the two challenged each other to new heights. François wouldn't be a very good father to Élise if he didn't keep around such a foil, no matter how Olivier wanted Arno reported or thrown out of the staff and house.

It wasn't until the children were fourteen, however, that François started to wonder if the good match was perhaps a little too good.

The cook had evidently sent Arno out to make an order for fruits from an orchard just outside of
Versailles. Also evidently, Élise had decided to tag along, and given how often those two were together, no one had given a second thought about her going off with Arno on his work.

François would talk to the staff tomorrow about that. On ensuring that Arno doing work did not need Élise bothering him, and to shoo her away as needed. He could already see Olivier's bare twitch of a smug smile. But that was tomorrow.

Right now he had two children to scold. Thoroughly.

The first, of course, would be Élise. Arno was still being treated by a doctor.

For it had seemed that when the two had gone to the orchards something had happened. There had been dogs involved, and a chase, and now Arno needed to be treated for several severe dog bites in his leg. Neither child had been able to offer a clear history of events and François could see that the two were covering for each other and that no story would ever bear the complete truth. At this point, the truth didn't matter. He knew enough.

"Élise," François greeted his daughter in her room. She had been quite upset at Arno's injury, and she quickly stood demanding to know how the boy was doing. He held up his hand and she returned to proper decorum, sitting neatly once more in her chair. François stepped over to her, but remained standing, crossing his arms. "Today's incident shows very little thought, and from you, my dear, that surprises me."

She frowned up at him, showing no signs of anything other than calm.

Much better.

"I expect better from you, Élise," he started, keeping his voice soft and firm. "You are de la Serre. You are a Templar. I have been very thorough in what that means. Weatherall has done so as well whilst you're at school." And what a day for Weatherall to have the day off. He would likely have prevented this little mishap, whatever it was. "You are to be a leader amongst all of humanity. A beacon of how things should be and will be when we win this detestable war with the Assassins. And a leader shepherds all who follow them."

Élise said nothing.

Good. That meant she was thinking.

"It doesn't matter how this transpired. What matters is that it did transpire. On your watch."

That got a flicker, and François nodded to himself. He was getting through to her.

"Now there is no way to prevent every catastrophe in existence. Floods and famine care not for human intervention. But we plan as Templars. We prepare for eventualities. I see no sign of any such thing from the mangled accounts of both you and Arno, and the farmer who came to see me about reimbursing him for the damages you two caused."

At last, Élise looked down and François knew that what he was saying was sticking.

"What you have done is as follows: One: You have caused Arno, a staff member that is under your care, injury. Two: You have caused damage to a farmer who feeds us, and is under our care. Three: You have caused injury to a dog, who did only what a dog does. Four: You have caused injury to me, as I have to pay for this and ensure that this indiscretion doesn't follow you as you continue to grow." He raised a brow at her. "You are starting to reach a marriageable age, my dear, so you need to look to your image now more than ever. Part of the cruelty of man that we must overcome its
long memories and hatred that breeds from festering wounds."

"I understand, Father," she finally spoke, softly and sincerely contrite.

"I hope so," he replied. "Because you will be facing a more severe punishment than Arno. He has enough punishment with that torn up leg."

Her eyes flashed, resisting briefly, before going back to her calm face.

Good girl.

"Now this is not because I'm trying to be unfair. But because you bear more responsibility in this. You are a Templar, and you did not shepherd as you were supposed to. Arno is staff. He is one who needs to be guided and you guided him wrong."

"I understand," she repeated. "Do as you see best."

François nodded again. "The first punishment, is that you are confined to this house. You will not be going about town for any reason whatsoever."

"Of course."

"Second, you will now do Arno's chores that he cannot as he is laid up in bed, saving those that require leaving the house. I hope you enjoy mucking out stalls. I will tell Olivier to give you the worst chores he gives to Arno."

She nodded, but there was the tiniest flash of a smile he didn't like.

"Third, in the free time you have, you are to study your least favorite subjects. Classical literature and musical theory. I will be testing you in this, as will others I bring by to ensure you have studied."

Her face was calm and she nodded her agreement.

And now the last and hardest one for him to do.

"Finally, you will return to your boarding school two weeks early."

"What? Non! Father, please!"

François raised an eyebrow and tilted his head just so.

It was work for her to control her face. Her jaw was twitching in displeasure, that much was clear her eyes still flashing anger and rage. He wondered if something was wrong at school, but he doubted it. Surely, she would tell him. Besides, he didn't want to send her early. He had so little time with her due to the boarding school. He cherished having her about the house and she was so like her mother when she was younger.

Julie...

But for now, she had erred, and as her father he needed to ensure that this lesson stuck.

"For now, you are to stay in your room for the remainder of the day."

She nodded sullenly.
François frowned, but left it as it was. She had been scolded and punished appropriately. Most importantly, she learned. He doubted he'd see her in such trouble again.

He hoped.

Trouble seemed to follow Élise and Arno.

François headed to the servant section of the ville, and finding Olivier first. He explained the punishment for Élise, and the punishment he planned for Arno. Olivier clearly wasn't happy with either, but he did what was proper and said nothing, merely accepting it. Good man.

Next he checked in with Arno. The doctor had come and gone, providing stitches and warning that there were signs of infection already starting and what foods and herbs would be required to ward it off, along with a salve to be applied every day. François nodded it all off. The staff would handle that, he didn't need to know, that was beneath his purview. Instead, he cared about the price of it. He nodded, sent the doctor to Olivier to pay him, and entered Arno's tiny room.

The boy was red-faced, from shame or fever François couldn't say, leaning back on his bed with his leg up on a pile of pillows fetched by the women staff and their emotional sensibilities. The leg in question was bandaged, and there was no sign of bleeding through, which François took as a good sign.

"Arno," he greeted sternly, deliberately lacking the warmth he had shown Élise.

"Monsieur," Arno greeted quietly, looking down as staff should instead of in the eye as Élise did.

François nodded in approval. "Now, about this little incident of yours..."

"It was my fault, Monsieur."

"Arno," François sighed, "fault doesn't really matter. What does is that something happened. And we need to address it."

"Oui, Monsieur."

"Good. Now, my boy, I am disappointed in you."

"Of course, Monsieur. You should be."

That damn Assassin ideology was pervasive, despite the years he had been working with this boy. François sighed and aimed his eyes at the ceiling to ask for strength in all this. "Arno, I have been teaching you. You are learning swordsmanship and marksmanship. Someday, as a member of this staff, you many need to defend Élise. That is part of your duty as part of this house, as she is my successor. Today you did not. You and she got into trouble instead. And while you understand defending my daughter from physical threats, you don't yet understand that there are more threats that a young woman faces than just a sword or bullet."

"Oui, Monsieur."

"A young noble lady faces gossip and rumors. Scandal and deceit. Her virginity sold off to get a high price in marriage. I may not do that to my daughter, I may plan for her to marry whom she wishes, but gossip mongers won't care. They'll try to sully her reputation to increase their own standing."

"I understand, Monsieur."
"I would hope so." François waited a moment to let that sink in. "Now for punishment."

Arno merely nodded.

"You will be paying the bill of the doctor."

Arno looked up, eyes huge. No doubt wondering the cost and where the money for that would come from. But he didn't say a word.

"Now, since we provide you room and board and meals, you have never been properly paid for your work. You still won't be."

Arno's eyes doubled in size. So expressive this boy.

"Since you are laid up and will be unable to walk, what you will be doing is going over the accounts. I know you have quite the skill at maths, so it's time for you to use them. You will be working closely with Olivier to go over the accounts and you are responsible for finding ways to save the money needed for the doctor. When you've reached that amount, any left over will start to be your wages."

Arno nodded dumbly, the entirety of this task clearly weighing heavily on him.

"And Arno, no cutting corners."

"Non, Monsieur."

"Bien."

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May 5, 1789

Growing up with M. de la Serre, Arno had learned many things. As a member of the staff of a noble house, he had privileges that other members of the Third Estate didn't have and that Arno often saw when going about doing errands for said house. He had access to an actual education, for one, which the countryside often lacked, though the literacy rate was far, far higher in the cities. He had been given lessons in swordsplay and marksmanship, which was only for soldiers and nobles, the art of sport. He had good food, often leftovers from the main table. And one didn't need to go far to see how impoverished and hungry the masses of France were. He had learned what was needed for running a household, in fact going over accounts whenever he got into trouble was often the only way for him to get any spending money, aside from gambling at pharaoh.

But Arno often wondered exactly where he stood. Oh, he was certainly staff. Olivier, in particular, delighted in making him do the worst chores he could think of, and Arno had an incredible grasp of horses and their care as a result, to say nothing of knowing his way around chamber pots or refuse or garbage. As his immediate boss, Olivier made it abundantly clear that Arno was Third Estate, and don't expect any different. You are the lowest of the low, don't aspire for more. If M. de la Serre ever needed to send Élise a punishment to do chores, Olivier offered her the easiest tasks that fell far closer to what would be expected of her station than mucking out stalls.

The simple fact that Arno stayed on after getting caught was a benefit of working in the de la Serre home. Other villes, ones Arno was often sent to as courier or messenger, turned out staff that did even the slightest things wrong or on the whim of the noble they served. Arno knew damn well to count himself lucky to be at a house that didn't do such a thing. However, Arno wasn't an idiot. He knew it was only by the work of being at the de la Serre home that he was able to lead as good a life as he did.
It was why he often wondered why he wasn't kicked out.

It was why Arno wondered where he stood.

Because M. de la Serre doted on him. Treated him as a son. And dammit, Arno loved him as a father. Not his actual father, but Arno understood that he was lucky in having two fathers. Charles Dorian, its own bitter haze of dusty memories, and the knowledge that it had been his fault, that his father wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for his exploring. Then M. de la Serre came along, found him lost and alone, and raised him. Arno had no doubt that was part of the reason that Olivier hated him so much. Because Arno was often treated more as family than staff. M. de la Serre ensured his tutelage, often used him almost as a private assistant, and most telling, forgave Arno for his indiscretions that would likely bring gossip and rumors to the house if he'd actually be the son and heir.

In a way, Arno counted on that paternal feeling, as much as he actually believed in M. de la Serre to be a second father. It was why he kept doing silly things like gambling, occasionally drinking, carousing, joining the occasional debate if only to play devil's advocate and stir things up. But Arno was twenty now. He couldn't keep doing this. Change would happen. But the last time his life had changed drastically was coming upon the body of his father, dead as a result of his choice to explore. Arno wished to push off changing into someone more responsible for a little bit longer. Linger in the frivolity that he could while he still had the chance.

Linger in his love with Élise.

Oh he knew that as the Third Estate he didn't have a chance in hell with her. She would some day be married off through political alliance, despite M. de la Serre's constant words to the contrary. Arno would likely marry a staff of either this house or some other, or maybe someone from Versailles proper. That was how things always went, from fairy tales all the way through to reality.

But he loved Élise. Wholly and completely. She was his best friend, his partner in crime, his heart and mind. And though she would never say it, Arno knew she loved him just as much. Their few trysts had been passionate and devoted, expressive of their love and care for one another. In many ways, it continued a private joke from when they were entering a bout of trouble: Don't get caught. After the incident in the orchard and the dogs, it was their constant refrain to one another. Avoid trouble, or else don't get caught. Don't get caught stealing a pair of horses for a ride in the countryside. Don't get caught in a shadowed hallway for a passionate embrace. Don't get caught filching food for the banquet. Don't get caught when they stole champagne and tried it for the first time. Don't get caught. The trouble was almost expected.

So for now, Arno enjoyed his life as it was. His uncertain position in the de la Serre home. His love with Élise. His barely-there privilege in the Third Estate.

A night of gambling sounded good. Victor was hosting a game with his brother at their smithy. Perhaps Arno would join.

Arno stared at the watch. The last thing his father had ever given him. Broken. Frozen in that one moment of discovering his father, ten minutes too late. He hated the watch. It was a constant reminder of his mistake. Of his irresponsibility.

Arno had tried to deal with it many times over the past thirteen years. It had been buried in a sock draw. Thrown into the trash. Hidden in a trunk.

Four separate times he had sold it.
He always came back the next day to get it back.

It was the last thing his father had ever given him.

Every time he saw it, it was a reminder: of his failure. Of his father's death. It should be gotten rid of.

Every time he saw it, it was a reminder: of his father alive, smiling, cajoling, before his demise. He couldn't lose that.

This push and pull had lead him to his current situation.

It was still early in the morning. Shops were only just starting to open to greet the day, bustle was barely beginning on the streets for the early risers and members of house staffs that went to market earlier in the day for when farmers brought in their freshest goods just picked.

That was the task Arno had taken. He was supposed to be getting bread. And he would. The de la Serre family didn't serve until 8:30 sharp. Arno still had time. He was sure he could find a baker who wasn't charging an arm and a leg for such a necessity of the French diet.

But first.

He stared at the watch. It had been left on a table in the smithy. The back had been opened and it was clear that Victor had been studying the innards. Did that lout really think he could smith the delicate parts of a watch? Arno silently snorted to himself and closed the backing, looking instead to the worn and dulled interior, the delicate craftsmanship, the red cloth lining to protect the glass that had been shattered with the death of his father.

Already Arno wanted to get rid of it.

The door to the smithy opened from the stairs that lead to the upstairs rooms. Arno looked up, surprised. Surely Victor had been too drunk to be getting up so early!

But, sure enough, Victor stood there, thick shoulders and chest bulging in his red shirt, leather apron not even fully tied on.

They stared at each other for a moment, both clearly surprised to see one another.

Then Victor saw the watch.

Arno quickly stuffed it in his waistcoat.

"Can't win fairly at cards, so you stoop to thieving? You bastard!" The hefty blacksmith lunged and Arno did the only smart thing. He kept the worktable between them.

"Calm down, Victor!" he said lightly. "I've only come for the watch. A paltry little thing."

"It's my watch now!" Victor roared. "I won it fairly!"

Arno snorted, ten months of debate in preparation of today turning his voice snide, "Well, in a just world, Victor, I would agree with you. But this is not a just world. This is France."

Victor's face contorted in rage, "You're a dead man!" And he rushed forward, hips digging into the table with such force it actually moved with all the tools and smithy paraphernalia on it.

"Step lightly there!" Arno cautioned, stepping further back to the open door he'd come through.
"You'll hurt yourself!"

Even further enraged, Victor's muscles bulged and he flipped over the table and everything on it.

Right. Time to go.

Arno left, slamming the door behind him and grabbing a chair to stick under the handle. There, now he could get a proper head start, go get that bread...

But Hugo, Victor's smaller, dumber brother was there. Staring stupidly at him.

Arno attempted charm. "Bonjour! I just had a nice chat with your brother-"

The door behind him pulsed outward.

"And... now that it's been resolved, I really must be on my way," he started edging down the street, both arms open and visible.

"Hugo!" Victor roared from the window. "Fetch the marshals!"

"I've got it Victor!"

"Hold on a minute!" Arno shouted back, but people were staring, and Hugo, though slow, understood commands very well and took off. "Diable."

So Arno did the only sensible thing.

He chased after Hugo. In this, at least, Arno felt he had an advantage. Both Victor and Hugo were huge brutes, and neither had much in the way of brains. They were strong, certainly, but they weren't overly fast. Arno, by contrast, had been getting fencing lessons for years, was lean and limber, and very fast. So as Hugo plowed through the crowds, Arno had a clear path to race up, and tackle Hugo to the ground. Stunned, the huge lout looked around confused and Arno used that to lug him to a private garden, throw him in, and then lock the gate behind him.

Now he had time for a proper head start.

He sighed. "Thickheaded blacksmith like you probably can't even read a watch," he muttered. Now, the baker was in which direction-

"Come over here and say that!" was a familiar roar.

Arno whirled around, eyes wide. "Ah... non," and took off, this time being the chased instead of the chaser.

"Get back here!" Victor bellowed. "Stop him! Thief! I'm going to smash your skull into paste!"

Arno didn't dare banter back, instead focused on the streets he had grown up on, darting this way and that, ducking through private gardens and alleys, hopping fences, and then calmly walking through a perfume shop before ducking out the back door and down another alley. With Arno's natural speed, he soon lost Victor, but it had taken up valuable time. He needed to get home. Some excuse for the bread... thieves. After all, bread prices were ticking further and further up. That would suit Oliviers arrogance.

So Arno made his way back to the de la Serre ville, no bread in hand. Olivier was in the driveway courtyard, speaking to one of the maids, Yvette, likely sending her out for new linens perhaps, Arno didn't try to follow the schedules of the entire house as there were too many and he was never
assigned to the softer jobs like a maid. Olivier made sure he was always doing the dirtiest work he could think of. So, with the majordomo busy, Arno breezed lightly by. He needed to head to the kitchens to make his apologies to Clarette, the cook.

"And where in God's name have you been?"

Arno was very glad his back was to Olivier, as he was sure his face showed off all his annoyance at the belittling tone and arrogance that just bled off his voice. He took a second to collect himself, and turned.

"Hah! Got you, you little shit!" Victor came running up, his idiot brother beside him and clearly out of breath, leaning over to try and catch it.

Olivier and Yvette turned to Arno, both with a question in their eyes. Yvette looked with curiosity and amusement. Olivier... however...

Olivier tilted his head in pure haughtiness and raised a smug eyebrow. The interrogation was clear in his eyes.

Arno deflected: "Just a little... misunderstanding, nothing to-"

Victor, belligerent as always, barged in before Arno could finish his sentence, going straight to Olivier. "Your master is harboring a common criminal! In broad daylight he broke into my home and stole my watch!"

Olivier's eyes danced with possibility as he turned to Arno with a quirk of the lips speaking to his dark bemusement. "Did he indeed?" he said softly. "Well, I'm sure the Marshalcy would be more than willing to sort this out."

Arno was caught between a frown and a grimace as he watched Victor smile in delight.

"Sort what out, Olivier?"

M. de la Serre! Arno stepped back to let him through and, deep down, to watch the master of the house fix everything smoothly.

Olivier took a properly deferential tone.

"Er, a most serious accusation against your ward, sir."

M. de la Serre stood straight, looking down his nose.

Victor was quick to jump in. He pointed straight to Arno. "He robbed me!"

M. de la Serre offered a withering look. "Of what, precisely?" Then he turned that withering look to Arno and Arno knew he was in for it. "Wait for me in my library."

Arno nodded his head and offered a victorious smirk to the blacksmith brothers before heading back in. Quietly he headed up to see what the punishment would be this time. The accounts again? To make up whatever money that M. de la Serre paid to make the problem go away? Permanent stable duty for a month or more? Scullery? He looked to Élise's portrait. Her punishments were always light in comparison to his, but she was a noble. That was expected.

He wondered how she was doing. She had finished her schooling but she hadn't returned home yet. Instead she was in Paris, only twelve miles away, working on some longer term project. Her letters
didn't go into details. He hadn't seen her in almost a year now. He missed her. They wrote weekly, but the letters, no matter how detailed, weren't the same as seeing her sparkling eyes or glittering smile.

Élise's painting always seemed to change when he looked at it. Her smile was more amused than usual, appearing to question why he did such a foolish thing as trying to get rid of his watch. Again. It was a part of him that she didn't understand. The warring desperation and reluctance to get rid of it.

He frowned up at the painting.

*Don't give me that look,* he thought to the painting. *Victor cheats when he plays pharaoh, everyone knows it.*

"Arno?"

He swiftly turned. "*Monsieur?*" He ducked his eyes in deference.

M. de la Serre looked tiredly at him before turning and walking briskly to a desk. "You'll be happy to learn I persuaded Olivier to leave off calling the Marshalcy." He looked up with his eyes flashing. "Again."

Arno ducked his head in deference and offered his thanks. "*Je vous remercie, monsieur.*"

But M. de la Serre wasn't quite through. "What is this, the sixth time? Seventh?" he asked in a beleaguered tone, clearly unaware of what to do to curb Arno and his frivolities. "Perhaps a new hobby might be better for your health," he suggested.

Arno couldn't quite bite back the first words that came to his mind. "Well, I find playing cards affords many opportunities for fresh air and exercise." Particularly exercise and running from cheaters or upset losers.

Normally that would be enough to encourage M. de la Serre to smile or chuckle, but that was not the case today.

Damn. Arno really messed up this time.

"We'll talk about this later," he said, gathering a file of papers and his hat. "I have business in town and must collect Élise before I can attend to it."

Normally that would mean trouble. That Arno's punishment was about to get creative in a truly humiliating way. But Arno missed all that entirely. Instead he instantaneously brightened, smile wide on his face, eyes alight at such news.

"Élise is here?" he asked lightly and with great excitement.

"Only for the day. We have a ball to attend tonight. She returns to Paris first thing tomorrow."

The unspoken, "She won't see you," was clear as the morning's sunlight.

That didn't stop Arno, his heart already fluttering. "She'll need an escort, won't she? With you so preoccupied?"

M. de la Serre shot that down with the deft speed of a cannoneer. "One of you running amok is quite enough." Whether he was referring to Arno himself or Élise was clearly open to
interpretation. "Remain here and see if Olivier has any chores for you."

Arno looked down and away. "I'm sure he does," he said bitterly.

M. de la Serre turned at the doorway, brow raised. "What was that?" he asked firmly.

Dammit. "Give my regards to Élise," he offered hopefully.

M. de la Serre nodded and left briskly, folders in hand.

Sighing, Arno went to his tiny room in the staff section of the home to clean up after running around the damp and muddy streets of Versailles. Looking far more presentable, he grimly marched down to his fate.

Olivier hated Arno, of that he was certain. He hated that Arno had been added to the staff. He hated that M. de la Serre looked after him. He hated that Arno was often treated more like a son than a member of the household. So as the majordomo, Olivier took great delight in giving Arno the absolute worst assignments. A deluge of pouring rain? Arno, there are things that must be done in town. Arno wanted to look nice for when Élise came home from boarding school? Arno, muck out the stables. The weather was gorgeous and everyone was doing their chores outside? Arno, the basement needs sorting and cleaning. And when M. de la Serre sent Arno to Olivier for punishments, Olivier took even more delight.

Arno entered the foyer and found Olivier talking to a deliverer. He waited patiently nearby and Olivier knew it. So the old bastard took even longer with the deliveries, checking things over to make sure they were "just right" for the de la Serre family and fussing over every little thing just to make Arno stand there stupidly.

Olivier may have hated Arno, but the feeling was quite mutual.

It took almost fifteen minutes for Olivier to be satisfied and send the deliverer on his way before turning slowly to Arno with that damn smug smile on his face. "Thrown out onto the street yet?"

Arno scowled. "Oh, you would love that, wouldn't you?"

"It would break my heart," Olivier said with saccharine sincerity.

"Olivier," Arno retorted, "if I weren't here, who'd do all your work for you?"

Olivier's face flattened, his face taking on haughtiness and arrogance. "The horses need brushing, boy. Get to it."

Right. Arno nodded to the order, offering a bitter, "Certainly, monsieur," as he acquiesced.

So Arno went to the stables. The first thing to do was the brush the horses, of course, that was Olivier's orders, but Olivier saying "horses" meant, "muck out the stables" and any other dirty work that was needed. The stablemaster, Jean, was quite familiar with Arno showing up to do all the dirty work and gave a rough smile.

"Caught some trouble again?"

"A misunderstanding. Olivier is making sure it's trouble."

Jean gave another rough smile and a bark of laughter. "Remember, boy, we don't question the high and mighty. We just do as told, bleed as told, and piss as told."
Arno offered a pout, but Jean clapped his back. "Come on, boy, we'll start with the horses. We can worry about the stalls later and keep you at least somewhat pretty for part of the day."

Arno laughed.

It took an hour to brush down all the horses, and Arno admitted to taking particular care for Élise's mount. If she was coming home, even for an evening, maybe they could sneak out for a ride. Spend some time together. _Something._ Jean teased him over it, and kicked Arno out to the courtyard drive to "go exercise that prissy mount and come back when you're tired and ready to work!"

However, no sooner had he pulled out the mount when a lathered horse came galloping in, pudgy Perrault, messenger of one of M. de la Serre's closest friends and advisors almost collapsing off the horse and falling to his knees.

"Monsieur!" Perrault shouted. "Monsieur de la Serre!" He tried to walk to the main door, but tripped and fell to his knees, his hard ride clearly not good for Perrault's pudgy frame and life of more leisure. "Nom de dieu, Monsieur de la Serre!"

"Woah," Arno rushed forward. "Calm down. Trouble? From Paris?" And why would Perrault beat his horse to a lather to race as fast as possible from Paris with word?

"A letter," Perrault panted, "for Monsieur de la Serre." He gulped, wiped sweat from his brow, and took another great gulp of air. "It's very important!"

Indeed. "Calm yourself, Perrault," Arno helped the chubby messenger up. "Let's get you to the kitchens. You need some wine to calm those nerves and some food."

"He _must_ receive it! Today! It's very-"

"Very important, yes," Arno repeated. "I heard you the first time. I'll see that he gets it."

Perrault looked to him, face red and sweating, taking the measure, and finally nodding, sagging in exhaustion. "Come on. Let's get you inside."

Jean had poked his head out from the stables with all the shouting, and helped Arno get Perrault inside to the kitchens to stuff him with some food and wine to calm his nerves.

Arno looked to Jean. "I need to get this letter to Monsieur de la Serre. Immediately."

"If Perrault here rode himself to a heart-attack, you'd best get going. I'll tell his lord himself Olivier."

"It will get us both in trouble."

"Not when he sees Perrault here. Just make sure you do it."

Arno nodded.

So he headed back out into Versailles. Because the entire house, indeed all of Versailles, knew _everyone_ was today. _Les États-Généraux._

"Élise was far more distracting and he was the Third Estate anyway. He knew exactly where he stood. At the
very bottom. Even with all the care that M. de la Serre showed, Arno would never make it to the
nobility, the Second Estate, and he had absolutely no interest in joining the clergy to be in the First
Estate. He was fine being the house boy.

But for all that he didn't pay attention, it was hard not to pick up bits and pieces of things.

This was the first Estates-General in over a hundred and fifty years and it had something to do with
financing or money. Last December, Necker, the Minister of Finance, had announced that
representatives for the Third Estate had been doubled, which had spread a wash of rumors through
the streets on what that could mean: if the meeting was this large something might actually change.

Arno doubted it. He wanted it. He had read that pamphlet last January, *Qui est-ce le tiers état?*
"Who is the Third-Estate? Everyone. What has it been in the political order? Nothing. What does it
want to be? Something." Olivier had seen it and immediately thrown it into the fire.

It was all a lot of hullabaloo.

But Arno dutifully went to the *Hôtel des Menus Plaisirs* to find M. de la Serre.

The crowds were massive, thick with people clearly decked out in their best clothes, but Arno
blinked when he looked at them all. Clergy were there in their finest ceremonial robes, nobility in
the latest fashions in the finest cloth, and many, many, many members of the Third Estate, wearing
simpler clothes that were well-cared for and fancy, if nowhere near as flamboyant and ceremonial
as the nobility. The din of the crowds were thunderous, arguments and debates that Arno only ever
participated in as a sport dealt with seriousness and severity.

Well.

It seemed this Estates-General might actually be something.

And something in Arno finally sparked.

Everything he'd heard or debated or read were suddenly forefront in his mind as he realized that
maybe... Something actually could change. There was a power to all these people assembled. And
with so many of the Third Estate... Arno dared to hope. Maybe offensive pricks like Olivier were
wrong. Maybe...

A guard at the gate stopped Arno as the crowds pushed him forward.

"No entry!"

All at once, Arno remembered his purpose.

"Please, monsieur, I have important news for Monsieur de la Serre, delivered just a half-hour ago."

"Then it can wait a few hours."

"But-"

"Are you deaf as well as stupid?" The guard barked. "Piss off!"

But a delegate of the Third Estate had seen the exchange.

"Ah! You're here!" he called over and quickly shook Arno's hand. "Had a long ride in?"
"Well, I-"

"Come on, I know where to go."

And suddenly Arno was dragged along into the Estates General.

"Make sure you listen," the delegate was saying. "I've been here for a week greeting delegates and discussing what we can propose. Come, sit with me. I need someone to take notes for me."

"But I need to deliver-"

"Never mind that, boy!" The delegate said with pure enthusiasm. "We're here for history. The Third Estate will be getting a say in things. The étiquette has been strictly enforced and I've never seen such pomp in all my life. The opening ceremonies have been dragging this all out in ritual and elegance and not a lick of practicality. The King should be speaking soon and I want to hear what he has to say about there not being any money in the Treasury."

Was that all this about? Arno's mind boggled. He saw the wealth of the nobility every day. How could they have no money in the treasury? But he and the rest of the Third Estate paid so much in taxes, how could there not be any money left in the treasury? But the delegate was continuing passionately, and Arno started to realize just what was going on.

And thus, Arno's political awakening had begin.

Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau, was tired.

Granted, that was an understatement.

But he was tired.

To say the last year had been difficult would be an understatement of the highest order. In Grenoble, the previous June. Six riots across the city, all in open defiance after the Church and the representatives of the King abolished their parlements for refusing to accent another new tax code. It was the first time in centuries that any part of France had revolted against the King, citizens throwing roof tiles down at forces that came to settle things down.

And it wasn't like France was doing well at that moment in the slightest, but it became a flashpoint and suddenly, Honoré could see what was going to happen. France had been facing drought and famine steadily, the price of bread getting more and more outrageous, and most of the Third Estate ate easily a pound of bread a day since other foods were often so scarce. The ten years of laissez-faire economics just had vendors charging more and more for bread of poorer and poorer quality as the famine continued. Plus, the country had been heading to bankruptcy for decades, the extravagances of each successive Louis trying to outdo the last. Add on to that the Seven Years War decades ago and the subsequent financial support that France had provided for the Americans. To even further deteriorate things, provincial parlements, like Grenoble were resisting all the new taxes that the nobility kept claiming exemption from. There was no equal taxations across the country, so some places were more heavily taxed than others, along with taxes to the nobles or the Church, and tax farmers collecting more than needed and pocketing the rest.

Enlightenment was progressing further and further. The bourgeoisie were getting more and more ambition and taxes ruined them before they started. Every reform put forth to limit the privileges of either of the first two Estates was shot down, not wanting to have any of their indulgences curbed.

And now, after the first day of the Estates General, Honoré could see with clarity what would
happen.

Civil War. Revolution. And most horrifyingly, blood.

After the long meeting let out, Honoré had done the only thing he could think of. He sought out his counterpart, François de la Serre. They may have opposing views in all aspects of philosophy, but Templars and Assassins both believed in avoiding bloodshed. De la Serre had proven honorable as they had fenced from the shadows, and had a good control of his subordinates, just as Honoré and his Council did.

Since they were meeting in such a public place, both knew they would leave this meeting alive.

Honoré limped to a chair and gratefully sat down, his twisted foot that he was born with hurting after running around so much this day. God, and this was only the first day. There was still so much to do.

De la Serre sat as well and almost simultaneously, they both sighed.

"Do you see where this is all going, François?" Honoré asked quietly.

De la Serre took off his wig and ran a hand through his graying hair. "Indeed. The nobles won't budge, neither will the clergy. Not after seeing all that fire in the Third Estate today. They'll form a voting block."

Honoré nodded sadly. "And dear King Louis can't make a decision to look either left or right without listening to whomever last spoke with him." He rubbed his scared face, small pox having left so many pockmarks. "This is going to be a mess."

De la Serre looked over tiredly, but raised a brow in curiosity. "My old rival, don't tell me you're suggesting we guide this mess?" A wry gin. "Shepherd it to beneficial results?"

He gave a withering glare. "No philosophical debates today, mon ami. But neither of us care for unnecessary bloodshed. We usually work against each other. In this, I propose we work together to actually prevent bloodshed."

De la Serre's brows raised to his hair line. "And how do we do that? The King rules by divine right. It's his say, no matter how much of an idiot he is, and even with both of us whispering in his ear, he's such a weak-willed ninny that he may not even do as told."

"Oh, I'm not saying it's going to be easy, far from it," Honoré acknowledged. "But can France afford the bloodshed about to happen? England was defeated by us and the Americans. They're still stinging. Austria has no love for us and God only knows what they'll think when they see some sort of civil war break out. And let's not forget that the Church is viewed in such a bad light by being the First Estate. I think the Pope might have some say if things start deteriorating."

"In that, at least, I agree with you."

He nodded. "So we help the Third Estate find a new form of government where they have more say. After we've peacefully reformed the government, we can go back to fighting in the shadows."

De la Serre actually raised a brow. "I see how the Templars can benefit from this. We'd have more people to recruit, more ways of getting power for shepherding. What do you Assassins get?"

Honoré offered a wry, if delighted smile. "Progress." The common man starting to have a say in government, in ruling himself. A step for humanity to see that nothing was true and all was
permitted. A way to see that laws arise from man and that meant ruling wisely, compromise, and continuing to the betterment of mankind.

"We magically create a new government," de la Serre raised a brow. "So, who or what will take its place? Another King? A council of capable men?"

Like Templars was left unsaid.

Honoré smiled. "That is the question, isn't it. Tell me, I've traveled a great deal--"

"For your affairs."

"-have you ever been to England?"

De la Serre's smirk was ironic and contemptuous. "As little as I possibly can."

"They have an interesting form of government there."

"I see where you're going with this."

"Indeed."

De la Serre sighed. "A truce, then?"

Honoré nodded appropriately for the severity of what they were discussing. "Till the government is settled and strong. I'll write my people of our truce. They'll know by the end of tomorrow and spread word."

"I'd best let mine know as well," de la Serre nodded, then bit back a yawn. "I need to go home and change, at any rate."

Honoré couldn't quite hold back a barb. "Ah, a lavish party to go to?"

De la Serre actually chuckled.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so what's the definition of a bad idea? How about taking on an enormous research-driven novelization project - actually, no, that would be too easy. Let's make it a rewrite instead, where we fix all the things we didn't like about the game like the love story and the blatantly, factually wrong history and try to make it even better? Actually no, to make it even worse let's do all that right at the start of school when one of us is starting a new job and writing curriculum from scratch. Does that sound like a bad idea? Yes? Then let's do exactly that!

And it will be delicious.

Hi everyone, remember us? It's been a while, hasn't it, since we last wrote for the AC franchise. If you're rusty, or if you're new, there are some things to keep in mind:

French will be used in polite speak - i.e. yes, no, sir, please, etc, and in the beloved curse words, like we did in the AC novelizations. Unlike the AC novelizations, we
won't be locked in one person's perspective, as this chapter demonstrates. We also finally buckled and put in dates so that we can keep track of all the freakin' chaos that's happening in Paris. Before anybody asks, the love story is going to be an... exploration. We'll leave it at that for now, but suffice to say we have goals and ideas (people who know us will be utterly shocked, we're sure :P). We will also be utterly ignoring the populist conspiracy angle.

Like, Ubisoft, we love you dearly, but not all conspiracy theories are cool. This one was a little stupid even for AC. We also announce the retirement of our beloved beta, Tenshi. She's been with us for years - since the Order's Best Years, and has helped us through all the novelizations and more. She's been an amazing asset, but now has to put her personal life first for a while. We love you Tenshi - and we're better writers because of you! The means, necessarily, that we are shopping for beta's. Mostly this is for spell checking because we suck and noticing homonyms, but also flow and sometimes-chapter-specific asks about imagery. If there is another beta out there that is more fluent in French than we are, that would be nice. The rest of the fic will not go up until it is complete - god knows when that will be with the school year starting, but don't worry, readers! The fic WILL go up!

Next chapter: To love and to lose. Only happy things will happen, we're sure.
To Love And To Lose

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Arno's head was spinning. The gentlemen who had dragged him in to take notes had stood on a massive column, hand to his ear, trying to listen to the king's speech. Arno hadn't seen the ruler, so far back and the room so full of people, to hear the monarch's speech. As it was he could not hear the man who had used him, his stage whisper impossible to hear over everyone else's stage whisper in the back of the meeting. Eventually he gave up and asked the man next to him what was going on. He had not been alone, and several of them partitioned off to outside in order to catch each other up and make sure that everyone had the same information. Arno felt safe to ask a few questions, and learned more in four hours than he had ever learned from Élise's tutors:

France was bankrupt. After two wars with the English there was no money left. The entire point of the meeting was to see how to rearrange the taxes to fill the treasury, and the finance minister Necker apparently wanted the Third-Estate to have a say in how it was going to happen. Everyone in Arno's group agreed that it would be the perfect time to articulate their grievances in the taxation in order to attain anything in the form of relief. The First- and Second-Estates were unilaterally exempt from taxes, that meant the Third-Estate had to pay the king, had to pay the feudal dues to the nobility, and they had to pay their tithes to the church. Effectively, all the money was funneling up but there still wasn't enough – and everyone agreed it was because the First- and Second-Estates wasted it on frivolity.

The most likely sources were, of course, the farmers and their hoarding of grain, one man suggested.

No, another corrected, he was a farmer and that wasn't the problem at all. Decades ago the police strictly controlled the quality of grains and breads – for example, areas of France that fell short one year were compensated by a different area that had surplus. That had been the king's role as le premier boulanger, the farmer said. Fixed prices often meant that farmers would sell at a loss one year but be compensated the next when there was a good yield. Twenty odd years ago, however, all the regulations were abolished.

So that's what happened, a finer dressed man, a merchant said. Laissez-faire economics, the idea of letting the market live as it would. That was when grain speculation came into play, and then several years of bad harvests. That was the problem, the regulation was gone, people were making a mint off of the speculation. "My job is to make money," the merchant said. "I buy something like grain low where there's surplus and sell it high where there's shortage. I am at least and honorable enough to try and be fair about it, but I'm paying ten percent tithe to the church, five percent for land, seigneurial obligations, rent, usage of mills and winery's to make my wares, all of this multiplied by how many people are in my family, and have to hand over a cut of my annual production! It's everything I can do to get by!"

Arno also learned that the church – barely one percent of the country, somehow held ten percent of all the land. For all the money they collected from tithes, they only had to pay France every five years, and the amount was self-determined.

Suddenly the Estates-General took on a wealth of meaning. Twice as many representatives from the Third-Estate: six hundred people invited by Necker to make real reformation. Everyone was excited for the chance to vote, to have their voices heard, to effect real change. Arno was swept up in the history of it, the swell of possibility and the chance to have surer footing with the other
Estates, even the nobility, even M. de la Serr-

The note. Diable. Arno asked for the time and balked when he realized how late it was. The note... He cursed and made his excuses. There was no way of finding him now, he would have to catch the monsieur at home. Oh, that was a long walk.

He powered through in the warm May air, pollen floating in the afternoon sun and making Arno realize how long he'd been away. He patted his chest, gritting his teeth. So long as it was delivered, Perrault insisted it had to be today, and the day was waning. A light jog then, in the warm air. Even still, it was the golden hour when he returned, and his shirt stuck to him uncomfortably. He saw the carriage had returned, and that gave him hope. Perhaps the monsieur was back... Perhaps Élise was back... His heart lifted at the very thought.

Then he saw Olivier. Damn.

Arno straightened his back and forced his voice to be cordial.

"Bon soir, Olivier," he said. "Had Monsieur de la Serre returned?"

Olivier was just as cordial, save that his voice was permanently condescending. "Seigneur de la Serre is not expected until late."

"Ah, well," Arno said, not above digging right back. "I'll just pass the time with Élise then."

"Don't get your hopes up just yet," Olivier said, not even deigning Arno worthy to look at as he continued to inventory the trunk of the carriage. "Mademoiselle is at a private soirée – in her honor." Then he turned, the faintest and dirtiest of smirks ghosting over his lips. "At the palace."

Arno blinked. Palais de Versailles? "A party?" he asked, turning around, incredulous. "I wasn't invited."

That damn smirk, wider this time, more obvious. "Neither were the horses."

Élise had always made a point of bringing Arno to parties, ostensibly to be her page but really to keep her from being bored. How had she not told him of this? Her letters didn't have any invitations... But then, the letter saying she was coming back had never arrived either, M. de la Serre had to inform him of that. It had simply been misplaced, surely. Lost in the mail. That was fine, Arno could find his own way in. Nodding, he turned on his heel to get going, but his eyes glanced down, and he saw the missive he had spent all day trying to deliver. He tapped his chest, remembering Perrault's red face and lathered horse. It was important, whatever it was. It had to be delivered today, and now the monsieur was no longer home and who knew where.

He grit his teeth.

Élise or the monsieur, Élise or the monsieur...

Arno turned back to Olivier. "How late is 'late'?" he asked, grudgingly.

The majordomo took no pity. "Perhaps an hour, perhaps three. Perhaps not at all." He casually shrugged his shoulders. "I do not question the comings and goings of my betters."

"Courage, my boy. You just wait here. I will return when this hand reaches the top."

"... That's forever."
Arno winced at the memory. "I'll just wait here then..." he muttered, moving back into the property. He found a washtub and cleaned the worst of the sweat off of his face and arms, pulling out and retying his hair before heading upstairs to the waiting room. M. de la Serre's office was of course locked, as it always was, and Arno pulled out the envelope, spinning it around in his hand, touching the wax seal. He was responsible for this note, had to make sure it was delivered. He had run all the way to Hôtel des Menus Plaisirs to try and catch him and had yet to even see the man. He had to deliver it, and therefore he had to wait.

He would take his responsibilities seriously.

He sat and crossed his legs, then recrossed them. One foot bounced, he played with the letter in his hands, he leaned back and forth, full of energy, knowing where Élise was and not yet free to join her. He glanced up at the clock, the low tick of its pendulum the only noise in the waiting room. Quarter after five.

...Élise never enjoyed high society balls. She'd be home soon. Having danced without him. Dressed in finery without him. Pursued by gentlemen without—he grunted and got up. He could read to pass the time, that would help.

Les Tragiques... too depressing. Arno only barely ever got passed the title and never saw the point of reading a seven volume poem as if it offered some kind of wisdom. Poetry wasn't wise, it was poetry, and had nothing to do with the real world, there was no value to it.

Traité du monde et de la lumière by Descartes... Arno had tried several times but could never get through it. Treatise on the World and on the Light had too much thought in it – too abstract, too technical. As soon as Descartes started talking about how fluid fire was his mind simply turned off. One long thought experiment didn't change what a man did with his hands, nor did it affect what was going on with the Estates-General, he didn't see the point in it.

Mémoires de M. d'Artagnan. Yes, that was Élise's favorite. Cardinal Richelieu, mousquetaires, sword fighting, adventure, high romance. That would tide him over. Arno pulled out the book and sat down to read, getting perhaps three paragraphs in before he looked at the clock again. Quarter of six...

He looked at the letter again. Thought of M. de la Serre. Thought of Élise.

... He could just slip it under the door. The monsieur would see it the instant he returned, the white paper bright against the dark wood of the parquet floor. He couldn't leave without dropping off the letter, but dropping off wasn't the same as delivering in person. Surely...

Arno held the letter, vacillating, trying to do his duty and have his fun at the same time. Élise was only here for the night, he wanted to make this count... He had taken responsibility for the letter, he had to see it delivered...

It was Olivier, outside, giving an impatient "hup, hup!" to the horses that sparked Arno. He jolted into action, bending down and thrusting the missive under the locked door. "There," he said. "Safe and sound, and only slightly delayed." M. de la Serre, wherever he was, always came home at night, so the letter would – technically – be delivered that day. Yes. He was in the clear.

... He was in the clear! And now, to the palace!
A skip in his step, he exited the waiting room, but as he did so he caught himself in the mirror. He was still in just a waistcoat and cravat, one sleeve hitched up against the May heat and the other slid back down to his wrist. Sweat stains were at the usual places and he looked as if he'd run about the town all day – which he had. He could even see dirt stains from his chase-and-be-chased by the smithies Victor and Hugo. He couldn't sneak through a sewer in these threads, much less a ball. Ah, what was he to do? Where was he going to get a passable set of formal attire like he'd seen at the Estates-General, from the nobili—He cuffed himself on the forehead for his stupidity and went to the servants wing. Time to be charming to the laundresses.

M. de la Serre was decidedly not the same size as Arno. He was a few centimeters taller than the monsieur, but Arno's shoulders were narrower and his waist, uh, significantly smaller. Arno's own wardrobe was small, but he found some charcoal culottes that still fit and whose stains would be invisible in evening light. A fresh shirt and a thin red tie to replace his sweaty cravat, the lacy cuffs hid the callused hands of a servant. The watch didn't go in his waistcoat, rather in the pocket of his culottes, he didn't want to lose it in clothes that weren't his (for now). The surcoat was the hardest part, Arno had to button up completely to hide the extra velvet even though the fashion was to have the lapels flair out. Dark green was not his color, and he didn't have time to shave his stubble, but he did have time to dunk his head in a bucket of soapy water and towel most of it dry. He always cleaned up well, Élise had said so many times, and when he next looked in the mirror he thought he could pull it off.

It was after dark when he arrived at Palais de Versailles, the air cool against his skin. He stood in line, looking at the finery around him, acutely aware that he was not one of them and praying that he could pass. The high fashion was unbelievable. Arno had been to parties of the nobility before, but this would be his first party at the Palais de Versailles, and the difference from nobility to royalty was a chasm even greater than that of the Third-Estate to the Second. Bustles made the ladies thrice as wide as the men, layers and layers of petticoats and fine silks and lace – were actual jewels sewn into the fabric? Hair was piled and piled on top of itself, climbing higher and higher with all sorts of feathers, beads, jewels, flowers arranged in some kind of theme or sculpture. Men had open lapels, exaggerated to impractical degrees, top hats and handkerchiefs (damn, Arno hadn't thought to bring one, he only ever used rags) and shoes that shone even in the dim light. The stockings under the culottes were bleached white, brighter than Arno's, and he suddenly hoped he could pass muster.

The line was, of course, exceedingly long for a party at Palais de Versailles.

"Quite the turnout," someone said.

"Yes, quite."

"Let's just put in a short appearance to be polite. I'm tired."

"As you say, Madame."

"Could this line move any slower?"

"Patience, my dear. We mustn't let the riffraff in, after all."

Arno quickly ducked his head, praying he didn't stand out as much as he felt. Everyone shuffled ahead a little at a time, the air rapidly cooling as the dark began to settle. Arno felt nervous – there were more people here than any noble party Élise had dragged him to – and even then he had stayed standing at the wall with the other servants, ready to aide her whenever she looked his way. They had danced, of course, Élise had forced him to join her when she had been mandated to learn,
and twice they had danced at a party to the scandal of the guests, usually until Élise would turn to someone and say, "So you see, monsieur, even the servants dance better than you. Please do not bother me again."

But now he was in M. de la Serre's noble coat. Perhaps they could dance for real, in front of all the Second Estate, impress them with their chemistry and grace. Arno dreamed of sweeping her off her feet, the rich boys envious and jealous that a simple house boy was better than they in all but how much money he had. Élise could laugh at all the ladies in waiting, as she had wished for years, show them how intelligent and elegant and above them all she actually was without obsessing over fashion. Arno's fantasy kept him preoccupied as the line shuffled ever onward, until the announcer suddenly sounded much closer than he had initially expected.

"Monsieur Charles Gabriel Sivert! Two guests. Next!"

"Arno," Arno introduced himself. Wait, he needed a title. Damn... "Le... Chevalier de... Thélème."

He winced. He shouldn't have looked through M. de la Serre's library, he'd seen the title Gargantua et Pantagruel. He was about to be caught...!

"Invitation, s'il-vous plaît."

… The announcer didn't notice the obviously fake title? Excellent. Invitation? Not excellent! Arno stumbled through an explanation: "About that. I had one of course, but on the way-"

"No invitation," the announcer said flatly, taking an arm and guiding him aside, "No admittance. Now clear the queue. Next, please. Chrétien Lafrenière. No guest."

Arno made a face, looking back and seeing the absurdly long line still behind him. What was he supposed to do now? Élise was in there somewhere, bored to tears without him. He walked down the length of the fence, the line of carriages to be stabled as long as the line of gue—his eyes snapped back to the transports, backing up slightly and gauging them with the fence. He wasn't used to climbing, but the height certainly looked right...

He would do it. For Élise.

The chassis bounced and swayed under Arno's weight, making the climb noisy and hazardous. Once he was on the roof he stopped and held his breath, looking back to the gate and announcer, the line of guard watching admittance zealously. "Louis-Michel le Peletier, Marquis de Saint-Fargeau, one guest!"

"Keep those carriages moving!" someone shouted from the other way, and the jolt made Arno jump up to the fence, his hands reaching the top and he scrambled up to a hefty stone column. The fancy shoes were small for his feet and had no traction, but he was able to find purchase and held his breath, waiting to be caught.

Nothing. … Was he in the clear?

He looked out, not at all dizzy from his height, and marveled at the crowd of people on the grounds of the palais. He couldn't count for all the people there, it felt as much as the crowds at the Hôtel where the Estates-General had its opening ceremonies that day – only infinitely more finery, if it were even possible. Everything was noise and undulating movement as people walked about, taking tours, talking with friends, fanning themselves, laughing and enjoying the gaiety of living the high life.
Arno watched, mesmerized, before Élise filled his mind. Right. All he had to do was find her... in this sea of people... He took a breath and leaped down, stumbling slightly on landing but no worse than when he and Élise would climb trees and steal fruit. This time at least there were no guard dogs. He merged into a group of men and women as they moved through the crowds, apparently knowing where they were going. Red carpets littered the lawns, enormous blue tents set up with tables full of platters of food underneath. The king's *musquetaires* walked about in their blue uniforms, though Arno was hard pressed to understand how they could handle so many people. Strings of pennants hung from the lampposts, and a sudden explosion made Arno's eyes snap up.

Fireworks...

There were fireworks...

Arno stilled seeing the explosions of color and light, reds and yellows, little bits of stardust falling to the earth. His heart bled a little, as it always did the rare times he saw fireworks, and he closed his eyes, thinking of... simpler times. Élise. He needed to see Élise. She would keep him from falling.

"Right this way, *Mesdames et Messieurs,*" a servant said, leading Arno's group inside. By him was a guard: "Keep moving, please, everyone!"

Inside – well, if Arno thought M. de la Serre's home was opulent it *paled* in comparison to the *palais.* The *parquet* floors were littered with inlays and elegant patterns, everything was expensive wallpaper and marble finishes. Gold was everywhere: decorative trim, of course, Arno had seen that at the *monsieur's,* but also decorative reliefs and embossing on fireplaces, picture frames, candelabras. Chandeliers had dozens of jeweled beads – not glass – hanging from them to better reflect the candle light, lush carpets so soft Arno's shoes sank into them, writing desks that told entire stories in their details; pool tables, grand pianos, seats covered arm to arm with cushions, everywhere Arno looked was the bold display of wealth. Paintings spread from chair rail to ceiling, couches were longer than Arno's entire length of his room, mirrors were as big as windows.

He checked his reflection more than once, adjusting his thin ribbon of a tie and making sure the extra fabric of M. de la Serre's expensive coat were tucked away and hidden. His coat was out of fashion, he could tell from the other men at the party and the women – Arno did a double take as a lady walked by – an honest-to-god *birde cage* was dressed up in her hair, doves and all, and the hem of her gown lifted enough to see *pantaloons* – risque enough as it was but they weren't white, they were *golden.* What...?!

The room flashed and everyone turned to the windows to see the fireworks, the explosions muted in the constant lull of conversation.

"Madeleine, come back to the party!"

"What's this party for, anyway?"

"Not sure. Some kind of ceremony for the de la Serre girl, it might be her debut."

"She's a little old for that, don't you think?"

"It might be something else, the invitation wasn't exactly clear."

"Were you at the Estates-General? I didn't stay long, I didn't feel safe with all those peasants there. I was certain I would be robbed or kidnapped."

Arno followed the press of people as he could, fighting his eyes to remain in their sockets as his
head swiveled back and forth to drink in everything they could. He didn't recall going up stairs but he found himself on the second floor, a dining hall whose table extended, oh, surely longer than the entire length of M. de la Serre's house. He counted twelve suckling pigs in varying states of reduction as men and women stuffed their faces. Cake filed in with servants and Arno quickly ducked away, remembering all the talk about grain that morning and uncomfortable that he was in a place that so casually served cake. A line of guards were moving down the hall as Arno did, he kept his head down but it seemed the mousquetaires were not above having their own conversations.

"Third Estate is practically up in arms and they're having a party..."

"Is it shift change yet?"

"Look at that one. Pretty sure his shoes cost more than my rent."

"Quiet. Not while they're here."

Arno stepped out to a balcony, looking out over the crowds again. Still no sign of Élise. Fireworks exploded over his head, pulling at his heart, and he resolutely kept his eyes to the ground. He could just see the gate from earlier, closed now, meaning all the guests were here. Where would Élise be? She hated talking with the women, the men wouldn't give her the time of day even though it was her party, what could she possibly be doing to keep herself occupied? Dancing? … With gentlemen?

Arno made a face. That would have to be his next stop. He walked down the length of the balcony before finding a new set of window-doors to move through, ducking around a short man in a top hat talking to another man, ghastly pale.

"I'll see you in the garden later, yes?"

"Of course."

All the rooms were starting to blend together, their only difference seemed to be color: pink, green, gold, red, blue. They were all big and spacious, sometimes with tables or desks, sometimes with billiards or pianos, sometimes with couches and fireplaces. Arno was starting to lose track of where he was, and he still hadn't found a dancing hall – though he wondered if he knew what it would look like if he went into it, everything here was so over the top he felt his station more keenly with every moment.

"Quite the turnout this evening."

"Yes, I can't remember the last time we were all together like this."

"It must have been that maverick business with-"

"And I would thank you not to speak of that."

"Madame."

Arno moved into another room, this time filled with marble walls, thick columns of some kind of stone he didn't recognize, chandeliers everywhere, pennants hanging from them – and music. A band at the far end, strings and brass and wind instruments combined with yet another grand piano, everyone stepping in time in strict lines. This wasn't a dancing hall, this was a ballroom. His timing was perfect, the song and the dance ended and there was several seconds of everyone breathing and
shifting from the dance to the edge of the massive space as others moved in or stayed for the next dance. A new song started up: the *allemonde*. He knew this dance, and his eyes swept the crowds.

A woman, bright peach dress, thickly laced collar dipping to exactly the right depth, sleeves ending at the elbows with even more puffy lace, touched his arm. Her hair was tame compared to the doves-in-birdcage woman, and there was a very pretty flush to her cheeks. "Care to dance?" she asked, every line of her face enticing. Arno almost said yes, but... she was not Élise. Would he ever find her?

It was at that moment red hair caught his eye, and like water to a starving man, Élise moved into his line of sight: green velvet made the white lace veritably *pop* against the dark fabric, beautiful puffs of paleness just below the shoulders — good god her dress exposed her shoulders, he could see the perfect shape of her collarbone, her red hair down instead of up, half of it tied back and coiffed for appearances but the rest a stream of red curls down the arch of her back. One traitorous lock of hair fell in front of her ear, highlighting her cheekbone, and Arno forgot who he was talking to. He glanced at the lady, his love of Élise making her seem dull, and made his excuses as gently as he could.

Élise turned — she had obviously been waiting for him to notice — and started walking through the *allemonde*, navigating the steps and hops with elegance and ease, leaving Arno fumbling to catch up and ignore the sudden stretch of his *culottes*. He followed her from one end of the ballroom to the next. There was a pause at the end of the dance, they were at the edge of the room now, making it harder for Arno to keep up. Everything was sound and words, most of it dim in Arno's ears as he tried to keep up with his redhead.

"I thought for sure those plebeians would riot this afternoon."

"You heard the king: New taxes and not a word of concession on the matter of representation. I don't understand why Necker even doubled the Third-Estate to begin with if the votes weren't going to change."

"Stuff and nonsense, all of it. What the lower classes have always needed is a firm hand to guide them."

"Quite so. Mark my words, this will all blow over in a fortnight."

"*Jeu de Paume* tomorrow?"

"Yes, why not? I doubt anything will be settled by then."

"My thoughts exactly."

Élise turned, a come-hither look glowing on her face, and Arno finally made it around that particular conversation. The next dance had started, bodies undulating out on the dance floor, and a press of women crowded in front of Arno, he unable to move through them without seeming rude. Damn Élise, she was doing this on purpose!

"And so I said to her, 'Marie' —"

"You call her 'Marie'?"

"Of course! I've known her since we were girls. We're practically sisters."

"You and the Queen."
"That's what I said."

"The Queen who grew up in Vienna? And goes by 'Antonia' among her intimates?"

"Ah, excuse me, I do believe I see Monsieur Necker there."

Yes, yes, Élise, you made your point, womenfolk are shallow and trite, now could he get passed them to talk to you, the *real* woman?

But she moved off again, faster this time, not-quite walking the perimeter of the ballroom to get to whatever her destination was. Arno pursed his lips, picking up his own pace, determined to catch her.

"Did you see what she was *wearing*?"

"What do you expect? She's half savage. Why her father married that destitute is beyond me..."

"I hear she spends her nights gambling in dockside bars, and that's the least of the rumors."

"Honestly, I pity her father..."

At *last* they made it out of the ballroom, into some kind of corner room with a piano, someone playing at it. Élise lingered at the far door, giving him another look, before she glided through it. Arno was smiling, now: she always did love the chase.

She clearly knew her way around the *palais* better than he did, darted around corners much like when they had first met as children. The rooms were dimmer now, the night stretching out. He found himself on another balcony, this time over an atrium of some sort, before a hand grabbed his wrist and he was jerked into a room.

Élise, resplendent in all her glory, was looking up at him with a smile almost as bright as his. "You must have caused quite the commotion to make it this deep into the *palais,*" she said coyly.

"What can I say?" Arno answered. "You were always a bad influence."

Élise scoffed. "Oh, you were *worse.*"

That was as far as Arno could take it, however, and the pair closed the distance to kiss. Her hands moved instinctively to his hair and his to her hips. They fit perfectly in his hands and he was certain his old stained *culottes* would rip for how tight they had become. Everything was taste and scent and touch, Élise always had the faint smell of lavender to her because of the water she used, and it was no different here, mixed with sugar and champagne and oh it would be the devil to get out of all of these layers of clothes to say nothing of her corset. He reached back to finger the strings but she pulled back for air, lips swollen and cheeks as bright as her hair. Her special smile was back, the one she only gave to him, and she drank him in as he drank in her. Then, incredulity.

"Are you wearing one of my father's suits?" she demanded, slapping his chest to give her space to look.

Arno smirked, proud, and gave a counter: "Are you wearing a *ballgown?"

"Don't even start," Élise said, pout on her lips. "I feel like a mummy wrapped up in this thing!"

"Must be quiet the occasion," Arno said, crossing his arms, smug, "to get you so *fancy.*"

Élise made a face. "It's not like that," she said, hips swaying as she shifted her weight. "Truth be
told it's a lot of ceremony and pontification. All the important parts barely had a dozen people as witness, everything else is just dressing and appearances. Dull as dirt."

Arno leaned in slightly, sly grin bleeding across his face. "Well, when you don't invite me to you parties, everyone suffers."

Élise rolled her eyes delicately. "I did try, but Father was adamant."

Arno stilled. "Your father?"

Élise took a breath to explain but the door behind them started to open, a gruff, "Who's in there?" filtering in. Élise was – as always – a hair faster than Arno and shoved her hand at the door, trying to pin it. The pair looked at each other, shocked at the turn of events, before Élise bit back a giggle. Who was the bad influence again?

"Go," she said quickly. "I'll distract them."

"What?" Arno said. "You're kicking me out?" After all that work to even get here?

"It's... complicated," Élise said, mincing her words while she pressed her weight against the door. "I'll explain later, out the window."

The window? "Oh, no. No, you're not turning this into a repeat of that apple orchard..." he still had the bite marks to prove it...!

Élise rolled her eyes again. "Stop being such a baby," she said, "I'm sure there aren't any guard dogs this time. Go!" She pointed to the door she was holding shut, and Arno was forced to admit defeat. Élise opened the door just a crack, making Arno suck in a breath and put on some speed. "Oh, my!" he heard, "That wasn't the billiard room at all, was it?"

"We are pursuing an interloper, Mademoiselle de la Serre. Have you see him?"

"Non! I shouldn't think they can climb stairs, not with those little hooves. And how did they get out of the royal menagerie?"

"Not an antelope, an interloper."

Arno didn't hear more, swinging his legs over the edge of the balcony and scanning the atrium below. He didn't see anybody and he hopped down. The small shoes clacked against the black and white tile. He wondered who the interloper was, nervous that he had been discovered. The next room was empty, and that gave him pause. Arno listened, but couldn't hear the constant chatter of the party. He was in a different part of the palais. No wonder the guard had knocked on the door...

There were also, he was loathe to see, still mousquetaires here, one or two huddled by a window. The fireworks were long since over.

"Could have been on party duty, but no..."

"Waste of time. There's nobody here, who's even going to come out this far?"

"Ten to one I end the night cleaning a rich man's vomit off my shoes."

"Nom de dieu, don't even say that out loud."

Arno kept his eyes on the windows to keep himself oriented. The number of people outside had drastically reduced, only a few small gatherings here and there under lamplight. That meant that
everyone was either inside or home. Thinner crowds meant higher chance of being caught... it
really was time to go home. But at least he had seen Élise, and her promised explanation later
implied that there would be a later – she would be home tonight and likely tomorrow, and they
could therefore spend more time together. The very thought sent him over the moon, he was feeling
audacious enough to let the gate announcer know he had managed to sneak into the party despite
the man's efforts, just to see the reaction.

He finally found an open door, stepping out into the almost chill air, and he saw Élise's father,
detached from any crowd, swaying on his feet.

"You all right, Monsieur?" he called out, walking up to his maître and surrogate father. "Too much
of the king's champagne?"

And, to his horror, M. de la Serre fell, and in the light there was blood at his neck. . . !

"Monsieur?" Arno asked, not quite believing what he was seeing. But the man did not get up, and
panic flooded Arno. "Monsieur! Monsieur de la Serre! Monsieur de la Serre!" He ran to the body,
heads of partygoers turning, Arno's eyes only on the man who took him in when no one else would.
He tried to turn the body over, tried to gain access to the wound and see how bad it was. Nom de
dieu, what happened?

"Sivert!" a raspy hiss from... somewhere. "Sivert come away!"

A woman shrieked, but Arno tuned it all out, finally managing to turn over the monsieur. The
blood! It was pooling at his neck, splattered across his face, so like his own father when he was
eight...! No, no, nonononononon, the odds of this happening again were astronomical, this wasn't
really happening, this was not actually happening a second time. He pulled at the collar, loosening
it, trying to give M. de la Serre air to breath. "Monsieur!" he called out. Merde there was so much
blood, where was the wound to stop it? Was he even breathing? Where was his pulse? Why was
his face so pale? Why were his eyes staring so blankly like before no don't let it be like before don't
please in the name of God don't let this happen again—

"Guards! Help! Murder!"

Arno snapped to attention, only to see a short man, plump and with a top hat, leaving with a second
man through a different set of window-doors. He could hear noise better now, out of his own
mind, saw a woman had fainted and four musquetaires advancing on him.

"S'il vou plaît," he begged. "Help me! I'm trying to get him air, he's not-"

The butt of a rifle filled his field of vision, his last thought being confusion as to why it looked like
it was about to hit him, but then the impact exploded along his face and his head snapped back,
body following suit as he fell backwards. His skull cracked against the stone and he knew nothing
after that.

May 6, 1789

...

Nom de dieu...

....Diable...

"... no! It wasn't me, Damiens wielded the knife! Please, have mercy..."
"... Gallia est omnis divisa in partres tres..."

... violin... What?

His head was stabbing him from tail to nose – nom de dieu his nose... did he break it? Had Victor gotten a lucky hit in? No, that wasn't right...

Arno opened his eyes, vision so blurry nausea superseded all senses. He groaned, closing his eyes and trying to keep himself under control. The sensation of moving still persisted, however, and that's when he realized he was being... dragged? How drunk was he...?

No sooner had he processed the thought that he was half dragged, half shoved into stone, dirt, filth and excrement. The impact cleared his mind, slightly, he could look up and understand that shapes existed, but everything was blurry. He still didn't understand what was happening.

"Where am I?" he asked. Diable even his words were blurry.

Someone heard him, however, and he could just understand the reply: "In hell."

His body couldn't take anymore, he purged everything in his belly and had enough sense to roll away before he passed out.

His head was still splitting, his nose and cheek were on fire. He tried to touch the wound but it was swollen and hypersensitive and his fingertips came back with blood. They must have broken his nose—mousquetaires, rifle to his face, M. de la Ser—Arno staggered up, the sudden change in height making his head swim again and he fell back to his side. M. de la Serre! They thought—but he didn't—he had to explain! He tried to get to his feet again, swaying once he was upright but managing to half fall to the door of the cell – good god they threw him in a cell! The cast iron was cool in his hands; his eyes darted around, trying to find a guard. He just needed to explain...!

"Hello!" he called out. "I must speak to someone!" He pulled at the door, the metal refusing to budge. Panic was starting to fill him – as if it wasn't already – and he threw a fist. The bars still didn't give. "Open this door!" he shouted.

"Scream all you like," someone said, the voice low but at the exact right pitch to carry. "No one cares."

Arno turned to see a man, scraggle of a beard and flat, unkempt hair. He tried to glare but his face protested too much, still in agony. Where even was he? Prison, obviously, but which prison? He crossed the space, spying a window. He had to hop up onto a crate to reach the grate, but outside did not help him understand where he was: regular blue roofs, a tree, cobbled stone for the roads. That could be any city in the country, he couldn't find a major landmark. He dropped back to the floor and the impact jolted his facial muscles, he held his forehead as the only safe place on his face, still swaying with a headache. Nom de dieu...

He moved back to the door, more desperate now, kicked it with a shoe that was too small for him. "I must speak with Élise de la Serre! Do you hear me? Élise de la Serre! She can explain it to you! It wasn't me!"

No one came for all his cries, and Arno was starting to shake, acutely aware of his lack of freedom. Oh, Élise... what must she be thinking? She was an orphan now, mother and father both dead – and murder! Did she think he the killer? No, that was impossible, he was no more likely a killer than she, she had to know that – she had to. She was a lady of the Second-Estate, noble birth and with considerable enough influence to have a party at the Palais de Versailles, surely they would inform
Arno shook his head. "It wasn't me!" he shouted so loudly his voice split, cracking along several octaves, and he sank to his knees, bereft of his circumstances. Tears burned his face, everything ached, and all he could do was moan, rocking back and forth slightly. He lost himself to his thoughts, reliving those scant hours ago: seeing the monsieur under the lamp, asking if he'd had too much champagne, the blood, trying to get him to breathe, just breathe... A woman screaming, come away, help, guards, murder...

Arno's eyes snapped open. "Someone was there..." He straightened. Name... what was the name, the hiss...

"Sivert, come away!"

Sivert! Arno gasped at the memory: two men, one short and plump, top hat. The other little more than a silhouette and oh, his head hurt to try and picture it.

Someone was playing the violin again, Arno turned and finally processed that he was not alone in the cell. His vision was still blurry, his head still splitting. The violin player was there, as was a man curled in on himself, rocking back and forth and muttering. A third man, pale hair and impressive beard, nodded to him, and Arno cautiously nodded back. That begot a large smile.

"Bernard Laroche," the man said warmly. "Welcome to your new home. You should feel honored: these days the Bastille is reserved for madmen, deviants, and traitors. Half of us here belong in a sanitarium, the other half either killed someone important or fucked someone important. You're pretty sane by this place's standards, so which did you do? Fuck or kill?"

Arno shook his head, his vision was starting to blur again. "I'm no killer," he said. "It wasn't me. Someone else was there..."

The man, Laroche, shrugged his shoulders. "And I'm not a counterfeiter. Doesn't change anything. Here we're all well and truly fucked."

"Please," Arno said, "I need to get out of here-"

Laroche snorted. "Forget about escape. It's a fool's dream."

"You're wasting your time, Laroche," said a new voice. "Boy thinks he's special."

Arno turned to see the man with the scraggly beard. His head was clearer but no less in pain, and the intense white of the chalk drawings hurt his eyes. One of the crazies, then? The man met Arno's gaze and did not blink, stared right back, until Arno's skull couldn't handle it anymore. He swayed again, holding his forehead, realized he was filthy. He looked up again, eyes scattering over the chalk scratchings, and leveled his eyes back to the unblinking scraggle of a man.

"What?" the man grunted. "Don't bother me, merdeux, from where I'm sitting I could kill you seven ways. Twelve if I had a spoon."

Merdeux... did he seriously just call Arno... His head throbbed again, and he belatedly wondered if he might really be hurt. "Did they break my nose?" he muttered, reaching up again to touch his face.

Only it must not have been a mutter, because Laroche got up and crouched down next to him. "Can't say for sure," he said, finger touching his jaw line to tilt Arno's head. "Swollen, certainly; bruised, definitely. You'll have a scar when this is done, but your nose looks straight enough. What
did they even hit you with?"

"Rifle..."

The violin player actually paused, looking up. "And they call us deviants," he sniffed. "They would
never get away with such barbarism at home."

"Whatever you say, Monsieur," Laroche replied, releasing Arno. "May I present: Gabriel-Charles-
Joseph-Paulin-Hubert, comte de Solagnes. Did I get it right, Monsieur?"

"First time in five years," the violin player said. "It's late. We should probably all get to bed before
the lunatics start thinking we're savages."

From across the room: "If you snore, I'll strangle you in your sleep. That's fair warning."

Arno turned to glare at the man and his crazy drawings.

"What are you staring at, merdeux?"

"Lay off him," Laroche said. "Clearly he's a fucker and isn't used to his delicate sensibilities being
torn asunder. Tell you what, just for tonight, to prove we're not savages – not all of us, anyway –
you get the clean pallet." Laroche guided him gently, and Arno tested the pallet. It was... lumpy,
flat, smelled of things he dared not identify, but it was this or the blood-covered blanket by the
rocking man, and Arno... was tired.

As he sat down, an ache that had nothing to do with his ruined face poked at his hip, and he pulled
out the object.

The watch.

Père... M. de la Serre...

Two fathers he had lost now, both at Versailles. One as a child he could barely remember beyond a
body on the floor, sound disappearing as he realized his father wasn't getting up, his world pigeon-
holing until M. de la Serre grabbed his attention. M. de la Serre had taken him in, so recently an
orphan, when nobody else even cared. M. de la Serre had done everything: swordsmanship,
horseback riding, hunting, etiquette. He had taken a young, frightened child and given him the
chance to cry, to mourn, without judgement or comment, only with gentle eyes and soft voice. He
had given Arno everything when he had so steadfastly had nothing. Arno looked at the watch,
forever locked at ten minutes late, forever reminding him of his failure.

Monsieur de la Serre...

He put the watch away, depressed, and collapsed to the pallet.

Sunlight. In his eyes. His aching face... He rolled over and everything hurt. Groaning he got up,
rubbing his forehead.

His pallet was one of four where the others slept, and calling it clean compared to the others was
little more than a matter of taste. Beside him were two buckets, their smell designating their roles.
A blood covered blanket was splayed on the floor. Nearby was a bottle of he assumed some kind of
wine, a crate with a simple candelabra – the dining room, he supposed wryly. All along the wall
were reminders of his prison: shackles, wracks of torture devices, balls and chains. On the far side
of the wall was a bench, and on the bench was the unsavory man with a scraggly beard. And in his
hand was—!

Arno surged to his feet.

The man was equally dour; he held up the watch with an accusatory glare. "Where did you come by this, merdeux?"

"I'm in no mood for this," Arno answered, advancing aggressively. "Give it back."

The man pulled a quick sleight of hand – probably a thief – and with a flick of the wrist flipped Arno to the floor. Damn it!

Arno scrambled to his feet, twisting around. The man had pulled out two wands – practice swords? In a prison? - and was moving into the center of the room. "Take it back," he challenged, "If you think you can." He tossed the wand over; Arno caught it. The others had awoken, the counterfeiter delighted at the show while the supposed comte simply took up his violin, uninterested. The two lunatics watched as well, Arno circling around and gauging his chances. His head was still splitting, his face still throbbing, but his mind was clearer than it had been the night previous. He was sore, but he was young and fit. The old man was in rags, his shirt open for all to see his muscled chest, he could clearly be fast if his flip of Arno was any indicator, and the man obviously thought he knew the sword. Well, Arno had learned from Élise's teacher, and she was as good as the famous Chevalier d'Éon de Beaumont.

Very well, let's see if this petty thief knew about swords.

"I've got five on the new blood!"

"Ten livre on the old man!"

"Fight, fight, fight!"

Arno took a classic stance, the thief's more open and overtly sloppy. This would be easy.

Thrust, feint, parry, slash—only there was nothing but air, the man spinning around to his blind spot and leaving Arno scrambling to put up a defense. Diable how had that happened? Arno blinked, studying the man again, but his stance was so bad... it had to be a misdirect, and Arno had fallen for it. Arno adjusted his grip, pursing his lips, determined not to fall for it again.

"Pathetic," the thief said. "Where'd you learn? Some crackpot who thought he was d'Artagnon?"

Arno grunted and tried again.

And yet, somehow, he could not keep up with this man, the thief had the uncanny ability to never be where Arno predicted, always moving to his blind side. Arno could barely keep up, unable to understand the style, and with offense so thoroughly shut down he had to stay defensive instead. The thief actually grinned at that, somehow pleased. Arno growled, but that was all he had time for as the thief pressed the attack. His stance was not terrible but deceptive – his form was excellent – better than even M. Weatherall. The order of attacks, however, were decidedly nonstandard. How the man could pull it off was beyond Arno.

It was only by bald luck that Arno saw an opening, a swing only barely too wide. Arno swung to parry, timed it perfectly, and was able to get a solid kick to the knee of his opponent, leaving him wide open. Arno pulled his swing, clipping the man's jaw enough to draw blood but not to break anything. He backed up, having proven his point, lowered his wand.

The thief stood, fingering the wound. And he smiled.
"My grandmother hits harder than you, and she's Belgian," he scoffed. "Still, well struck, merdeux," he said.

"Stop calling me that."

"What's the matter, merdeux? Did I hurt your feelings?" The man snorted. "Let's see if your defense is as good."

That was all the warning Arno had before that sloppy stance shifted to boldly aggressive. Arno was giving ground almost immediately. Someone shouted, "Dance, boy, dance!" and Arno couldn't backpedal fast enough. He tripped over something, he didn't know what, and the wand struck his collar. Cursing, he rolled to the side and swung back up to his feet – only to be struck again, this time in the ribs. The damn thief didn't even let an opponent stand! That wasn't fair! Arno got up again, his right side now very sore. He held his wand, however, and took his stance again. He was not going to lose the watch to some cheating thief! He'd never hated a man more.

"So much effort for a broken antique," the man said, still pushing Arno back with his overwhelming offense.

"The only broken antique in here is flapping his idiot jaw!"

"Say that again," the man said.

"I've nothing more to say, old man!"

The thief seemed angry now, whatever split seconds to breath Arno afforded were now forfeit. Arno was knocked down and struck three times in rapid succession. His ribs were aching now, he could tell the bruises would be fierce. Still he got up, determined to get the watch back.

"Give me what's mine," he said, "and go back to your crazy drawings, old man."

The thief froze – actually froze. "Drawings?" he said slowly.

"Nom de dieu," Arno cursed. "I was not struck so badly as to be blind. Those," he said, gesturing to wall behind him, backing up. "Everywhere, scribbled like chicken scratches all over the-" he turned to point more specifically, but when he looked at the small enclave he saw nothing. The bright chalk drawings that had so hurt his eyes last night were... were gone. How...? "Where...?"

He didn't even have time to process – the watch thief grabbed his arm in a bruising grip and dragged him deeper into the alcove. "Come here you petit merdeux," he growled.

"Get your hands off me!"

"Look at the wall, merdeux."

"What are you do-"

"Concentrate. Concentrate! Picture an eagle in the back of your mind, a chamber in your skull that notices every detail. That eagle can tell what ink your master uses or which wheel is about to go. That eagle can see friend and foe, ally and enemy. That eagle sees past the illusion."

The words were a little fast and a lot esoteric, Arno wasn't quite sure what eagles had to do with the missing chalk drawings. He was trying to remember the night previous: the sensation of dragging, his aching head, the blurry vision, fireworks... fireworks...?
"And when I get back, we'll see the fireworks."

Arno could hear the sound, the successive pops of noise, the direction taking his eyes to one corner of the wall, and there it was. Thick white lines, almost like a mountain... and over there, a stylized monkey, and come kind of interlocked pattern of concentric circles, and a math equation of some kind... What...? He blinked, his head aching, and the vision went away. "What are they...?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Mon dieu, you have the eyes," the thief muttered before answering the question: "Messages from the past. I had myself thrown into half the prisons in Paris in search of these." The thief moved into the alcove, reaching down to a skimpy bench with a book on it, the inseam covered with copies of the drawings, only partly finished. A litter was near it – was that where he slept? - and the man moved to stand in front of it, crossing his arms. "What's your name, boy?"

He pursed his lips, dithering, before answering. "Arno," he answered with as much gravitas as he could muster. "Arno Victor Dorian."

"Dorian..." the thief repeated, and his eyes widened enough that Arno could see the blue in them. The man's face slacked, open with surprise, eyebrows determined to reach his hairline. His entire head tilted back and a smirk that had layers of... something... eased his features, making him look much younger. "Of course," he said, words barely audible. His head returned to normal, face serious but no longer dour.

"Pierre Bellec," he introduced himself, handing over the watch. "I knew your father."

"And when I get back, we'll see the fireworks."

Arno snatched the loved-and-hated item back, emotionally spent and still aching. What did it matter if he knew his father? His father was dead. M. de la Serre was dead. Élise was out there somewhere alone, mourning and without someone to help her through it all. Arno backed away, his pallet suddenly calling to him.

The thief, Bellec, would not accept his silence, however. "He died at Versailles. It would have been, what? 'Seventy-six? 'Seventy-seven? December, as I recall. No witnesses."

"And when I get back, we'll see the fireworks."

Arno turned. "How did you...?"

"You father was an Assassin, Arno. He gave his life fighting for the liberty of all mankind. You stick with me, and you might just live long enough to join the Brotherhood."

... And there went whatever goodwill the man scrounged up with knowing the details of the murder. Arno was a practical man: secret societies? Liberty of all mankind? Did they meet in secret and have a special codeword? Hell, why not go all out and have an underground sanctum with a map of the earth? It was ridiculous to contemplate, and Arno didn't have time for this level of nonsense.

"Listen," he said, tired, "I'm sure your little cult is a delightful bunch, but I'm not interested. The only thing I care about is finding Élise."

Bellec snorted. "And how are you planning on doing that from in here?"

Arno remained indignant. "What, don't tell me you have a plan to get out of here, and you'll only share it if I agree to join your little cult?"

Bellec frowned, seemingly his default state. "You have a healthy bit of skepticism, seeing as the de
la Serre's are all Templars."

"Oh, stop it," Arno moaned, rubbing his forehead. *God* his face was throbbing. "Now you tell me Monsieur de la Serre is part of an Order that ended hundreds of years ago? You're as crazy as the others in here."

"This is your heritage, boy. You got no right scoffing at it."

"Whatever you say, old man," Arno said, sitting on his pallet, rubbing at his head again.

Bellec was irritated. "Get your head out of your *cul, merdeux,*" he said moving into Arno's space. "You're a part of a legacy that extends back over six-hundred years, since before the Levantines and the Third Crusade were even thoughts in people's heads. You inherit a Creed and a responsibility that-"

"Look, I'm sure it's all wonderfully esoteric but I'd much rather wait for my head to stop throbbing."

Bellec scoffed, crossing his arms and turning away. Laroche laughed. "Can't look too crazy, Bellec," the counterfeiter said. "This one's 'rational,' doesn't have an ounce of romance in him."

Arno rubbed his forehead. "Little hard to be romantic when you're thrown into a prison because the man who raised you was murdered," he countered. "Hard to fit in the duels with rapscallions and evil cardinals or wooing the fair maiden from behind bars."

Laroche laughed, and Bellec said no more.

That didn't mean Bellec was done, however, merely waited a day or two for Arno to warm up to the idea, which he was determined *not* to do. The company of the cell was varied, Laroche was by far the friendliest, as was the *comte* when he wasn't writing or playing the violin. One of them was utterly crazy, talking to things that weren't there, and Arno rather thought he and Bellec were cut from the same cloth. He mentioned it over a 'hearty' dinner, but Bellec ignored him to continue copying the invisible drawings.

Instead he would bring the copies over and ask questions, particularly on the math, wanting to know how far Arno had gotten in his studies.

"I was a *house boy,*" Arno said. "Whatever level of math this is is beyond me."

"Shame, you have a good head on you to even recognize the symbols," Bellec said. "Know some people who could read this. They could teach you."

"Part of your cult?"

Bellec shrugged. "We get all types."

"And the mission to be thrown into half the prisons of Paris?"

"Needed to look for them, copy them down. Research them."

"How intellectual."

Bellec went away but it would never be for long, trying different ways to entice Arno, who vowed to refuse every offering. Once the hidden pictures were successfully copied, then it was questions about M. de la Serre that Arno utterly refused to answer. There were memories and anecdotes of
his father, which hurt to the point of almost coming to blows: he didn't want the memory of his father associated with this insanity, and Bellec learned very quickly not to bring up the subject.

Finally, however Bellec simply handed Arno one of the practice wands.

"Now what?" Arno demanded.

"You want to get out of here, right?" Bellec said. "Have to take an opportunity when it comes, but when it does that's Paris out there, and you'll want to do better than that piss poor fight you gave me before, merdeux, if you want to live from one day to the next."

"Don't tell me Paris is awash with scum and villainy, enemies – excuse me – Templars about every corner looking to kill me?"

Bellec shrugged, not even commenting. "You want to get back to the de la Serre girl? You need to survive. And to survive you have to stop looking like a training manual, merdeux."

That was what finally convinced Arno: simple logic. He hadn't realized his form was actually too good, that ceremony wouldn't mean much in the real world, and honestly it was something to do while he was in prison. Bellec was a cruel instructor, never giving an inch and determined to make Arno's form less recognizable. Bruises were a daily occurrence, as were curses and that damn nickname "merdeux." Arno eventually kept his center of gravity low, not by a classic stance but by hunching forward. They couldn't hide everything, muscle memory was hard to rewrite, but it was better than nothing.

Harder to learn was creativity, the ability to mix up moves in order to be unpredictable. Bellec lamented that it should have been second nature to him, but Arno ignored the jibe as often as he could. Improvement was relative – some days he could do it and others he couldn't, seemingly at a whim, but Bellec said it had more to do with his eagle than luck.

And that was another thing, even as the pain to his face faded, his head could not handle the... the eagle... as Bellec called it, for long periods of time. He tried to copy the invisible chalk drawings but could barely hold the gaze for more than a few minutes before his head was splitting. The special corner of his mind never felt like an eagle, more like the popping of fireworks, the sound of a memory that he would never experience. He tried to explain it to Bellec but it felt like they were talking different languages, Bellec insisted it was an eagle and Arno couldn't get him to see that it wasn't.

"Does it matter?" the comte de Solages asked at one point. "Eagle screech, fireworks, it's a sound, like my violin." He plucked a chord for emphasis.

"They're killing us! Oh God have mercy, they're killing the prisoners in here!"

Everyone looked up.

"Oh god! It's inhuman! The blood! So much blood!"

"Nom de dieu," Laroche muttered. "He's doing it again."

"Who is that?" Arno asked.

"Hey!" Laroche was saying, getting up and moving to the bars. "You aren't proving anything by doing this. That's enough of that you degenerate!"

"Speak for yourself, Laroche," the voice said, smooth and perfectly lucid. "I intend to get
something out of this. *They're killing everyone! Oh god! Help us!*

Arno hopped up the crate to look out the window as the madman continued to shout and scream, saw people on the street look up and point. A small crowd gathered, listening to the artful screams and pleas for mercy. Others joined Arno to watch, except for Bellec, who said, "You're doing exactly as he wants, you know," and went back to his book.

"Oh, you're ruining the fun," the lunatic said, still shockingly lucid.

Arno stopped watching after a while, finally deciding that people had to pass the time here *somehow*.

Two days later the man, whoever he was, was dragged away, laughing and bidding his inmates a pleasant goodbye.

Arno got back to training.

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**July 14, 1789**

Just over a week later, Arno was yet again having his behind handed to him, this time with shoulders to his sternum. "Again!" Bellec grunted, ever strict.

"How's the crowd?" Laroche asked.

*Comte* de Solages looked out the window. "Still there," he commented dryly. "Clearly they heard about the wonders of the establishment and wanted to partake of its delicacies."

The crowd had arrived midmorning, a swell of people and shouts and noise that were indiscernible from this high up other than a massive, rebellious yell. The guards were harried enough to have seemingly forgotten to feed them, but Bellec said that was the best time to train: when the mind was at its weakest to learn to be its strongest.

"Again!"

Arno took up another stance, hungry and with half an ear on the constant noise outside. Something low sounded, and dust settled from the ceiling, falling into Arno's line of sight. What were they doing out there?

Bellec tapped his hand, making him drop his wand.

"Focus, *petit merdeux,*" he scolded.

"How?" Arno demanded. "What the hell is going on out there?"

Bellec shrugged. "Citizens are restless. Might be an opportunity, if you still want out of here."

"Escape, now?" Laroche asked. "All those people will throw us right back in in less time than it takes to blink."

Then there was a low boom, followed almost immediately by the impact, a vibration through the floor that everyone felt. Stillness settled over them, the stunned shock of people wondering what would happen next.

… Nothing.
"That was cannon fire," Arno said, beside himself.

Bellec stood straight, rolling his shoulders and moving to the alcove with the hidden drawings. "Sometimes, opportunity sounds a lot like cannon fire, merdeux. Follow my lead. Laroche you in, or would you prefer to rot here for the rest of you life?"

"Non, but I wish you the best of fortune."

"Solages? We haven't got all day."

"Non, I'll take my chances here."

"Orders from de Launay, secure the prisoners!" The shout came from further down the hall, and Bellec ducked under the window as to be invisible. Arno followed suit, not sold that this was a good idea or even a bright idea, but willing to try anything if it got him out and back to Élise. He worried about her constantly, remembering the dark haze he was under when he first lost his own father and wanting to hold her through it, let her know it would be okay, be there for her as M. de la Serre had been there for him. He crouched low, behind Bellec, and waited.

A pair of guards arrived at the door, the keys and lock mechanism echoing out over the din outside. "Prisoners," one of them said. "Up against the wall."

"On whose authority?" Solages asked.

Laroche: "I told you this was going to end badly."

"Silence!" The pair moved in, and the other prisoners moved to the back as they were told. Bellec moved first, feet somehow silent in his shoes, and reached up to grab a guard. Arno followed suit, his grip decidedly more sloppy. Bellec's guard was down in seconds but Arno had to fight for footing to hold his grip, his guard gulping for air and hitting his arms. Bellec followed up with a devastating punch to the guards midsection, forcing all the air out. Arno adjusted his grip, and Bellec touched his elbow, moving it to a better position. Finally the guard fell, and Arno let go.

He had just...

He had just... to a guard...

Now, at least, he could say he belonged in prison. He gulped for air, trying to process the violence he had just done, but Bellec was already well ahead of him, taking the two guards and stripping them of their coats.

"Here, petit," he said, tossing the blue jacket to him. Arno missed the catch, his hands were shaking too much. "Let's get out of this shithole. Bon chance, the rest of you. Come on, merdeux, put it on!"

Arno was still shaking, still looking at the incapacitated guards on the floor.

"They're not dead, merdeux, get off your high horse and put this on!"

Arno followed the order, brain unable to supply a counter. Bellec grabbed his arm and yanked him out of the cell and down the hall. "Come on, merdeux. Run like you mean it, and no matter what happens, stay close. I'll get you out of here."

The pair marched down the hall, Bellec adjusting his jacket and posture and slicking his hair back. "Prisoner's secure!" he called out to a pair of guards, easily sounding like he had been doing this for
years. "Tavernier gave the grenadier here a scare, nearly shit himself. Piss poor soldier this one."

"What?" Arno demanded, trying to catch up.

One of the guards grinned. "Not surprised," he replied easily. "Get up to the battlements. I don't know what de Launay is going to do, but it's better to be prepared."

"Of course."

Bellec moved down the hall and to a stairwell, Arno at his heels and completely lost as to what just happened. Bellec stopped halfway up and Arno nearly ran into him. "You did good back there," Bellec said. "It was a soft ball but not everyone can act naturally."

"How did you just do that?" Arno demanded, Bellec moving back up the stairs.

"Skill, boy. One you could learn if you're of a mind. Damn, the door's locked. Watch my back while I get it open."

Things were moving a little too fast, Arno wasn't entirely sure how they had gotten from exiting a cell they'd been trapped in for two months – he incapacitating a guard to do so – to casually talking with another, to lockpicking a prison door. The silence stretched out and Arno didn't hear the crowds outside as much, it almost seemed like a normal day. Arno knew, however, that at any moment a guard could come up the stairwell, demanding to know why they were there or why they didn't have keys. "Bellec," he asked, nervous, "Is the door open?"

"Not quite."

"Lovely," Arno muttered.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl, Arno slowly losing his sanity as he waited for the inevitable. "By all means, take your time," he bit out, starting to bounce on his feet, guard jacket pulling on his shoulders.

"Patience, merdeux," Bellec replied. "I'd do better with a set of lockpicks but you can use almost anything. Stop dancing, petit merdeux, or they'll be onto us."

"Little hard to do that when everything hinges on an old man opening a door with little more than a strand of hair."

"Then think on this, merdeux," Bellec said. "The Bastille has about eighty invalides, soldiers who can't do field duty anymore. Before that stupid crazy got himself transferred out a fistful of Swiss grenadiers were added to the host, and there was talk about transferring a few hundred barrels of gunpowder here. Now god knows how many citizens are out there trying to get in, and there's shots and cannon fire. What do you think is going on out there?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Arno asked, incredulous.

"Cause you have a brain, petit, and not even that damn de la Serre could have crushed it. Think!"

The problem did its job, distracting Arno from the anticipation of getting caught. He'd no idea how Bellec even knew those details, or how he'd noticed Swiss arriving or gunpowder, but with that many stores the answer was obvious. "They want the armory," he said. "But why?"

"No idea, petit merdeux, it's not like I'm out there. God knows what the maîtres are doing about it..."
And then, further down, the echo of footsteps. Damn.

"Bellec, we have a problem."

"Find a solution," Bellec said, intent on his work.

… Lovely. Arno felt his nerves on fire, he moved down the stairs to meet them, trying to think about the lock and how he could possibly stall them. He pulled at his guard jacket, knowing he was a Swiss grenadiers now, and met one man in the narrow stairwell. Think Arno, this was the moment, how do you keep him distracted?

"Do you have the keys?" he asked. Damn it!

"What?"

"Keys," Arno said, unable to take it back and hoping to God in Heaven he didn't flub this. "The cannon fire... it shook the whole structure, remember? The lock up there, uh, is jammed now, we've been waiting... twenty minutes, yes, twenty minutes for the spare set of keys to come."

The man frowned, Arno so busy trying to come up with a story he only just now noticed the guard was holding a rifle. If this went badly, Arno was dead.

Then, "I'll go and ask."

The guard turned and exited the stairwell.

Arno held his breath for almost a minute, but nothing backfired, and he slumped against the curved wall, suddenly desperate for air. He couldn't believe that had worked! What had become of his life!

He moved back up the stairs, and he heard a grunt from the ever sour Bellec. "Got it! Let's go, merdeux!"

The battlements had a smattering of blue uniforms, all edging around the inside courtyard and staring down. Arno looked and saw – nom de dieu! There was a slew of bodies in the inner courtyard, all without uniforms, unarmed citizens, and the veteran soldiers were holding a line, rifles aimed at an outright mob as it flooded its way inside with little more than rakes and knives. What on earth?

Bellec grabbed his arm again and dragged him away, finger to his lips to remind Arno they were in disguise. Parts of the battlement were on fire, one entire section of the roofline had caved in on itself – the cause for the rumble earlier no doubt, and nothing made any sense.

"What the hell is de Launay thinking? Why doesn't he fire?"

"Hold the line! Don't let them in!"

" Quickly, while the crowd has them occupied," Bellec said, moving to the outer wall. Beyond was more than the cell's window had any hope of depicting – there must have been a thousand people swelling in the streets, shouting and pumping their arms, bloodlust intent even this high up. Arno stood by his earlier statement: what the hell was going on? No amount of gunpowder could have justified all of this!.

Bellec shed his jacket, once again looking a prisoner. "Crowd that big is going eviscerate anyone who looks like a guard," he said by way of explanation.
"That's all well and good," Arno replied, taking off his jacket, "But you still haven't explained how we're going to get down there."

"Trust me. Over here!" Bellec marched along the edge of the battlements, eyes always out and down, scanning the ground below, looking for something Arno didn't understand. More than a few people in the crowd saw them and pointed. Arno was beside himself, uncertain what he was even doing or how it had all come to this. All he wanted to do was go back home to his room on the de la Serre property, muck stables and make Olivier mad and wait for Élise to come home. How had things changed so rapidly? How could he get it back?

"Ha! I knew Hervé would think of something like this!" Bellec stopped so suddenly Arno finally did bump into the other man's back. "It's time to jump, petit!"

Arno blinked, slow to process the words. What? "What?! Prison has scrambled your brains, old man!"

Bellec gave a bark of a laugh, a manic grin on his face, eyes alight and alive. "Drink took care of that a long time ago. Now get over here!"

"Non! I can't—c'est impossible!"

"Impossible?" Bellec countered. "That's the purview of every Assassin, boy!"

Arno didn't move, and Bellec's lips curled. He grabbed Arno's hand and clapped something into it. "If you can pluck your head out of your own cul, come find us. You'd make a great fit! Au revoir, petit!" And then, unfathomably, Bellec spread his arms wise and leapt over the edge. Diable! Arno looked over but didn't see the body land. Where? How? Bellec came out of a haystack – who had a haystack with the grain shortages – and looked up to give a cheery wave before walking away. How did he survive that?

Arno looked down – and down and down and down before vertigo made him turn away, holding his mouth. Some of the guards had apparently turned at Bellec's shouting, were now advancing, rifles at the ready. "You!" one of them ordered. "Back away from the ledge!"

Arno was trapped: he couldn't fall without dying, he would die here by the guards. Nothing about this made sense he still didn't understand how things had come to this, he just wanted to see Élise again, and he didn't know how to do that. Guards or fall, guards or fall, guards or fall...? "Merde..." he would die a free man. Arno hopped up to the ledge, and something in his mind burst: he could hear fireworks in a deep chamber of his skull, and as the surge of energy flooded his senses and blood pounded in his ears and as the reality of what he was about to do began to faintly sink in there was a sense of... something that filled his heart, something between resignation and acceptance, heavy and somehow light at the same time. He was awake in a way he had never been before, even when his so-called eagle made him read chicken scratch on walls. He leapt, open air surrounding him, and he finally realized why it was called an eagle.

Then gravity embraced him, and he screamed all the way down, flailing for empty purchase and slowly turning in midair. Dieu vous maudisse, Bellec!

Chapter End Notes

No, we're not done yet. No, we're not ready for weekly updates yet. We only just
finished le Rois des Thunes memory, maybe a hundred fifty pages in. But it's such a long wait to summer and we had a really good holiday break and we wanted our readers to feel good. So of course the best way to do that is utterly brutalize Arno - makes perfect sense, right?

Aside from the obvious memories we just burned through, this is mostly set-up, set-up, set-up. There are two major things we change in this fic, and one of them starts here with us planting some seeds. We'll talk more about it later - hopefully when we are up to updating weekly - but suffice to say we see the relationship with Élise and the relationship with Bellec slightly differently. We don't really have the space here to get into it too deeply - especially for Bellec - but we have a very different idea of Arno's and Élise's emotional health and Bellec's role shifts to play into that.

Still don't have beta's yet, so this one is unbeta'ed and we have the sin of google translate for that last sentence: God damn you Bellec! Again if anyone is interested in spell checking this giant mass of words and help us with pacing and flow, let us know in a PM.

Next chapter: Death and Rebirth. That doesn't sound important, no not at all...
Death and Rebirth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

But the hay kept him alive.

Somehow.

… *Nom de dieu* that was entirely too theatrical for a sane man!

Arno was shaking when he finally climbed out of the hay, his legs couldn't take his weight and he stumbled to the ground. He felt light-headed, and his next clear memory was someone at his shoulder, pulling him through a crowd.

"Make way! Make way! We've got a hero here! Don't worry, *monsieur*, we'll get you fixed up."

"What?"

"Saw you at the Bastille, you one of them that charged the place, right? You were swaying so bad I thought one of those guards had shot you. Don't see any blood, what was happening?"

Arno tried to put it together, tried to string a thought together. "Please... I haven't eaten..."

"You and everyone else in Paris," the woman – it was a woman – said. "Do you know if they found the gunpowder? Saw them dragging that man, de Launay, through the streets earlier. He was shouting something, kicked a man – bitter to the end I suppose – but the crowd gutted him. Head's on a pike last I heard."

*Nom de dieu.* "It was a mob," Arno said, remembering the press of people below, the guards trying to hold them back. "There wasn't any thought. Just bloodlust..."

"Did we get the powder?"

"... I don't know."

"Well, don't worry, we'll get some food in you. Hey, André!"

Soup – little more than hot water – was placed in front of him, and a bottle – not a cup, a whole bottle – of wine was added to his meal. He all but guzzled the bottle, he was so thirsty, and on an empty stomach the alcohol went right to his head.

The next morning Arno woke on another pallet, but instead of imposing stonework and the sound of a violin it was all bare wood and wounded stucco. He wasn't in the cell...?

The escape hit him all at once, as did the hangover, and he winced and held his head. Bellec... the keepsake. Arno moved precariously to a sitting position and searched his pockets. Hands moved instinctively to the watch, the firm grip grounded him, and he pulled out some kind of medallion from his other pocket. Brass and silver, well made and ornate.

And, pressed into the relief, was a shape Arno knew very, very well.

He pulled out the watch, turning it over to its face. Time had worn the watch down, bits of rust obscured the inlaid design of the front, but Arno had stared at that design for hours. The stylized
triangle with a curved bottom. He looked at the medallion. A stylized triangle with a curved bottom. They... they were the same.

Assassins. Secret societies. Passwords. Suddenly... suddenly it wasn't so over the top. Bellec had performed astounding things during the escape: changing identities, picking locks, leaping from unimaginable heights. He was an absurdly skilled dueler. But... if this symbol held that kind of weight, if his father really was... an Assassin... then the things he said about M. de la Serre...

His eyes watered, and he lay back down, unwilling to face it. When his patron came in Arno downed another bottle of wine, trying to numb the pain, and spent the day in bed.

Eventually, though, the thought of Élise brought him out of his stupor, and he realized she was still out there, somewhere, alone. Diable. He got up and thanked his rescuers. He had no money on his person to repay them, but she laughed it off and said everyone was in the same boat. No money meant no carriage, no horse, nothing but his feet and his too small shoes to get him to Versailles. It was twenty kilometers from Paris to the King's seat, and he loathed to think how long walking would take.

He lasted maybe an hour before the shoes he had taken from M. de la Serre were too much, and an hour after that before he realized bare feet were infinitely worse. The calluses his feet had gained from training barefoot in the cell with Bellec were insufficient for roads. His culottes were ripped and soiled from his time in prison, his old shirt no longer even remotely white, and his leggings had disappeared at some point. The closer he got to Versailles the more he was looked at with distain, another Third-Estate rebel trying to go higher than he had any right to. He knew on horseback it was a twenty-minute ride, but on foot it seemed interminably longer. He should have made it in half a day, but hunger, thirst, and abused feet made that a ridiculous fancy.

He didn't even have money for a place to stay, and it was well after dark before he realized he would have to sleep outside. Uncertain what dangers the night held, he slept in a barn in an inn M. de la Serre had frequented, only to be chased out as soon as he was asleep for being a vagrant. His next place was under the chassis of a carriage. The air was warm, humid, and when the rain came Arno knew this entire ordeal was destined to be miserable. He had maybe three hours sleep, covered in mud, and had to find a stream to clean himself so as to be presentable. Diable, Olivier was going to have a field day with this. But whatever punishment he suffered would only be bearable if he saw Élise. Helped her through her loss.

Acutely aware of how he looked, Arno used the servants' entrance of the estate when he arrived in Versailles. The house was quiet this late in the afternoon, and Arno quickly realized why when he saw nobody was there. The staff were all gone, and there was no sign that anyone had been there in days. Even if they had all moved to the Paris house, no one was left to tend here... why?

Arno pursed his lips, changing out of his filthy clothes and washing up. He ate any food he could find, stale bread, eggs, half rotten fruit to ease his empty stomach. Even in his proper shoes his feet still suffered the earlier abuse, and he began the long, limping trail back to Paris. Élise. He had to get to Élise. Nothing else mattered.

It was another two-day jaunt because of his feet, they were swollen and ugly and Arno again had to sleep outside in the capricious summer heat. The rain didn't come when he was sleeping, but it was pouring when he returned to Paris. Soaked through and once again without anything to eat, he moved through the streets of the city.

For a city that had stormed the Bastille as an angry mob, the city was remarkably sedate, people moving about, talking, shifting from one errand to the next. The papers had absurdly long lines to
learn what the National Constituent Assembly (sorry, the what?) had been up to, everyone was
talking about M. Jean Sylvain Bailly, elected to mayor of Paris the day after the Bastille and
currently meeting with Louis – the King was endorsing the revolution, how amazing! - and the
rumor about was that Bailly had presented the King with the symbol of the revolution: a tricolor
cockade.

Arno pulled someone aside. "I've been away," he said simply. "Cockade?"

"Nom de dieu, let's fix that right away. My wife's been making them by the dozen. Everyone that
stormed the Bastille was wearing one. Look – Paris colors with the royal white in the middle – the
King surrounded by his people; he's among us now instead of above us, what great symbolism!
Bailly's supposed to present one to the King, between him as mayor and Lafayette in charge of the
National Guard we might just see change before another bloodletting."

Arno found a cockade pinned to his shirt before he really followed what was happening and sent on
his merry way, still lost as to what in God's name had happened in the last two months. Did this
have to do with the Estates-General? It must have, but he'd no idea what could have happened that
was so monumental. It was just meetings and votes on policy, how had that lead to searching for
powder and storming the Bastille and... cockades?

No, none of that was important. Élise came first.

He pulled his soaked hair out of his face for the umpteenth time, making his way to the Paris
house. The rich stonework and manicured greenery were littered with boards and trampled
footprints and broken barrels. Le Marais, one of the richest districts in Paris, looked as though the
Bastille mob had run through here like a bull—Élise!

His steps quickened, and he eyed the streets more carefully as dark settled far earlier than normal
because of the storms. He saw boards on windows, worried what that meant, and stuck to the
shadows, uncertain what the denizens here would say if a Third-Estate ruffian such as himself tried
to approach in the dark.

Finally, however, he made it to the Paris house. He couldn't quite stop his sigh of relief when he
saw a light. Someone was home.

Again, he entered through the servants' entrance, feet sloshing along the floor. He went upstairs,
two at a time, to his beloved's room and turned the handle.

"Élise?" he asked, but elation quickly turned to adrenaline when he saw the barrel of a gun at his
face. Attached to the gun was a hand, lace cuff, and attached to the hand was Élise. She looked at
him with the coldest eyes he had ever seen, dark and detached. Seeing his face did not change hers,
there was no special smile, no warm flush, just a slow, deliberate lowering of the gun.

"... That's some welcome," he said carefully, worried for her state of mind. Had grief driven her so
far? Had the riots hurt her in some way...?

"One can't be too careful," she said, voice low and aloof and so, so bereft of life. "Not after what
happened." She turned, putting the gun on a table, leaving her back to him. Her shoulders were
tight, hunched, her head down and at a slight angle, the sign of hidden sadness. Oh, Élise, don't
hide your pain... Arno moved forward, reaching out to touch her shoulder, wanting to say...

"Élise, I-"

"Haven't you done enough to repay my father's kindness?" she interrupted, voice unforgiving.
Oh, dieu, she thought Arno—! "Élise, please. You can't believe I killed Monsieur de la Serre! How could I, after everything he'd done for me? I saw him fall, saw the-" he cut himself off from saying "blood," not wanting to share a detail that painful. "I tried to save him, clear his airways!"

"And clearly you were successful," Élise countered, still with her back to him, red curls bouncing as she shook her head.

"Élise, it was murder! What could I have done?"

"You did enough." Arno froze, having never heard such a dark tone from his beloved, surprised to see her capable of something so low and dangerous.

"I swear, I had nothing to do with his death!"

And at last, Élise turned around, face a tapestry of pain. Dark eyes looked up to him, wounded to the point of tears, and she said, simply, "But you did." She turned, moving passed him.

"Non. Non! By my life I swear-" Arno turned to follow, down the hall and to M. de la Serre's chambers. Élise pulled out an envelope, held it in accusation at him. A letter? What did a letter have to do with—Oh, non. "Is that...?" he asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"A letter intended for my father the day he was murdered," she said, still so cold. "Read it."

Grandmaître de la Serre,

I have learned through my agents that an individual within our Order plots against you. I beg you to be on your guard at the initiation tonight. Trust no one. Not even those you call friends. May the Father of Understanding guide you.

L.

Arno stared at the missive, reading it and rereading it, a hand reaching up to cover his mouth as he realized the order of events that day. Of his role.

"There. Safe and sound, and only slightly delayed."

"I will return when this hand reaches the top."

Late again...

He was late again...

"There. Safe and sound, and only slightly delayed."

And it wasn't the errant attention of a child. It was a willful decision: spend time with Élise instead of delivering the letter. He had chosen vice over responsibility, and shirking on that responsibility had led to... He staggered back as if struck, looking up to see those dead, detached eyes of Élise, the accusation and judgement.

"There. Safe and sound, and only slightly delayed."

"I will return when this hand reaches the top."

Late again.

Late... always late... irrevocably late...
"Élise..." he started to say, heart breaking, world shattering all around him. So very late...

"I found that in my father's room. Unopened."

Arno shook his head, still rocking from the revelation. "I didn't know," he said, weak defense.

Élise was unforgiving. "Neither did my father."

His legs were weak again, he wasn't sure how he was still standing. All he could think about was Perrault, how desperate he was to deliver the letter, the lathered horse. Going to the Estates-General, trying to get passed the gate and being swept up in the event, forgetting all about the letter for hours and hours instead of finding the Monsieur. He'd been so happy to shed the responsibility under the threshold of the door, happy to spend time with Élise, and that selfishness had led to the death of his second father. He had created this mess, he had orphaned Élise, he had ruined her life with that one act of desire... How could he ever make it up to her? How could he ever fix that mistake? How could he... how would he...

"Just go," Élise ordered, cold, so cold, and again she turned her back on him, not even bothering to see that he left.

And he did, because her rejection had broken him just as surely as the revelation had. He walked back out into the rain, as lost and alone as his love, and without a place to call home.

Two months.

Two months was all it took for her world to shatter about her.

A commotion outside, rumors someone had fainted, and then the mousquetaires pulling her aside and explaining what had happened, and who they had found with the body. It wasn't Arno, of course, Élise knew that without even needing to think, her lover was a follower not a leader, and originality like this was beyond him. The shock had kept her lucid, she was able to argue placing Arno in the Bastille – a place for political prisoners rather than murderers – but soon after the body was carried by on a litter and Élise lost all composure, running to her father before someone grabbed her to hold her back. The sudden grip reminded her she was in public, and showing weakness was a sin to the Order. All she could manage was a numb silence, her very soul torn to shreds.

Or, at least, she thought it was torn to shreds. Then she had arrived home, moved immediately to her father's study for addresses. The other Rites needed to know, her writing would prevent her from sleeping, where the nightmares would hurt the worst. That was when she had found the note. Olivier was only too happy to point out that Perrault had arrived in the morning with the missive, and that Arno had taken over the assignment – only to slip it under the door of the office. Arno was adorably dim, but this was not adorable nor was it dim, it was willful dereliction of duty and shirking of responsibility. Any thoughts of securing his release were banished from her mind, he could rot there for all she cared. He was as dead to her as her father was.

Grief was a bitter sickness, and Élise did not understand the first week after his passing, but the words on that note from Chrétien haunted her. She hardly slept, and when she did it was to terrors she did not remember when she woke. Olivier looked after her as best he could, but he was not her instructor nor her secret keeper. One was out of the country and the other was functionally dead. All she could do was look around the house and wonder where her father was, only to remember immediately what happened and mourn all over again. She tried to be productive: she wrote letters to the other Rites, but Chrétien's warning prevented her from sending them. Who had betrayed her
Weatherall eventually returned to her, now missing a leg and a shadow of his former glory.

"Oh, Élise," he said. "This house will destroy you as it destroyed me after your mother's passing. You have to be outside, doing something. Let us watch the Estates-General, you need to catch up on the politics and keep abreast of them, now that you are Grandmaître."

The word hurt Élise so suddenly two tears spilled out, rolling down her cheeks. Weatherall said nothing, just put a hand on her shoulder to remind her of his support. They left, Élise dressed in pants and her hair piled up and hidden under a top hat and powdered wig, bindings hiding her bosom to make her pass as a man. Weatherall explained – for the last six weeks (six weeks...? Had she been lost that long?) the Estates-General had been at an utter stalemate, quarreling over how votes were to be cast. Traditionally the votes were to be done by order, one for each estate, but now that the fool Necker had doubled the representatives of the Third-Estate the peons thought it should be something as radical as one vote per person, making the Third-Estate the most powerful body of the convention. The Third-Estate, thoroughly fed up with the dead end, simply decided on their own to meet and pass laws anyway, regardless of the King's input, to better the Kingdom. Mirabeau, the Assassin Mentor, was of course part of the insurrection and had at some point named them the Assemblée Nationale, the National Assembly. Élise snorted at such an uncreative name. By now bits of the First and Second Estates were starting to join in spits and spurts, and there was even more to absorb.

The best way to absorb the details was to watch, Weatherall said, but when they joined the delegates at their meeting place, the gates were locked. Everyone was crowded, milling about, trying to figure out what to do. Rumors were running rampant that the King was against the Third-Estate, that he and the other two would try and get rid of them: soldiers were coming, someone said.

Afraid but still bound to their duties, the crowd of representatives eventually found a Jeu de Paume, a tennis court, that was unlocked. It was harrowing to pull in chairs and tables, but eventually someone got up on a writing desk and waved his arms, calling everyone's attention and demanding silence.

"Before we go any further, mes amis," he said, voice booming. "We must first avail ourselves of our predicament: The King wishes to dissolve this assembly! We must not let that happen! I propose everyone present to take an oath!" The man raised his hand, Élise was beginning to wonder who it was. "This assembly must swear, never to separate, and reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the kingdom is established!"

Hands shot up into the air, hundreds already repeating the oath, several taking the words and penning them to paper in order to sign. Élise hardly saw what the fuss was over, solidarity meant nothing in a world where people stabbed each other in the back, where friends were enemies, where lovers refused their duty. She looked at Weatherall, uncertain what she was supposed to gain from this. Her instructor nodded, seeing it was too soon, and took her away, but not to the house.

He hailed a carriage and took them to the Paris house, several of the staff already there and airing the place out. He left to get information, ordering her to go out – for a walk if nothing else – once a day to get her color back. "Action," he said. "You have to act. Painful as it is you are now the Grandmaître of this Rite. You are responsible for decisions, you are to give orders to your subordinates. You are to lead, Grandmaître, and grief can only be forgiven for so long."

The words bounced around Élise's empty chambers as she followed his directions. The sun and heat of the season warmed her hair, she saw other people walking about and living their lives.
Time moved on, and whether she was ready or not, she needed to take charge. If those paltry plebeians could swear to meet and make law, then she could do no less.

It was mid-July then, when she wrote letters to Chrétien and the others to meet at the usual place. She already knew her agenda: *clean house*. A Templar had ordered the assassination of her father, and she would be damned before she let that hinder her destiny. The time for childish hesitation was over, it was time to grow up.

She had followed the crowds, ear to the ground, trying to do as Weatherall suggested and keep apace of the citizenry. That had taken her to the Bastille. Arno was there somewhere, rotting for his crimes, and for the briefest of moments Élise worried that he would be freed. Then she had seen one man jump, from the battlements, and then another: Arno.

... They had taken him. Dear, sweet, irresponsible Arno was innocent no longer. He had found and joined his heritage, and now he would be her enemy on top of everything else. She supposed it was inevitable: he an Assassin, she a Templar. Another loss to the treachery from inside her own house —the house. Élise had looked around and realized the crowd was not a crowd but a mob, desperate for the ammunition in the Bastille. Armed civilians meant riots and massacres, and as a leader she had to see to her own.

It had been everything she could do to get to the estate: it was being ransacked by looters, poor and destitute convinced that money was kept in hidden boxes that only needed to be found rather than in investments and finances. People were making off with busts and desks, anything that had gold inlay or looked expensive to either sell off or burn. Élise killed all of them, ordered her staff to hide themselves, and then she killed two men who came later, there specifically to eliminate her. The traitor was still alive, even two months later, and determined to finish the job. Where were the replies to the letters? It didn't matter, she was alone now, and had no one else to shield her. That was fine, she didn't need a shield anyway.

Two days later Arno came, and now everything was infinitely worse. He arrived a half-drowned rat, filthy and soaked from the rains, desperate to get back in her good graces as if he hadn't had a hand in *ruining her life*. Everyone was out to get her, she couldn't trust anybody, not even a gentle lover like Arno. He was an *Assassin*, now, after all, and just as likely to kill her. No, she had to be alone, she had to be alone, she had to...

His face...

There was a scar there, now, sliding along his cheek and clipping off at his nose. His eyes were as warm as they always were, his lips still tempting even under a beard. Under the smell of mud and rain was his scent, and all the good memories had come back: riding, running, stealing, escaping, falling into bed. His desperation assaulted her, her memories threatened to make her feel... anything. Anything beyond the numbness. She watched his heart break when he read the letter, saw him stagger back, and now she watched him leave, world as broken as hers.

... Good. Now he knew a fraction of the pain she went through.

Those warm eyes filled her vision, however, and she had to shake the vision away. The past was dead. She would not bow to it. There were still items in the house to entice the looters. They had to go.

She would start with the wine. Yes. Wine was very easy to get rid of: one simply had to drink it.

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*July 25, 1789*
Arno remembered little after that. He went from one bottle to the next, usually through theft, sometimes begging on the streets for coin so he could make the pain go away. He mourned for days, sinking further and further, realizing the depths of his flaws. He had nothing left, no family, no home, certainly no friends. All he had was a broken watch, time frozen ten minutes late, the constant reminder of his mistake, and now another: just as raw, just as punishing, just as damaging. Only now M. de la Serre was not there to let him cry in his office, M. de la Serre was not there to hold him through the tears, or distract him with hunting and horseback riding. Nothing was there but his mistake.

It was, oh, he didn't know how many days later, when he pulled out the watch to stare at it and a second item fell from his empty pocket: the medallion.

He picked it up, flipping it around to the triangle relief.

Bellec...

"If you can pluck your head out of your own cul, come find us."

… He had nowhere else to go. The cult would have to do.

… That made him want to drink even more.

He examined the medallion, trying to figure out where it was supposed to lead him. The relief work was exquisite – cults apparently had a menagerie of artisans, but he couldn't find anything that resembled a map. A simple address would be too mundane, he supposed. He worked it over for an entire afternoon, trying to find whatever secret code was necessary to unlock its secrets.

Secrets. Of course.

Arno closed his eyes, thinking of fireworks – his eagle – and looked again. An ornate floral pattern was somehow... there. How did the artisans do that, exactly? And... what the devil was it supposed to mean?

He scrounged up a piece of paper the next day, his stomach reminding him that wine was hardly a steady diet. Sober and hungover, he realized how little he'd eaten in the last two weeks – since the Bastille. Dire consequences would come if this kept up, further cementing the fact that he had to go somewhere, and the cult was apparently rich enough to place haystacks and create ornate medallions. He copied the flower onto the paper and, without any other ideas, started asking people where he could find this pattern. Most looked at him as if he was a lunatic – he could very well be, at this point (a sane man wouldn't make the mistakes he had made...) - and most had no idea. He slowly made his way south, toward the Seine, asking as he went. One person in a pale coat and sword at his hip saw the medallion and stared at Arno for a very, very long time.

"Try the isle," he said simply, before turning and leaving. Arno tried to follow, but the man seemed to disappear into the crowd. Could that have been...?

No, his mind was playing tricks on him, he was going mad with hunger.

Tired, he made his way to the many bridges that crossed the Seine as it split Paris in twain. The isles were hardly small, but to his benefit there were some demonstrably large landmarks: Notre Dame of course, but also Place Dauphine, Palais du Justice, Hôtel Dieu, etc. That meant real estate for this kind of pattern would be small. Arno slept on a roof that night, fitfully for his hangover, but the next morning his mind was clearer. His body was weaker, however, and there was of course no bread to be found here. He had lost track how many days he had gone without eating, and he
started to ask more insistently.

Sainte-Chapelle, he was told by several people. That was the stain glass pattern in Sainte-Chapelle.

On Île de la Cité, the church was five hundred-odd years old, rich in ostentatious Gothic architecture. Originally built to hold holy relics such as the Christ's crown of thorns – supposedly locked in a reliquary that only had one key, held by the King, it had one of the shortest construction periods of its time and was split into two levels: the ground level for the Parisians and the upper level for the King. There was commentary, there, Arno was certain, but he couldn't find the energy to follow the thought as he entered the church. Everything was buttresses and pinnacles and gables, straight vertical lines and impressive if it wasn't so gaudy to Arno's tastes. His entire opinion changed, however, when he entered the Parisian chapel and bore witness to the interior. Stain glass made intricate colored patterns bounce along the walls, the arched ceilings were blue with white stars – no, *fleurs de lis*. The arches met at the back of the church, perfectly centered over a statue of the Christ. The churches at Versailles were nothing like this...

Arno walked up the statue, eyes bouncing everywhere, but he did not see the rose pattern of the medallion. Frowning, he looked up to the statue. "I don't suppose you know where to look?" he asked. Disrespectful, he knew, but he has spent three days on this mystery and he didn't feel like wasting more time. The statue said nothing of course, simply stood there. But... as Arno studied it he thought the figure was looking up.

The upper chapel for the King? He nearly rolled his eyes. Of course. Why be pedestrian, no, cults were lofty, far reaching, and arrogant enough to place themselves on equal footing with the King.

Grumbling mightily, Arno looked for some kind of stairwell, but all pertinent doors were locked. Arno was forced to exit, looking up to the rose pattern that had led him here, wondering what his next step would be.

Only... was that a balcony?

... Could he make the climb? He was so hungry the idea of physical labor like that made him nervous. What if he fainted partway up?

... He was going to faint anyway. He grit his teeth and took a running start. He had climbed trees before, but never buildings. The hand holds were different, there was no place to put one's feet, leaving all his weight on his arms. The clouds were finally starting to clear after so many days of on and off rain, and thankfully the balcony had an open door to the interior. Arno saw two long, red, carpets as he walked in, but that thought cut off immediately when he looked up.

Stain glass... the entire chamber was stain glass! Color exploded everywhere, a rainbow of sunlight that warmed the space and dazzled Arno's eyes. He moved in deeper, experiencing the spectacle to its fullest, unable to rip his eyes away from the patterns and designs, watching the stones change color and everything *glowed*.

Eventually he saw the rose pattern through all the color, a giant circle above him even more impressive than the rest of the chamber. Sensing a pattern, Arno tried to figure out how to get up to that particular landing. Again, there were no open doors or obvious stairwells. Why did this cult enjoy climbing so? Arno held his stomach, empty pangs had long since stopped, that was a bad sign. Gritting his teeth, he took a running start, failed; tried again and failed again, and finally got a grip on his third try. So much time looking up had upset his sense of balance, and his head was spinning by the time he finally reached the top. He swayed before getting control of himself.

At the far end was a door that *did* open, thank god, and a narrow, circular stairway that went down,
"Took you long enough, merdeux."

Bellec was there, significantly cleaned up: beard evened out, hair cleaned, plain but serviceable coat. He turned and continued down the stairwell, an open invitation for Arno to follow. They exited out to some kind of underground hall, the architecture much more austere compared to the King's chapel above: simple arches, squat pillars, elegant floor tiles. The only thing ostentatious were the eighteen-foot statues of men in hoods, blades coming out of their wrists. Candles were at their bases, offerings perhaps. Was the cult religious?

Down the hall were three short steps, the red carpet having the stylized triangle at its end, opening up to a circular chamber with stairs curving up on either side. White banners with the triangle symbol hung from impressive heights, a simple chandelier hanging to give off just enough light to promise mystery. The artifice of it all grated on Arno.

"What is this place, exactly?" he asked.

"A sanctuary," Bellec replied. "A place we can train and prepare, away from the eyes of our enemies."

Arno looked around the excessive stonework. "Didn't we just escape from a dungeon?"

"It's not a dungeon," Bellec corrected derisively. "It's a nerve center. From these tunnels we can get anywhere in the city, all without being seen. We have eyes everywhere."

"Really," Arno countered. He gestured to the solid stone. "Seems visibility would be a problem. Wouldn't you prefer something with a view?"

"This place has served us well for six-hundred years, merdeux. Show some respect."

"Uh-huh," Arno said. Focus was starting to blur, a random thought skittering into his head. "And how long were you standing in the dark waiting for me?"

"Not long. Guillaume spotted you from the bell tower."

The name washed over Arno. "Well, it was quite an entrance," he observed as they moved under the stairs and into another hall. Stairs lead down here, passed a pair of crypts, someone in a coat similar to Bellec's praying over one of them.

"Are you mocking me?" Bellec asked, an edge in his voice.

"Non, non!" Arno said, the hall opening up to another massive chamber. "Very theatrical."

"Shut up. We're here."

The stonework was much rougher here, incomplete, but at the far end was... some kind of structure. The arched ceiling from the lower chapel was copied here, only instead of centering on a statue of the Christ it centered on a balcony, one, two, three, four people in white hoods sitting and looking down. Below them was another relief, griffons and with eagle heads and goats, and some kind of reliquary shaped as that stylized triangle. As one the figures stood, stepping into the light, their faces hidden by shadow. That was certainly... intimidating.

"Let the candidate approach."
Bellec wordlessly stepped back, away from Arno and into the deep shadows. Suddenly alone, Arno dithered before hesitantly stepping forward.

The ensemble above him stepped to the edge of their balcony, close to the light. One of them was African, one of them limped, but he didn't really have the time to process more, as the spokesman began.

"So... the son of Charles Dorian returns to us. Bellec thought you wouldn't come. What changed your mind?"

The direct question surprised Arno, mildly. He was expecting pomp and circumstance, riddles and symbols and arc words. All the ornamentation had been cut through with that question, and Arno straightened. "I'm tired of running from my failures," he said. Drinking the pain away hadn't done anything, and penniless and homeless, he had nowhere else to turn. There were skills here, skills that could help him. "Monsieur de la Serre... my father... I want to make it right." He wanted to fix those mistakes, he wanted to erase his culpability, undo the damage he had wrought.

The African spoke: "The death of Grandmaître de la Serre weighs on you. Why? Did you wield the blade yourself?"

"There. Safe and sound, and only slightly delayed."

Hurt. Everything hurt.

"... Does it matter?" he asked, suddenly so tired. "The blame still lies with me."

A different figure, a woman turned and said something – a language Arno didn't understand. Bellec replied in the same language, deliberately mysterious. There was the pomp and circumstance, the ceremony that Arno had immediate distaste for.

"Very well," the spokesman said in answer to the gibberish. "Out of the dark, you come into the light. From the light, you will return to the dark. Are you prepared to travel the eagle's path?"

"... If that's a fancy way of asking, 'Do I want your help,' yes."

The spokesman smiled, Arno could see in through the shadows, and he gestured below him. "Then drink."

The massive stylized triangle held an equally massive, ornate cup. The base was triangular, with Latin embossed on it: *Fraternitatem Numquam Periculare*. Never compromise the brotherhood. That sounded... dubious. The chalice was large enough he had to lift it with both hands. There was a scent to the water, and his stomach again reminded him that it was empty. Perhaps this would at least settle it as they did something as mundane as finding him a room. He drank, the taste somehow both sour and bitter and replaced the chalice. Ceremony over, he stepped back, waiting for something.

But Bellec stayed in the shadows, looking at him across the way, and Arno frowned, wondering if there was something else he was supposed to do. He looked up at the white robes above him, the hoods had points on them, made them look like beaks of an eagle. When had the people up there doubled...? His eyes drifted down to the massive stylized triangle, and everything was swaying by that point, and the edges of the triangle were telescoping in and out. What was happening...? He felt hot, feverish, and he thought he was maybe falling.

There was light in front of him, moving toward him and slowly engulfing him, the pure white of the sun. Two statues were next to him, hooded and no longer eighteen feet tall; their arms were
"Now begins the end and the beginning. Let your life be judged, and see it reflect back on your actions. Show us the canvas of your heart."

Around him was a white void, paintings hanging everywhere, extending above and below to all infinity, spinning slowly around him. Five paintings slowly moved up towards him, each with headings that showed... his very life. *Natus*, birth, his mother as he never remembered her, swollen belly and longing gaze as his father... *père*... in the intimacy of their bedchambers. *Puerilis*, childhood, M. de la Serre at the estate, top hat off and hand affectionately on Arno's shoulder. He remembered this, they had gone to Paris for some reason, and they had returned to the estate – M. de la Serre had looked at him and smiled, "*Welcome home,*" he said, and that was when Arno knew he would be alright, that he would be looked after and loved as his father had done. *Iuventus*, youth, Élise pulling him along on one of their many adventures. Arno smiled at the sight, those were the happiest moments of his childhood: sneaking sweets from the cook, running through orchards on the country property, sword practice, learning to dance, all the trouble they got into. She was his happiness for as long as he could remember. *Adultus*, adulthood, was a painting of him dueling Bellec at the Bastille, that memory much darker and more pained. That was before he knew the depths of his culpability, before he fully understood his role in the disaster that befell his life, his and Élise's. And then *Mortis*, death, Arno jumping into the void.

"Yes, child. To live, first you must die. To die is to remember that which defines you. Jump."

He looked down to the vortex of spinning paintings. He didn't want to die, he didn't want to die... he was at the Bastille seeing the guards approach, the open expanse of nothingness behind him, a choice, he had a choice he had to make a choice and he didn't want to die so he jumped jumped into the void into the painting into his mistakes the death of his father body on the red carpet facing up eyes open looking at him in accusation he was ten minutes late into the carriage that would take him to his new home to the man who would raise him and love him and he would betray him put the letter under the door safe and sound only slightly delayed what a mistake it lead to the murder the stranger the blood the fall too much of the king's champagne but not really M. de la Serre...!

Arno was on the ground, lush red carpet, black and white tiled floor, window-doors open, curtains blowing up in the wind. Cold. December was so cold, his culottes and leggings weren't thick enough, the winter sunlight was dim, dull, washed out. Hallway. He was in a hallway, the hallway, where it happened. Glass was falling around him but he was there, he could stop it. He wouldn't be late...!

"Can't I go with you, père?"

"Courage, my boy. You just wait here. I will return when this hand reaches the top. And there is to be no mischief."

And little Arno and little Élise had wandered off, did the very mischief his father had warned against, giggling and heedless of what was about to happen.

No, no, no no nononononononononononononononononon.

"Father!" He ran down the hall with his shout, marble busts turning, their eyes glowing in accusation. This was when his life fell apart; Arno knew his father, could see him pacing at the end of the hall, "*Where is that boy? I'm certain I told him six o'clock - we should be well away by now.*"

"Father, it's me! I'm here!" He could stop it. He could undo the mistake...!
The hall was disintegrated around him, busts bursting to bits, the floor collapsing and giving way, forcing Arno to run and jump. A chandelier erupted to fire, his father still pacing back and forth. He pushed harder, trying to reach him, unable to close the distance, desperate to get closer. The floor gave out from under him, Arno was surrounded by the open chasm to Hell below, bones and skulls about him, where his father would soon be. No, non, not again, not like this! Arno climbed the skulls and bones, out of the chasm of his grief and back into the hall, only he was back at start: black and white tiles, billowing curtains, staring busts and swinging chandeliers. Arno moved to run again, desperate to get to the end of that hallway, but the floor tilted and sloped. Hell would not be deterred so easily. Arno rolled and wheeled until he reached the bottom, scrambling to get to his feet. He could see the shadow, the killer.

"Père! Look out! Non!"

His father dueled, sword against sword, a child's imagination of the murder, but as fast as Arno ran, as hard as he pushed, as much as he wanted the change, it didn't come. He hadn't waited for the watch to hit the hour, he was too late then, and he was too late now. Time slowed down, he was running in mud, the eyes were still staring at him, and the shadow did the deed. His father fell in slow motion, the shadow disappearing to nothing, and Arno ran.

There was his father, exactly as he had found him: on his back, one arm slightly raised, one leg pinned underneath the other. Face turned to the side, eyes open, staring at him. Words were unnecessary, the watch said it all:

Ten minutes late.

"Your guilt is large for one so young. The weight is a burden to your heart. How does this relate to François de la Serr?"

His father crumpled to dust, and Arno didn't know if his heart could take any more pain, the ashes revealing an envelope, the responsibility he had taken on himself and failed to carry out. He remembered the wax seal, the inscribed L, Perreault's great huffs. It spoke of treachery, danger, it had to be delivered, "He must receive it today! It's very-"

"Very important. I heard you the first time."

Only he hadn't tried very hard. He went to the Estates-General and was swept up in the commotion, hours talking to men about current events and learning the weight of what they were doing – that weight was trivial compared to his responsibility, and in the end all he did was slip it under a door. Safe and sound, and only slightly delayed. All to be with Élise, all to have his fun instead of doing his job.

"Haven't you done enough to repay my father's kindness?"

No, that wasn't right that wasn't what he meant, he was sorry. So sorry!

"I found that on the floor of my father's study. Unopened."

He should have tried harder, he should have searched more, he should have been responsible...!

Versailles. He was at Versailles, dull memories of the party, of Élise. "You must have caused quite the commotion." "You were always a bad influence." "You were worse."

He was, he was a bad influence. He was always the one who got them in trouble, he was always the
one who was caught, he was always the one who made the mistake. He had thought nothing of it until now: Élise took the risks, yes, but Arno always followed, and he was no match for her force of nature presence, he had no hope of competing. Surely, he should have stayed at home, did his work as a house boy.

Versailles was undulating around him, dim and dark like that night, one lamppost casting a small circle of light where M. de la Serre stood. The shadow that killed his father ran forward, unhindered by the shifting earth, free to wreak havoc on Arno's life a second time. Please, please, not again...

"If I leave it here, Monsieur de la Serre will see it the instant he returns."

That had been his mistake. Assuming M. de la Serre would come home, assuming it was safe to come home, assuming he could go off and meet Élise... The shadow once more engaged in a duel, Arno running yet again, desperate to stop the carnage. There, the killing blow, M. de la Serre staggering back. The angle had changed, the shadow backing away, just as Arno remembered. "Too much of the King's champagne, Monsieur?" And then the fall, and Arno was upon the body again, trying to clear his airway, pulling at the cravat. "Sivert! Come away!"

Only now M. de la Serre's empty eyes were staring at him. Just as accusatory as his father's. This was the price. This was the price for his mistakes: the death of those he loved. He needed to make it right, he needed to fix it, he needed to heal the damage. Please, just let him heal the damage. …

"Truly, I am blessed to have such a loyal companion as you, my friend."

…

"Your heart is noble, child, and your will is strong. How far would you go? Could you kill the killer you seek?"

What?

"You have perished under the weight of these mistakes. Now you are to be reborn. What canvas would you use? How would you heal this damage? Could you assassinate this murderer?"

There were people above him, around him. Faceless, silhouettes, shadows. The floor was different, not the Palais de Versailles, the tiles were smaller, quieter, subtler. The paintings were back, his life on canvas – only, the images were different. Mortis, his death, was now a depiction of him and the watch outside of Sainte-Chapelle. Adultus was him approaching the collection of white eagles on a balcony, he desperate demand for help that he could right the wrongs. Puerilis was now the undulating floors and Arno chasing a shadow. Juventus the cup from which he had drank. Life was going in reverse, he was dead and now he was approaching Natis, birth. He moved through the crowds, staring at the paintings, making his way down the hallway, uncertain where he was going, what he was doing, who he was becoming.

Bodies were on the floor, the crowd surrounding them: his father and M. de la Serre. And standing above them was the killer, proud of the sins he had committed. Natis, the painting above him depicted: Arno killing the shadow. Arno facing his mistakes. Arno taking revenge on the killer.

Something deep inside Arno awoke, dark and full of rage. Presented the opportunity, he would do whatever it took to fulfill that prophecy. He snuck through the crowds, careful to keep back, because he did not want to be caught prematurely, as he always had with Élise. Carefully he moved
behind the monster, something was in his hand, he wasn't sure what, only that it was sharp and necessary and he would make this right or die trying and he lifted the blade the hidden blade and plunged it into the back of the murder to see justice done the body fell the cloak disappearing like smoke and he saw the face only the face was his it was his he was the killer he was responsible he had killed the men he'd called father.

"And now, that part of you is dead. And now, you are absolved of your sins."

Weight lifted off of Arno, so much and so suddenly that he was light-headed, and he fainted.

It was past three in the morning. Honoré yawned, stretching his arms out as much as he could without dislodging the mass of papers around him and on his lap as he kept watch. He had been with the Assemblée Nationale late into the night before insisting on getting home for sleep at his "old age." In reality, he had come underground, to the Assassin's home, and caught maybe three hours sleep before taking watch over their newest novice.

The interview had been grueling. It was always grueling, guiding the candidate through their deepest feelings and memories to find the essence of why they had arrived at the Assassin doorstep. Grueling, but necessary. The French Brotherhood had not had a Templar infiltrator yet, nor had it ever approached extinction as other branches had. The ceremony for the interview may be archaic, and some of what was learned of candidates often left the Brotherhood overly watchful, but the results spoke for themselves. The French had the strongest brotherhood loyalty, and none had been turned in the six hundred years since the Brotherhood was brought to France.

So Honoré wasn't too worried about young Arno. He saw what Arno could be. It would be a difficult path for him to walk, there was no doubt of that. Arno may have been ceremonially absolved the crushing regrets he felt, but he would still have to grapple with it every day. He simply had a method to deal with it, if he could realize it. That would perhaps be the hardest part. Arno was practical. To a fault. The Brotherhood was more than just a set of useful skills, it was philosophy and belief. Such nebulous things would be difficult for such a pragmatic mind to see, and what's more, the Templars had stifled Arno's exposure to such methods of critical thinking. Many of the Third-Estate ended up that way, burdened down so heavily with just surviving that realizing the higher goals of thinking outside of every-day problems - of thinking of art or music or the humanities - could bring fulfillment. Instead, it was always the question of "when will I use this?" instead of "what an interesting idea, what comes next?"

Honoré settled back into his seat from his stretch, looking over his papers.

The Assembly was doing well so far. There was a certain amount of running rough-shod over the other two estates, but as far as Honoré was concerned, they needed their world-view shaken up after centuries of never being challenged. But the undercurrent amongst the Third-Estate was still swelling. Now that they had a voice they kept pushing and pushing. Granted, everything they were after was long overdue, but change couldn't happen overnight. Connor hadn't rebuilt the American Brotherhood in a day; it had taken almost twenty years for it to be as strong as it was now. Ezio, the greatest Mentor the Brotherhood had ever seen, had had to rebuild everything over the course of almost a decade. France's people wanted all their changes now, good or ill. So Honoré was left coralling the Assembly and the King into a middle ground.

Very frustrating.

And it was going to get worse.

"Nnnhhogg."
Honoré looked to Arno, something far simpler to handle.

"Père," he mumbled, fitfully turning in his sleep.

"Shhhh," Honoré replied gently. He set aside his papers and took a cloth from the basin to dampen it and place it on Arno's fevered forehead. The boy clearly hadn't eaten much since his escape from the Bastille, and the grueling nature of interview had left him out of it, and numb. "Rest, Arno," Honoré whispered, patting the boy's shoulder. Arno looked blearily at him, eyes out of focus, before nodding.

"Oui, Monsieur de la Serre..."

Poor boy.

So young, yet bearing so much guilt. Honoré kept his hand on Arno's shoulder, in hopes of offering some layer of support to fight back all that regret as he continued to read through his reports and notes and organizing how the following day would go. Or current day. It was nearly four in the morning now.

With a heavy sigh, Honoré set aside the papers he was working with and instead looked at reports on Sivert. Arno did indeed have the mind of an eagle, untrained as it was in how to activate, but in that desperate moment of finding de la Serre, the boy had unknowingly picked out the exact information needed. Sivert had killed the grandmaitre. What Honoré couldn't figure out was why. From all Honoré had found thus far, Sivert was a money man, had funded Haytham Kenway's operations in the colonies, had used his connections in the military to install the idiot d'Abbadle as governor of Louisiana. Not bad for a filthy little smuggler, but he had earned his way up to being an advisor for de la Serre. So why kill him? He was one of the highest ranked Templars in France.

They needed more information on Sivert. But he had since disappeared back to his smuggling. For so deep a betrayal, there must be something larger. And Honoré couldn't help but worry as to what it might be.

So Honoré kept at his notes. Worrying at all the little things would lead to an early grave, no doubt, and he had far too much to do. Priorities. First, figure out the Assembly. Then look to Sivert. If nothing else, de la Serre had been a strong leader. Honoré had no doubts that letters had been sent about the truce and in the two months since, the truce seemed to be in effect. Honoré wouldn't upset that for now. Not unless an open move happened on the Templar side, but he doubted such would occur. No doubt they were working to clean their own house, which was fine for the Assassins. It gave Honoré more influence in trying to keep cool heads at the Assembly, to keep the path of France on a peaceful transition. He had to focus on that first.

With that in mind, he started to sort through all his papers again. Somewhere there was the agenda for the meetings and committees today.

Almost an hour later, Honoré was watching Arno closely again. There were signs that he was finally waking. So Honoré organized his papers, poked his head out the door, and sent a messenger. As was typical whenever there was a candidate, the council stayed underground to be easily reached. Soon a novice had brought him his white hood. Time to finish this.

Within ten minutes, Arno was sitting up, holding his head, and looking around, eyes finally starting to focus. The first person those clear eyes looked to, was Honoré. He nodded, and offered gravitas, because this, above all, needed to be understood.

"These are the words spoken by our ancestors. The words that lay at the heart of our creed." And
what would ultimately be the salvation from culpabilities and regret for this boy.

Guillaume stepped forward, his dark skin always so imposing in the tunnels under the contrast of the white hood. "Stay your blade from the flesh of the innocent."

Sophie did not step forward, her presence simply strong and throughout the room. "Hide in plain sight."

Hevré, similarly, did not step forward, though that was likely due to his trying to save his strength for the stairs back up to the streets. "Never compromise the Brotherhood."

The three tenets. The foundation. The fundamental rules that kept them safe, alive, and working to help humanity keep learning.

"Nothing is true," they all intoned. "Everything is permitted."

Arno stared at them, wide-eyed.

"Let these tenets be branded upon your mind," Honoré said heavily. These words, that had saved so many lost souls that washed upon Assassin shores. "Follow them, and be uplifted." Release the culpability you hold yourself to. Release that regret and guilt. "Break them at your peril," he added fiercely. Don't let pragmatism blind you. Don't let desire blind you. Focus on those around you.

"Rise, Assassin."

And Arno did.

Bellec entered the room, a red velvet pillow in hand with golden tassels. Upon it, a hidden blade. The most simple and basic weapon of their brotherhood. A blade hidden in plain sight.

Bellec was never one that others thought of as ceremonial. He spoke gruffly, drank heavily, and fought coarsely. But in Assassin ceremonies, Bellec held the solemnity and honors in the highest of regards. He had cleaned up, was dressed in his best, and set about outfitting the blade to Arno's left forearm with not only ceremony, but a kind of reverence.

Honoré stepped forward again. Arno's eyes were on his again, locked and piercing. Honoré kept those eyes on his, reached out, and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Arno Dorian is dead," he said with finality. "He has been culled from this world, with his sins and failures turned to dust." And by Arno, himself, no less. Honoré knew his path would be difficult. Arno's greatest enemy would not be a Templar, or a philosophy or a person. But himself and that guilt. "Tonight, he is reborn," ready to face those regrets, ready to move past his losses, "a novice of the Assassin Brotherhood."

And a handful of a novice, no doubt.

Arno finally broke eye contact, looked down to his wrist, and flicked it, letting the blade slide out, before another twist hid the blade once more.

Like he was born for it.

Bellec nodded his head, before he reverted to his more abrasive persona. He patted Arno on the back.

Honoré gave a nod and the Brotherhood dispersed. Hevré needed to get back to his law practice, Guillaume was investigating the Court of Miracles, and Sophie was doing the research Honoré couldn't while he was with the Assembly all day. Honoré himself took breakfast in the library with
her to discuss what he had in mind, what to focus on, etc.

Bellec would get Arno something to eat and get him started properly on training.

Sophie sat with a cup of tea and looked hard to Honoré. "Are you sure?" she asked, her voice just as hard.

"Of course," he replied, filing through his papers.

"He was raised a Templar."

Honoré actually looked up at that. "You were there for the Interview, you know he was not."

"No, he wasn't inducing into their Order, that I'll grant you," she said, staring into her cup. "But he was raised around Templars. Something of it might have rubbed off on him."

To this, he frowned. "Philosophy isn't some disease to be cleansed," he said softly. "Yes, he grew up around Templars, yes, he loves the Grandmaitre's daughter, yes, he mourns for the Grandmaitre, but he is not a Templar. Under all that guilt, under all that regret, he simply wants things better. He wanted to help the de la Serre girl with her grief. He wants the Third-Estate treated better. He wants to help. You could not find someone better tailored to our Brotherhood."

Sophie still stared hard at her cup. "I did see that. He has potential, I won't ever deny that. But other branches have had difficulties with bringing Templars into the Order. At times it seems easier for our own to be turned to Templar than the other way around. Haytham Kenway was one of us and became a Templar. Shay Cormac was one of us and became a Templar. Now we have a boy who was raised surrounded by Templars. Can he truly understand what we mean when he was immersed in their philosophies, inducted or not?"

To that, at least, Honoré offered a soft chuckle. "Ah, you're forgetting something that Assassins hold dear, Sophie."

She looked up with a raised eyebrow.

Always so severe in looks and manners, since society never looked at a woman's advice otherwise.

Honoré smiled. "We Assassins believe in diversity of thought. We seek for humanity to grow together and learn. That doesn't mean that humanity follows our way of thinking. It means that it looks at all possibilities and decides together. Arno was raised outside of us. He was raised around Templars. But he is still an Assassin inside, even if he doesn't see it yet." He leaned back in his chair, eyes alight with possibilities. "I wonder what new views he'll be able to bring to our Brotherhood, to help us along our own path of self-improvement."

"Ever the optimist," Sophie grumbled, but in good humor.

"You know me so well," he smiled back. "Now, let's go through the lists."

Arno had never enjoyed food so much in his entire life.

Ever, even.

After weeks without proper meals and only the most disgusting wines that had to be watered down piss, having a proper meal was heavenly. Bellec had brought him to a large underground chamber that had a few rows of tables and two large chandeliers giving the stonework a soft glow. A meal
had been set in front of him, and Bellec had then disappeared to "start arranging things." Whatever that meant. Though worn, the upholstery for the chairs were soft, the flatware was clean if slightly chipped, and everywhere Arno looked, things were well-cared for.

The best meal he'd ever had was incredibly simple fair. A watered-down stew, actual bread. But somehow everything Arno experienced was just... more. More delicious, more soft, more warm, more... more.

What the hell was in that drink?

At the moment that didn't matter. Food in the belly mattered. And, to his surprise, he himself had been cared for. After almost a week of traveling in too-small shoes, his feet had pinched and swollen. Even after grabbing his own proper shoes, his poor feet did not care for the treatment he'd had to put them through. But while that drink had sent him into some sort of hallucinatory hell and heaven, someone had applied salve, wrapped his feet, and gotten soft slippers so that walking wasn't agony.

Surprising for a cult.

A few others were spread out at the tables, also grabbing a meal. All were dressed like proper, upstanding citizens, except for the gloves and heavy scarves that came up to cover almost half their faces. It was July. (Maybe August... how long had Arno been out of it?) The weather was far too hot for such fashion. But... Arno wasn't alone. He didn't know these people, he barely understood the cult he'd just joined, but... he wasn't alone.

And that meant something.

He shook his head.

He happily took another far-too-large bite of bread. Not the same quality as at the de la Serre table, or any of the parties Élise would drag him to, but so very delicious at this moment.

An older man came in, face pot-marked and Arno blinked. No limp? Shouldn't he have a limp? Arno shrugged to himself and got back to his divine meal.

"Arno," the man greeted, and Arno struggled to swallow and stand for courtesy and shaking hands, but the man held up a hand and sat down in front of him.

"Monsieur," Arno said as soon as he finished gulping his drink to finish swallowing.

The man smiled, "Finish your meal. I'll simply talk while you eat. You look like you need the food."

Arno chuckled. That was perhaps an understatement. He took another spoonful of stew.

"Now, you met us at your little induction ceremony, but I somehow doubt names were properly given."

Arno held back a snort. "Yes, well, I doubt ceremonies need anything as simple as introductions."

The man smiled warmly. "Touché. I am Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, but everyone here simply calls me by my title, Mirabeau."

Nope, no, Arno did not choke. He most certainly did not rush to grab his drink, and he most definitely did not cough into said drink. Because there was no way that this was that Mirabeau. The
thorn in M. de la Serre's side, the lowly bastard who couldn't keep his own dick in his pants when he saw a pretty face that lead to many affairs and subsequent time in prison for his indiscretions. No, that could not be true.

To self-named Mirabeau actually chuckled. "Ah, it's good to know I got under his skin from time to time."

Arno, very carefully, swallowed. "E-enchanté, monsieur."

"I don't know about it being a 'pleasure' to see me," Mirabeau gave an amused twinkle, "but I'm sure it is 'enchanting'."

"Um... Indeed."

Mirabeau chuckled.

After a moment, Arno did as well.

"Templars and Assassins," Arno muttered. "Mortal enemies. I'm not sure I quite believed that till now. I'm still not sure I do."

"But you see that we do exist and work against each other."

Arno nodded, taking a much smaller chunk of his bread. "So... you lead the cult?" Best get the pecking order down now. Arno had no doubt he was at the bottom.

"I suppose I do have that title as well," Mirabeau kept that warm smile. "I don't have any fancy name or exulted collection of syllables to pronounce. I'm simply the Mentor for the Brotherhood."

Arno gave wry grin. "That's a little plain."

Mirabeau shrugged, still clearly amused. "We don't care much for finery down here. We are in a sewer after all."

Okay, that got a full laugh out of Arno. Ignoring how that made sense and was actually sensible, it also meant that Arno wouldn't have to be so strict in his manners as he did whenever he was sent to another noble's house or to Versailles or anything of the sort. Unknowingly, a part of him relaxed. Arno had been certain that cults had a well-defined pecking order, but even here in the dining hall, people sat wherever they wanted, it seemed, instead of following some sort of strict etiquette. Interesting.

Well then. He had questions.

"What's next?" he asked quietly. "I've joined your cult, been drugged and tended to. Now what?"

"No more drugs, that much is clear," Mirabeau replied. "The Interview is not an easy process, but you are feeling no ill effects, correct?"

Arno shrugged. "My mind is clear."

Mirabeau raised an eyebrow. "But?"

Glancing around, Arno realized that even without a pecking order, he'd still need to be guarded to not let things slip out like that. There were likely still structures here, just nothing defined. So, he offered a wry grin to cover that he hadn't meant to let that slip. "My senses feel... more."
"Ah, that," Mirabeau nodded to himself. "That was not your interview. That is your eagle. Bellec said you have the sight."

"But what does that mean?"

"We aren't sure," Mirabeau replied. "We've known for centuries that the eagle will randomly appear amongst the populous. It does take training to learn how to call on that eagle, and the eagle appears differently for every person."

"We'll watch the fireworks."

And suddenly he heard distant fireworks and could almost see a sparkle of color directing his eyes to the papers at Mirabeau's side. Then he blinked, it was gone, and his head ached.

"Ah, and now you're back to normal vision," Mirabeau said softly. He slid Arno's drink closer. "Have a sip. Keep eating. Now that you've activated it, it will occur at random until you have control."

"Meaning more migraines," Arno muttered.

"Unfortunately."

Mirabeau seemed to content to simply sit there while Arno did what he could to get his raging headache under control. Another plate of bread was brought over along with another drink. Arno sipped without looking before looking up. "Milk?"

"It helps, sometimes," Mirabeau replied. He shrugged. "So I've been told. I don't have the sight."

Arno nodded, though only barely. "Back to my earlier question. What happens now?"

Mirabeau slid one of his papers across. "You start training. For now, with your feet still healing, we want to focus on your lack of education."

To that, Arno stiffened. "I do not have a lack of education," he defended. "Monsieur de la Serre made sure I was taught how to read and write. I have a fine hand. I'm very good with numbers and accounts," after getting into trouble so much, "I know everything I need to."

Mirabeau actually held up his hands. "Apologies, I did not mean to insult Monsieur de la Serre by implication. The fact that you can read and write is very good, but also very common here in Paris. You have all the education you need to be a houseboy, in that you are very correct."

"But you don't have all the education you need to be an Assassin, my boy."

Arno raised a brow. "Stick a knife in someone's back. Or use this fancy instrument strapped to my wrist?" Arno flicked his wrist, extending the blade, still amazed at how it hid so easily under his sleeve.

"Oh, there will be physical training," Mirabeau acknowledged. "Pierre tells me that your swordsmanship is more like a training manual than an actual practitioner, and there are skills in hiding and escape you need to learn. But to be an Assassin requires more than just the strength to kill. It's also learning the strength not to kill, and that takes a great many thought experiments."

Arno bit back a groan. There was a reason he didn't make it through Descartes and his thought experiments.
"Bellec will be your primary teacher," Mirabeau continued. "Along with other members of the Council and I. Bellec will focus mostly on your physical training. He is a master of it. The Council and I will handle the more basic education. Critical thinking, in particular. But what you most need to be aware of, Arno, is going to be perhaps the hardest for you."

Pit in the stomach. "And that is?"

"You are to remain here, underground, while you're learning. Unless you are accompanied by an Assassin, you are grounded here until you have learned enough to survive."

*What?*

"It will take roughly one year for that to happen. Sometimes less, sometimes more." Mirabeau looked Arno straight in the eyes again. "Arno Victor Dorian is dead," he intoned. "While you are down here, we will be removing your name from files. We will be making you disappear. We will ensure that you are forgotten. When you are done with your training, we will give you a job and you will start working on getting information. That is the primary job of *all* Assassins, getting information. You will likely have a different name, and if any remember you, you will be so different that they will question themselves. Because Arno Victor Dorian is dead."

That was...

That was...

A lot to take in.

"A job? Outright *giving* me a job? What sort of influence do you *have*? How did you arrange for *hay* to be at the Bastille? Grain prices are rising daily!"

Mirabeau smiled, waving that aside. "There is a farmer outside the city we helped. He makes sure we always have grain, and he gives us bales of hay if he ever has surplus. We store it elsewhere, obviously."

That just lead to *so* many more questions.

"Now," Mirabeau stood, still smiling warmly. "Today is a day of rest for you. You know where your chamber is. We want you off your feet for today. Bellec will be spending today starting the death of Arno Victor Dorian, before beginning with you tomorrow. For now," he pulled a book from his pile of papers and slid it over, "here's something to read and think on."

Arno took the book, and looked to the cover.

Descartes.

*Diable.*

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*Principles of Philosophy.* Ethics was a science, Descartes wrote. It was the highest and most perfect of sciences, and because of its metaphysical nature therefore connected to the divine. Referencing an older line, "*Je pense, donc je suis,*" or, "I think, therefore I am," Descartes argued that reason was the primary methodology for investigating ethics, and that the quality of the reasoning depended on how well-informed a mind was: a more informed mind was able to make better decisions - and that part of the mind was the mental condition - physical health played into the science of ethics.
Arno looked down at his bandaged feet, swelling still going down, and wondered how that had anything to do with his faculties. Having said that, though, this was the first time he had read Descartes and been able to understand him on his (... fourth) reading. This particular book had never been in M. de la Serre's library, and for a man of the Second Estate so enamored with educating his daughter Arno was a little surprised the Descartes collection was not complete.

Reading the work had taken him two days, he was a little disgruntled when he finally managed to work through it enough to feel comfortable with it. When he was done, he could walk without a limp, though his feet were still sore, and answered a summons from Bellec.

"All right, merdeux," the dour man said. "Mirabeau said he gave you some light reading. What'd you think?"

Arno gave his opinion. "Parts of it are so abstract as to need a translator, but the idea of well-informed decisions at least made sense. Eventually. The talk about degrees of wisdom made sense, to a point. If this is considered light reading, however, I fear we have a problem."

Bellec nodded. "You have a brain in there somewhere, merdeux." Arno winced at the nickname, wondering if he'd ever shake it off. "Best you start using it. We'll start off by getting one thing clear. Above us is Paris, and they don't give you time to have 'meditations.' If you stop and think about what you're doing you'll be gutted before you can say 'je pense, donc je suis'."

Ah, a practical man.

"This work here," Bellec added, snatching up the book. "You study it here, where it's safe, to exercise your mind. Like Descartes says, the body is just as important as the soul - you can exercise the body, so you should be able to exercise the mind. That's what this is for. Descartes never knew about us, but one or two of us were his friends, and you can hear the echo of an Assassin in his works."

… And there was the cult. Assassins knew Descartes? What was next, that they knew the Pope? "You don't seriously expect me to believe you lot influenced a philosophe."

"More than a few in our time. History's Maître Quemar's specialty, but when you stretch back as long as we have you can't help but hobnob with one or two famous people. Leonardo da Vinci, Prince Suleiman the Magnificent of the Ottoman Empire, Richard the Lionheart of England, just to name a few."

"And you have now lost any engagement I might have had with this conversation," Arno replied flatly.

"Merde, merdeux," Bellec cursed. "Get your head out of your cul. You're one of us, now, you have to be able to believe a maître when he's trying to teach you - fantastic or not, believable or not."


"You exercise your brain here, you exercise your body, too, until both things are high functioning machines. Paris up there doesn't forgive mistakes, so you get good enough to make as few as possible. You need to know, merdeux, that I won't be handing you answers. I'm not going to hold your hand and tell you it's fine, take your time, because I don't want you thinking the real world will do you the same."

Arno had seen as much during their sword practice at the Bastille. "Will I be allowed to ask questions, or will you throw me to the ground like you did in prison?"
Bellec's answering smirk was dangerous. "Depends on how dumb the question is."

"... Wonderful."

"First up: your feet are still trash and I already know how bad your sword fighting is. For now, we have to see how much de la Serre kept from your education."

This again. "He taught me-"

"Everything you need to know. Mirabeau told me. Well, let's see what you think you know, and what you do know. If you're on the Champs de Mars, for example, and someone comes up to you and asks where the target practice is, what do you say? No, actually, that's too easy, let's say you're assigned to decrypt a letter, what are the three most common ciphers out there? How do you tell counterfeit coins? What's the minimum number of tools you need to pick a house lock versus a palais lock? How much money do you need to feed a new cull of novices?"

"Wait, wait, what even is a novice?" Arno demanded. He hadn't known any of those questions!

Bellec nodded. "The outside world only sees one thing: an assassin. That's by design, but inside we have names depending on the level of training. New recruits like you are novices. After your death above is completed and we can start sending you out you're an apprentice. After the first kill you're an assassin, and after a set number of years or demonstrating a particular skill set you become a maître assassin. After that's the Mentor, but we only get one of those per branch."

"... Branch?"

And Bellec grinned. "Still think you know everything, merdeux?"

The next hour was one assessment after the other: mathematics, literacy, language, history, critical thinking, philosophy, religion. It took the entire day, Arno was exhausted by the end of it, attention blurring in and out as he mentally shut down. A bowl of stew was placed in front of him, he looked up and realized he was in the utilitarian room he had been assigned to. Bellec dragged a chair over and sat across from him.

"First month is the hardest, merdeux," he said, settling in. "Especially for kids that don't come from an Assassin family - which you might as well be. Not everyone is used to actually thinking for themselves."

Arno stared at him, blinking slowly. "Are you… actually being nice?"

Bellec made a face. "You won't think that by the time I'm through with you."

And so, training began.

Bellec spent most of the day making Arno recognize muscles he never even knew he'd had. Sword training was brutal, but Arno had expected that after their time in the Bastille. What he hadn't expected were the other physical exercises he'd do. Hanging from his fingertips for as long as possible before resting and doing it again, running along the tunnels daily to bring up his endurance, falling and rolling so as to not hurt himself, the list went on and on. He eventually stopped questioning it as he realized that these silly exercises helped him improve his swordsmanship. Hanging by his fingertips increased his strength, all the running gave him endurance, knowing how to tuck and roll had him dodging with far easier.

Arno kept at it, once he realized the practical aspects of some of these more bizarre trials. What he
had more difficulty with was all the reading. Not that he couldn't read, thank you, but that there was so much he needed to do. History, politics, governance, law, medicine, science, mathematics of trajectories, the list was extensive. Arno had thought he'd had a grasp of these already, but the depth with which he was expected to know any of those topics was astounding and he saw no purpose in. In this, Bellec was perhaps the worst teacher.

"Don't you see?"

"See what?"

"It's all connected, merdeux, Templars, Assassins. All of it."

"And Parisian law from a century ago is connected how? And it matters now, how?"

Then Bellec would, unsurprisingly, assign him some physical task that would leave him dripping in sweat, sore, and desperate for either a pillow or a bath, perhaps both at the same time. That, Arno didn't mind so much, as he could see the real improvement he gained for his physical exercises. But all this learning...

It wasn't until Maître Quemar came into the tunnels and sat with Arno that he finally caught a glimmer of what was so important about everything he was supposed to be learning.

"Boy, you're not thinking."

Arno, of course, had been defensive. "I am perfectly capable of thought, Monsieur, despite what all of you have been telling me."

Quemar said nothing, only squinted at him. Finally, he sighed. "Do you know what my job is?"

Arno stopped himself from rolling his eyes. "Assassin," he replied dryly.

"Wrong. I am allied with Assassins, I am part of the Assassins, but that is not my job. My job is a lawyer."

That actually made Arno lift a brow and he could feel curiosity start to curl. "Lawyer?"

Quemar sat back, hands on his cane still. "Don't take that tone. I know what people say of lawyers. But my job is to defend. I need to know the law inside out in order to get the best results for those who need defense when no other would dare try."

Arno scoffed. "And that's why you're so well known for getting people out of going to jail."

"Tch. Please. That's not the type of law I fight."

"What else does a lawyer do?"

"We make law," Quemar said, a pulse of intensity bleeding through his voice. "Our job in the courts it to litigate; we fight over interpretation and implementation, we refine and create nuance that governing bodies have no hope of understanding, we demonstrate the fallibility of old laws to inspire new ones. One court case can change history. Think on that before you ponder the relevance of what you do. Thinking," he added with a raised brow. "Is more than just deciding how much you can buy with what's in your purse. It's knowing your own mind, running through scenarios to determine outcomes, and more than just doing what your heart tells you. The heart can be tricked, a trained mind cannot."
Arno was willing to follow that train of logic, at least a little. The idea of laws changing in courts was something he hadn't known, nor even considered as a house boy. With Mirabeau and the National Constituent Assembly making the laws now with the King's approval, this had the potential to change very quickly – that's what Quemar said – and being up to date was going to be important. He still didn't understand why past laws were relevant if all of them were being rewritten in the now, but at least he was willing to try.

Bellec didn't help, though. He thought things were obvious when they weren't, overexplained the parts that were, and always punished him with physical activity.

"All right, merdeux, let's see how good you are."

Arno usually prepared himself for falling when he took that tone, but once in a while he would be paired with another novice, and those Arno looked forward to. Having had sword training since he was young, he was usually significantly better than whomever he was paired with.

Usually.

His opponent was a woman, and Arno didn't think twice about it, having fenced with Élise since he was a boy. Her skin was beautifully dark, her hair even darker, but she was thin as a rail, and clearly poorly fed. He took her down in one strike, swiping her sword out of her hand almost comically. Her eyes seemed to bulge in fear, she backed up awkwardly, tripping over her own feet and holding a hand up defensively.

Arno lowered his sword, bowing to her for the bout, but that was when the woman shot to her feet and twisted his wrist, palming his ribcage.

"Cosette's the winner," Bellec declared.

"What?" Arno demanded. "I disarmed her, she—"

"Would have killed you if she extended her blade," Bellec said, ever dour. "Look, merdeux."

Arno turned, and the dark woman extended the blade with a flick of the wrist.

"You'll fight a woman, but you don't take is seriously; and you think fights are over once an opponent is on their cul? You don't think."

"You all say that over and over but don't actually point out how one is supposed to 'think' the way you expect me to," Arno growled, a little tired of hearing this over and over.

"We are, merdeux, but the Templars have you so broken in you don't even realize it."

Arno hated, really when anyone in the cult assumed he was somehow less for being raised by M. de la Serre. He was hanging by his fingers for an hour after that, to the point where his fingers were swollen and felt broken even though he knew they weren't. He entered the dining hall and saw no other novices to eat with. That was probably for the best. He took his onion soup and bread and started walking back to his cell. In the narrow hall that lead to quarters he saw the woman, Cosette.

"Here to gloat?" he asked, still feeling bitter.

"Non, to ask for help," she said. "You know swords. I need to learn."

"Seems to me like you are already ahead in your studies," Arno said, but not as derisively.
She shrugged her shoulders. "This," she said, holding up the hidden blade she had beaten him with. "This saved my father's life when I was a child. In the Caribbean, a former slave wielding these freed my father from a plantation. I already know it's value."

Arno's mind skittered to a halt as things suddenly came together in his mind. "Ahhh," he said awkwardly. "Your father was a slave?"

Cosette raised a brow. "Interesting. You didn't assume me to be a slave?"

Arno shrugged. "I had seen Africans, such as yourself before. Only ever from a distance. I had never given it much thought."

She hummed. "I suppose that's better than most," she said softly. "Now about some sword lessons?"

Arno offered a wry grin. "Only if you show me how to use that blade?"

Her dark eyes glittered.

Chapter End Notes

Joyeaux Bastille Day! What better way to start off our weekly updates of this massive fic than on a French Holiday! (waves manically) Hi!

Currently, we're 22 chapters in, 430 pages of typing, and... well, stuff is happening. Now that we're updating weekly we want to talk a little bit about the rewrite AS a rewrite, and subsequently AC:Unity itself. Unity is - in short - a bit of a mess thematically. Other AC titles have very clear themes - Connor's belief in the world goes down as the United States rise up; Ezio builds a brotherhood while the Borgia fall apart; Eddie Kenway's ego is broken to pieces along with the golden age of pirates, etc. Unity even tries to have its title in the name, but the actual plot of the game starts to fall apart when one examines it.

In history: Paris and France slowly spin further and further out of control, and their attempts to try and put it all together leads to more and more extreme actions, and the game chooses to end that spiral at the Terror (the Revolution goes on for another ten years after that, but it's a good place to end). What's the parallel in Arno's narrative? They say at the end when Arno recites the Creed that it's a condemnation of fanaticism and dogma - but those are not the things the game highlights during the gameplay. It talks instead about a Shakespearean tragedy, a Templar and an Assassin who love each other but... what? One of them is on an Ezio quest for revenge and the other talks a lot about redemption but the Extremists aren't Arno and Elise, they're Bellec and... maybe Germain?

The pillars might stand nice and straight but the message of the game is an incoherent mess, the time skips are painful, especially in 1793 when the real spiral of self-destruction starts, the Events that are being covered are given no nuance or even justification. I'll grant them that because the AC franchise never gets into the nitty gritty of different events - god knows you don't connect the Tea Party to Lexington and Concord and then to Bunker hill, but the two of us can follow that because we know the history, we learned it in school. We didn't study the French Revolution and
had no idea that Arno sneaking into Tuileries to burn some documents is actually August 10, the insurrection against the National Assembly as the Jacobins and extreme left take power from the Girondists. We didn't even know what Jacobins and Girondists were until we started this fic.

The result: this fic plays as close to history as we can possibly manage (though for us that's no surprise), and we take the time to get into the politics of the day as much as we can. And, that way, we can thematically tie the Revolution to the protagonist: Arno. These decisions mean that the "tragic romance" goes very, VERY differently. We see the first blush of that here with Elise's perspective.

We also see a blush from one of our reviewers who - in what I can only assume took hours to do - took hi-res pictures of one of the Unity supplementary materials and emailed them to us in a massive .rar file. There were some juicy tidbits there, one of which we start to see here but will get into more detail in a later chapter.

TL;DR: Arno spends most of this fic in a desperate need of a hug.

Next week: Bellec's training
Cosette may have excelled with the hidden blade and was able to show him many different forms that he was able to start adding with his sword work, but what was the most useful for him with the history she was able to bring with her of the Brotherhood. Unlike Bellec, who kept trying to use every major event in history to show the far reach of either the Templars or Assassins, Cosette's family history was far more engaging to understand. She had actually lived it, survived it. Arno learned what slavery was really like and he wondered why anyone thought it was a good idea. It was through this lens, of looking at slavery of having control and being "good shepherds" that Arno could finally see why Templar philosophy had so many flaws. In the de la Serre family, M. de la Serre was a good shepherd. Arno and the house staff had been treated well and fairly, but one person with that much power could also end up exploiting those beneath, as France had done to the Third Estate for centuries now. Seen in that context helped to clarify much for Arno.

As for Cosette herself, it was certainly interesting trying to teach. Arno had never had to teach anyone before, had only ever had to learn, and it was an interesting switch of perspective. Though she was eager to learn, it was strange trying to explain why footing was so important and how to shift weight from one leg to the other. Arno had to really reach back in his memories to when he had learned the basics and realized he'd never asked such questions so he couldn't answer why so easily. He had to figure it out himself and then explain it to Cosette.

"You did not hesitate to fight me," Cosette said after another bout as he helped her up off the floor.

Arno shrugged. "I often sparred with a woman as I grew up."

"A woman? Learned sword fighting?"

"I grew up in an unusual house, as I understand it."

"Indeed. Who was she?"

Arno smiled unknowingly, eyes softening, as he thought of Élise. "A strong woman, capable, intelligent, driven. She was the daughter of the house, set to inherit everything."

"A daughter? Not a son?"

"Monsieur de la Serre wouldn't have had it any other way."

"Very unusual." Cosette took a cloth and wiped her brow. "You care for her a great deal, I take it?"

Arno did not blush. "Oui."

"Yet now you are dead, to her and the world."

Arno looked away, remembering her decisive rejection, her blaming him for M. de la Serre's death. Safe and sound, and only slightly delayed... He shuddered. "It... ended poorly," he said simply.

Cosette nodded. "As it did for me," she answered, touching her chest.

The pair trained mostly in the morning, both of them naturalized to waking with the sun before
Bellec came in with another African – former slave? – Maître, usually to watch. Each would take their student and then the reading would begin.

Arno read more Descartes than he could stomach, as well as Voltaire and Rousseau, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Adam Smith, Kant, Montesquieu. *Dictionnaire Philosophique, Discourse on Inequality, The Social Contract, Theory of Moral Sentiments, Spirit of Laws*, Arno was flooded with ideas, philosophy, dreaded thought experiments, people opining on law and justice and thought and government and the human condition. Most of it was drivel, even the parts that Arno could wrap his head around he needed days to break down and absorb. Cosette was (slightly) better read, but could only barely read. They worked together, Arno as translator and Cosette helping break down the finer thoughts. The overarching theme was human instrumentality, the idea that people could govern themselves because they could be educated and discern truths through rational thought. Cosette was, in that respect, a far better teacher than Bellec. She had the curious ability to love what she was hearing.

"You are good speaker," she said softly. "Your voice is light and tender, I am carried away by the words and uplifted by the ideas."

"But why?" Arno asked. "It's all bland essays and lectures."

"But it is life," Cosette replied. "You do not know, you have never been outside of France."

"I was," Arno countered. "When I was a child. My father took me to Africa for two years. I don't remember much, though: drums, singing, dark hands with white palms. Always being hot."

Cosette smiled. "You know more than I do," she said. "Except about always being hot. In the Caribbean you will sweat even when the sun is set. My père used to say he did not know draught until he came to France. But back to the point: these thought experiments and essays, they give someone like me hope. I can believe that I will be safe in the world they describe."

"And you are not now?"

A long pause drew out, Cosette's eyes slightly wide as she leaned back. "Nom de dieu, why do you think I am here?"

That was the first time Arno realized that the cult might have done more than trick people like himself into coming here, and also the first time he realized that the cult might actually – on occasion – help people.

That was when he truly started to take the lessons seriously.

A week later Arno turned twenty-one, an empty number without Élise there to celebrate with. Once she had smuggled in a bottle of wine, the two of them had gotten drunk for the first time, laughing at how badly the other was at pronouncing words and giggling over the stupidest things before Olivier had found them. He had spent his first hangover in the bright sun expecting to somehow help Olivier at a horse auction, the noise and light pounding on his abused skull. Élise, damn her, had suffered no ill effects from the alcohol, arrived and asked whatever was the matter with him and called him a baby for not handling his wine. Arno did take a bottle, staring at it and wondering if he should take the day to mourn what he had lost. Cosette, however, seemed to always have a sense of his moods and spent the morning making him read Latin and translating it to her. Eventually he asked what she was doing.

"I saw your face," she said. "That was the look of my father, when he came here and realized things would not be different. He thought he would find opportunity here, after he was freed. It did
"I don't understand. Why was he pale?"

Cosette didn't say anything for a very long time, dark eyes downcast and picking at the worn wood of the table. "My mother… our owner took a fancy to her."

What did that- nom de dieu. "But she was married to your father!"

"Married?" Cosette asked. "Whatever made you think we were allowed to marry?"

"Careful," said a new voice, "I don't think he's ready to have that much of his world shattered."

A man, thick shoulders and arms, leaned an axe against the table and sat with them. "Name's Urbain Fabre," he said, smiling through his thick beard and offering a hand. "Today, anyway. You're the former Templar, right?"

"I was not a Templar," Arno moaned.

The axe man, Fabre, laughed. "And Cosette here has parents that were married. Don't worry, Dorian, we won't judge you for it. Just tease you."

Arno continued to make a face.

"You have spirit for a Novice," Fabre said, still smiling. "Now me, I was a right mess when I came here. Just released from prison, yellow pass making me an outcast everywhere, I didn't have anywhere else to go - had my whole world turned upside down when I got here. It never occurred to me that kindness was anything more than a myth. Hello, girl. What's your name?"

"Cosette, monsieur…" Cosette said, suddenly even more quiet than she usually was.

"For you, my dear, I'll be… Jean Valjean. How about that? Nice and easy to remember."

"I'm sorry, why are you here?" Arno asked.

"Oh, sorry. Maître Beylier sent me here. Said the two of you are ready to learn the finer art of picking locks."

"Quoi?" Arno and Cosette asked in unison.

Fabre grinned.

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**August 27, 1789**

The next morning Arno woke to a surplus of noise. More people than he'd ever seen in the underground dungeon were massed together at the tables, discussion was lively and, in some cases, heated.

Surprised to see so many discussing so fervently, he found Cosette frowning down at a paper that she was clearly struggling to read.

"What on earth is going on?" he asked as he sat down.

"The Assembly put forth a document," she said softly. "I'm trying to read it, but..."
But reading wasn't her strongest skill. So, Arno gave a soft grin and did what he always did. He read it to her.

But in the process of doing so, he realized just what he was reading.

*Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen, The Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen* was quite the read.

"This... is amazing," Arno breathed as he read through it. By this point he had gone through it three times with Cosette, repeating certain parts and helping her read through the language. "All men are equal, no influence of the Church in how we should be governed, all men have liberty, property, security and resist oppression. No more *exemptions from taxation*. We *all* have a say in the legal process." He looked to Cosette, wide-eyed. "I never knew it was possible for this to be true."

"Which one is your favorite?" Fabre asked, coming joining them at the table. "I'm fond of the fourth article: 'Liberty consists of doing anything that does not harm others.' My second favorite is eleven, 'The free communication of thoughts and of opinions is one of the most precious rights of man.' I can say what I want and do what I want so long as I don't hurt anybody. How about you two?"

"... The sixth," Cosette said slowly, "The one that says law is the expression of will. That means if we convince enough people, we may save everyone who looks like me."

"Article Ten," Arno said, eyes skimming over the lines. "'No one may be disturbed for his opinions, even religious ones, provided that their manifestation does not trouble the public order established by the law.'"

"See?" Fabre said. "We all get a favorite."

"Who even wrote this?" Cosette asked.


"Jefferson?" Arno asked. "Isn't he one of the people we're forced to read?"

Cosette pressed fingers into the bridge of her nose, thinking. "Did he write the *Declaration of Independence*? The document *Maître* Connor sent over?"

"Well, *I* heard that Mirabeau had something to do with it, too," said a new voice. The trio looked up to see a new face – narrow cheekbones and delicate mustache, finely cut green coat. He *reeked* of nobility. He sat with them without invitation, leaned forward with his elbows on the table. "Impressive that one of *ours* had a hand in something so monumental."

"I'm sorry," Fabre said, eyebrow raised. "Who are you?"

"Marius Pontmercy," he said grandly. "Not a noble like all of you are currently thinking, but rather an *entrepreneur.*"

"And what are you selling?" Fabre asked, wry grin on his face.

"Books. Interested?"

"In the scam? Certainly."
Pontmercy was offended. "Scam?"

"You don't walk around like a peacock like that unless you have an agenda," Fabre replied, still smiling. "Besides, you're a novice, right? You're dead to the world right now, which means you can't sell books anymore."

Pontmercy leaned back, his face saying he didn't know how to react. "I'll have you know," he said slowly, "That I am not a novice. I just made assassin, and now I will be the epicenter of intelligence, gossip, and change for the future. I have to look the part, don't I?"

Fabre rolled his eyes. "I see you didn't learn much from all you're training. Come on Dorian, Mademoiselle Cosette, let's start your training and we can have a real 'intellectual' discussion."

Pontmercy turned to Arno and Cosette, as if seeing them for the first time. His eyes widened fractionally in some kind of recognition, and Arno immediately decided he didn't like the man.

"What?" Arno demanded, defensive.

"Nothing," Pontmercy said. "Come to my bookstore when it opens; we'll have some reading that even you might like."

"Don't worry," Fabre said after the man in the green coat left. "I'll soften him up later. For now, we celebrate that the National Constituent Assembly took a step towards making a feasible constitution in only four months and get the two of you started on lockpicking. Touch is everything, and we'll see how sensitive you both are."

Lockpicking, it seemed, was one thing Arno didn't have to think too much about – as Fabre described, his fingers were sensitive, and so were his ears. He could hear the tiniest click of a tumbler and could keep his hands steady as he moved to the next one. Cosette also had a deft hand, and in two weeks Fabre said they were ready for more complicated locks when they both made apprentice. Arno was getting curious what was going on above him – the Declaration made him think of the Estates General, of the idea of the Third Estate taking control of their destinies and getting bread to eat... He was distracted during Bellec's training and was struck down more than once.

"What's the matter, merdeux? You're better than this, now."

"Desolée," Arno said, rubbing his jaw. "A little distracted."

"With the revolution above us? You and the rest of France, merdeux. Gotta keep it in perspective. Whatever good we get out of this, there'll be blood to pay getting it, and the people are gonna have to decide how much they're willing to pay."

"It won't come to that," Arno said, "We live in an age of reason, don't we? That's what all the reading is about, isn't it? To show us that we can rise above bloodlust?"

"Oh, an idealist," Bellec said, swinging his practice wand. "We'll see if we can break you of that. Come on."

Arno stood, still rubbing his jaw. "Come on where?"

"Top side, merdeux. Mission came from the Council, and I'm about to volunteer us."

Despite living a scant twelve miles from Paris, Arno had never left Versailles except to go to the
country house. The duties of a house boy never afforded that kind of freedom even as a child. The escape from the Bastille had been harried and confusing, and by the time he'd arrived at Élise's city house, he'd been half mad with hunger and desperation. Even going to Sainte-Chapelle... his memories were blurry. Now, Arno was fed, outfitted, had two months of combat training, a sword at one hip and a gun on the other. He looked at the firearm dubiously – training on that particular piece of equipment was still forthcoming, but after listening to Bellec's warning over and over he thought he could handle walking the streets. Maybe. A little.

Arno pursed his lips. "So, what exactly are we doing?" he asked, tugging at his blue coat.

"Here," Bellec replied, giving him a piece of paper.

"Reports of satanic apparitions are terrifying the citizens," it read. "It is said that throwing coins into any fountain on the Île de la Cité will summon the Devil. Witnesses claim that the voice of Satan beguiles the coin-thrower into the shadows, never to be seen again. Investigate the fountains, summon the 'Devil' and put an end to the absurd apparitions."

Arno looked up. "You can't be serious."

"Dead serious, boy," Bellec replied. "The whole point of the job is to keep the people safe so they can live their stupid lives. Assassins only ever react when that thought is being threatened. Why do you think Templars piss us off so much? They think they can tell everyone what to do and that'll be fine."

Arno remembered his reading, his thoughts on M. de la Serre. He had been a good shepherd, was mindful of someone like Arno – so lost and alone – and he, former house boy, could hardly consider that bad.

"But if they have good intentions, wouldn't it?"

Bellec turned around, eyes wide and oily hair falling into his face. "I swear, if de la Serre weren't already dead I'd kill him for what he did to you."

"But—"

"Shut up, merdeux, before I put you back underground."

Arno did as he was told, though he didn't like it. The streets were narrow and paved, buildings so compact as to almost be built on top of one another. This late in the evening not many people were out, Arno couldn't see the sun but the golden hour was rapidly fading. This was the time of prowlers, thieves, and criminals. Arno kept his hand at his sword and wished he knew how to use his gun better.

Bellec moved through the dwindling crowds like he'd lived here his entire life; he shifted from merchant to sweeper to former beggar, greeting people with what could only be described as a dour smile, starting conversations and slowly working them around to talking about water and the taste of the fountains.

"Water's always tasted like piss, but now it seems even dirtier than ever," he said easily.

"Have to be careful which fountain you drink from," one denizen said. "There's something like three of them that bring the Devil out. One sip you're lured away to the darkness, never to be seen again – heard they give promises of bread, wealth, coin. God's testing us to see if we're ready to for the revolution, I guess."
Bellec laughed. "I don't mind the idea of being tested. Which fountain makes the bargain?"

"Careful, you'll wind up a beggar again."

"Ha! I'll water it down with this," he said, holding up a bottle of burgundy.

An hour later they were sitting at the edge of the isle, la Seine a dark, yawning break of the city lights. Bellec had his burgundy wine, taking deep draws from the bottle and occasionally peeking over the gardening wall to see if anything was happening. Arno sat with him, but still had utterly no clue who or what they were supposed to be waiting for. Nor did he understand why watching Bellec slowly get drunk made it go faster.

"Here's the thing, petit merdeux," Bellec said. "When we got you, you couldn't think worth a damn. Even after two months the best you can do is hedge around an idea, and right now that idea is the revolution." He gestured vaguely, bottle in his fist. "Your heart's good but it's swept up in all the emotion that's flying around; you think things'll change, that you'll wake up one morning and the world will be a better place. You think the power of your emotions will somehow change the outcome. It won't. It can't."

"And you know better?" Arno asked, not quite annoyed, but put off by Bellec yet again asserting that he knew Arno better than Arno did.

"History knows better. History repeats itself over and over. The Assassins are beaten back, they rise up again. Templars are beaten back, they rise up again. Kings and dynasties rise and fall, and they're always replaced by something else – usually another king. Books make the common man see the pattern, and some of us are smart enough to see past the illusion, but we small few can't fix the grand masses."

"... It's hardly a 'small few,' Bellec," Arno said carefully.

His teacher scoffed. "What's Paris' population right now, boy? Half a million? How's that compare to all of France? All of Europe? Just a drop in the bucket. No, they'll try, and Mirabeau – damn him – thinks they'll win, but we're just trading one kind of king for another. Even those Americans had a revolution, and now they just call their king their president. Connor's letters just about bleeds suspicion. We'll do that next, we'll have you read letters from the other branches – older, safer ones. Maybe if you see the change in Connor's letters from flowery idealist to realist then you'll understand. The world robs us of all the good people, like your father, and twists the innocent like you into shadows of what you could be." He took another long draw of his wine.

Arno mulled that over for quite a while, uncertain how to handle such pessimistic words. M. de la Serre had been an optimist, had often said that mankind was always on the edge of greatness. Was this the push they needed? Was this how greatness started? He thought again of the Declaration, the inherent optimism of the document, the things it did right. How was something so convention-defying meant to end in failure? How was rewriting the entire Estate system a bad thing? If Mirabeau had a hand like that pompous Pontmercy had said, then the comte was also an optimist. What was wrong with optimism? What was wrong with making things better? What was wrong with... fixing mistakes? Then, too, there was the talk of his father.

"How well did you know him?" Arno asked in a low voice.

Bellec gave him a long look, eyes narrow before looking over to the supposedly cursed fountain. It was full dark now, noise had quieted to almost nothing but the stray cat or dog. "You sure you want to hear this? Damn near punched me in the Bastille."
Arno pursed his lips, thinking back. How was he to accept such fantastic ideas back then? He simply shook his head, shrugging his shoulders, at a loss for words.

"Charles Dorian was a born Assassin, merdeux, the best they can make. Honorable, fair, intellectual, gifted in his craft. Saw him sneak into a smuggler's den with nothing but his hidden blade, and an hour later everyone was dead with nary a sound. He got more information about the slave trade in Africa than anyone else for us to send to Saint Dominique, and killed a Templar officer besides who was leading the charge. He was too valuable to have been given the box."

"The box?"

Bellec looked at him again, eyes glossy with drink. "You're not ready for that yet, boy. You barely understand the Assassin-Templar war, you'd walk right out if you knew about the artifacts." He took another drink. "Charles could drink me under the table. It was him that taught me how to hide in plain sight. You have a hint of that – I saw it at the Bastille – you'll be able to blend in high and low society both. That'll make placing you a lot easier once we finish pulling your head out of your cul. Mon dieu, I miss that man." He leaned back, eyes closing briefly, taking a deep breath.

The moment drew out, Arno absorbing the new information. For the first time he knew why his father had taken them to Africa, and after knowing Cosette he felt pride in his father's work. He didn't realize he could take pride in the cult; only now did he start to understand that they... they did things. Good things. It was the first time Arno thought he could find satisfaction with this place.

If he ever learned what they actually did.

"So, what exactly are we waiting for?" he asked.

"Someone to spike the well," Bellec said. "Well water draws from the Seine, they'd have to re-spike it every night – hell, every couple of hours."

"Well, no one's shown."

"I know that, merdeux. We'll have to draw them out."

"And how, pray tell, do you suggest we do that?"

"That's easy," Bellec said. "You take a sip."

... what?

"... What?" Arno hissed. "You expect me to take a drink of tainted water and be drawn into some... some Devil's bargain?"

"Yes," Bellec said without any hesitation. "I'll watch from the roofs."

"From the roofs? What can you be expected to do from all the way up there?"

Bellec's face soured. "You'll find out, petit merdeux. Now go take a drink."

Arno bit back a curse before standing straight up. Pursing his lips, he marched right up to the well, wondering why the hell he'd just felt a touch of pride for this stupid cult, and drew a bucket of water. He was most certainly not going to guzzle the water, and knowing it was tainted stilled his hand. The idea of willingly ingesting something poisoned prevented him from moving – instead he took a sniff, smelling nothing. He sat on the lip of the well and tried to work up the nerve to drink.
Growling, he plunged his hands into the water, letting it up in his fingers, but he froze, and it eventually seeped out.

"Bon Dieu," he growled, and finally tried again, lifting it up to his lips and taking a small sip.

His hands emptied immediately, and he forced himself to gulp. The water tasted fine, as far as he could tell, nothing stuck out to him. He looked out over the square, wondering if Bellec was still behind the garden wall. The city was quiet, he could actually hear the Seine below, a languid sound of water lapping at the wall of the isle.

Where was the hallucinations? Nothing had happened. He stood, intending at first to go to his trainer and ask what to do next. It was a short walk, perhaps two dozen steps, to the garden wall his teacher was hiding, but as he got close to it he noticed how loud the Seine was. Was it always that loud? He wasn't moving all that much closer... When he looked over the edge of the garden wall he saw much more than when he left – dirt stains and boot prints in the earth. Bellec was nowhere to be seen. What...

Arno looked up and squinted. It was the dead of night, but for some reason everything seemed very bright. The drab white exterior of the building in front of him was now hyper-bright, the colors of the turning tree down the street were oversaturated. His eyes were darting everywhere, trying to take in all the detail... sparkles were everywhere trying to catch his attention... was it possible to over-see? The Seine was roaring in his ears, the gentle lapping now sounded like a garbled mix of fireworks and an eagle screech. He'd never heard an eagle screech in his life but the fireworks seemed to pop and crackle at the exact right pitch and his eyes were darting to the bright red of something and he needed to walk that way. His hackles were raised, there was warning in that red, danger in his ears. Nom de dieu why was everything so much?

He was stumbling, he was pretty sure of that. There was a whisper that sounded like a roar: "Come to me. I can give you untold riches. Eternal life can be yours. Everything you desire. Just come to me. Yes. Closer. Closer."

"You're too loud," he moaned. The red was coming closer his brain was overloading with stimulus.

"Closer..."

Arno looked up, the sky was such a pale color the stars looked like fireworks. A clatter of sparkles drew his eye to the hyper-saturated blue of a roofline, and there was a darker, richer, more comforting blue. What was that...

The blue leapt off the roof, the colors swirled and Arno heard another eagle, one that wasn't his – how did he know that...? And the red disappeared under the weight of the blue. The blue turned him around and pitched him forward slightly to the mud and muck and puddles and then fists were driving into his ribs so suddenly and so hard he jerked.

"Cough it out, merdeux!"

Bellec... the blue eagle was Bellec...

His stomach was suckered again and Arno was forced to choke. Everything in his stomach exited very suddenly.

Later – how much Arno wasn't sure – he was able to look up and not be blinded by all the information his eyes were feeding him. He was on a rooftop... somehow... The stars were still over-bright, but he could look at them. Most of the colors were closer to normal, and when he turned to
the side Bellec was still Bellec, burgundy wine in his hand. An empty bottle was by his hip.

"You all right now, merdeux?" he asked, words slower but not slurred yet.

"I don't hear anymore fireworks," Arno said, rubbing his temples.

"Eagle's dimmed, then."

"I have no idea what that means."

"Yes, you do, petit merdeux. You just don't want to admit it." He lifted his bottle in silent cheers. "À votre santé." Bellec took a deep drink before handing the bottle over to Arno. He refused, stomach not agreeable to something else entering it. "You did good, petit. Real good."

"Good guinea pig," Arno muttered.

"Gotta learn somehow, merdeux. I told you when you started that I wasn't going to hold your hand. You're lucky you had an eagle, it kept you safe."

Arno had no idea how the purported eagle kept him safe, but he'd given up trying to question Bellec on things that he deemed obvious. Instead he asked, "What happened?"

Bellec was drinking again, Arno's ears were still sensitive enough to hear the languid gulps. "They were waiting by the other side of the alley. Soon as you drank they started calling you, and you came as the water started to affect you. I followed you from above, and once I knew it was only the two I took care of them." He gestured out over the edge of the roof.

Arno looked as his eyes would allow and saw two bodies in the alley, blood bright red even in the full dark. He pulled back, suddenly sick. "You killed them..."

Bellec leaned forward, second bottle empty, and tossed it over the edge of the roof. "That was the job, merdeux."

"What, the police were too good for them?"

Bellec made a noise. "We're Assassins, merdeux. This is what we do. We find people who break the Creed, and we kill them."

"What even is the Creed?" Arno moaned, stretching back and looking up at the stars. Oh, how he wished they were fireworks now...

"Nothing is true, boy, and everything is permitted. Once you understand that, what we do will make sense."

Well, it didn't make sense in the now, and Arno was beset to understand how killing two men down below had the same value as researching the slave trade in Africa, or even guarding some unnamed box.

Honoré was livid. While he was certain that he had been this furious before, he wasn't sure when he was last ready to explode. He had finally been going through Assassin reports after having focused on the Assembly for so long. He had thought that the Assassins would be fine if their Mentor had disappeared for a few weeks to help shape the governance of their country. After all, there were four other masters on the Council.

But no.
That hadn't happened.

Instead, Bellec, one of their best Assassins had taken a novice on a damned fool idea of a mission, gotten Arno poisoned, and said it was all part of a lesson.

So, yes, Honoré was a bit irate.

The first thing he had done had been to call in Bellec for words.

Naturally, the Assassin was firm in his belief and wouldn't take his chastisement properly.

"You let a novice get poisoned. You took a novice above ground."

Bellec scoffed. "Boy's got to learn somehow. Can't be soft on him."

Honoré let out a long and controlled breath, leaning forward to rub a hand across his forehead to stave off a headache. "You are correct. We don't coddle our trainees. But we do have a system in place to make sure they are ready before they go above ground." He took a focused breath through his nose. "Tell me, would Arno have known how to escape if anything went wrong?"

"He'd learn."

"Or he'd get arrested and recognized before we've finished ensuring his 'death'. Really, Pierre-"

"Don't," Bellec hissed, scowling fiercely. "Don't think you can just talk at me and I'll agree with you. You left the merdeux in my care. I'm training him to the best of his abilities."

Honoré sat back, tightening his rage into a ball to set aside as carefully as possible. He knew he wasn't the most conventional Mentor the Assassins had ever had. He was a far more public figure than most, especially as part of the Assembly now. He acted through maneuvers and discussions, not shadows and stabbing. Oh, he saw the merits of a proper assassination, and assigned many a task with the Council, and had, on two occasions, done so himself, though he didn't care for it. But the French brotherhood was as strong as it was and had more apprentices survive because of how they trained their novices. No Assassin ever went out as a novice until they had the basic skills to survive. Fighting and disappearing. Hide in plain sight. As far as Honoré had seen, no one had thought to start teaching Arno the hiding or escaping, only the fighting and philosophy. While important, all Arno would know would be how to get into trouble. It was just as important to learn how to get out of it.

So Honoré let out a soft sigh. "Pierre, you are correct," he conceded. "We don't coddle our novices. To do so would be suicide for them. Punches can't be pulled when learning how to fight. Adaptive thinking can only be taught by throwing our novices into continuously new and different situations. I support your endeavors of that."

Finally, Bellec's scowl receded. Slightly.

"I'm glad you are taking Arno's training so seriously, and I agree that he has been too regimented in his thinking. Learning to adapt is essential for him." Honoré leaned forward again. "Continue to teach him to think on his feet. Continue to challenge him. Don't coddle him. But for God's sake, make sure he can escape before you bring him above ground again. Even if all he knows is how to run and hide in a lone haystack, that at least gives him a starting point. He doesn't have one now."

Bellec grimaced. "Politi-chien," he grumbled. Honoré pretended not to hear it. "Fine. I'll have someone find some haystacks for him to hide in."
Honoré nodded. It was begrudging and Bellec would be finding ways around it, but it was something.

It was the second week in September when word came down that Arno had an appointment. With Mirabeau. At his apartments. Diable.

Arno couldn't say why he was nervous that Mirabeau had called to meet with him. The Mentor had barely been down in the sewers since Arno had joined the little cult, had barely interacted with him, yet Arno felt anxious. He was fairly certain he hadn't done anything wrong. Or at least nothing wrong beyond whatever Bellec had him doing physical exertion for. He had remained studious despite his skeptical view of the cult. Cosette and Quemar had been the most help in making him see things that the cult did, but Arno would admit he was still fuzzy on exactly what the job was.

Follow the Creed. Let people figure it out themselves. We protect them to do that.

None of that made sense. What was the Creed? People needed to figure out what? Wasn't protecting the people the job of the police and army? So why did the cult do that?

So many questions and if he asked them, Bellec would growl in frustration and assign more hanging from his fingertips for not seeing the connections of Assassins and Templars.

Bellec came down looking calmly pissed off, and Arno really wondered what was going on. Bellec said nothing, just stalked out the door.

Was Arno supposed to follow him? He wasn't supposed to be alone above ground without an Assassin yet?

... Should he escape the cult now?

... ... But where would he go?

... ... ... Did he really want to now?

Arno stood, indecision giving him too much energy and leaving him pacing.

"Ah, Arno."

Then Arno was still as he turned to see Mirabeau himself come to the sitting room. "I'm glad Pierre didn't steal you away. You can come in. I'd like to talk with you."

"Oui, Monsieur," Arno nodded his head politely, a tiny bow, falling back into how a house boy would greet the master of the household. After all, he was a guest here. And a novice.

Yet Mirabeau waved it off. "No need for formalities at the moment," he said genially, a gentle smile on his face. "It would seem you and I are the only ones around. We're slowly breaking down the Estate system. Might as well start practicing being equals, don't you think?"

That actually made Arno smile.

They went through to Mirabeau's study, and Mirabeau sat Arno down at a couch and sat at a chair, both by a small, low table. Tea and refreshments had been set out and Arno, as was proper, waited till Mirabeau took some small pastries before sampling one himself.

Mirabeau sat back with a contented sigh and Arno waited politely.
After a moment, Mirabeau looked to Arno softly. "My boy, I haven't been able to check in to our headquarters often."

"You have been rather busy," Arno replied with dry irony.

Mirabeau chuckled. "Indeed. But as a result, I haven't had the chance to see how you were doing."

"I am fine, Monsieur."

"Oh, please," Mirabeau said genially. "You were raised outside the Brotherhood. I'm sure you have plenty of questions after a scant month with us."

Too many to truly count. Arno paused, trying to decide which was the best to ask without sounding like a Templar, which everyone assumed he was. In the end he shrugged. "What is the Creed? Everyone keeps telling me we have to follow it, that people will discover it, all these things, but no one has really explained it."

"Ah," Mirabeau sat back with satisfaction. "That's perhaps the easiest and hardest question to answer."

Arno kept his face from flattening to a dead stare, as that response usually begot a non-answer.

"In specifics, the Creed is three tenets," Mirabeau started, setting his cup aside, eyes alight. "The first is perhaps the single most important part of being one of us. 'Stay your blade from the innocent.' What do you think that means?"

Arno offered an ironic grin. "Don't kill everyone?"

Mirabeau chuckled again. "Yes, it does seem rather obvious. But there is more to it than that. When we decide to kill someone, it is only after much deliberation and careful consideration. For all that we call ourselves Assassins, we don't kill wantonly. We research. We investigate. If I or the Council ask for someone to die, it's because we've seen that there is no other way. Killing isn't our first option, it's our last."

That made sense, Arno reflected. For all that he'd been surrounded by Assassins for just over a month, none of them talked about going out to kill. Most talked of gathering information. He hadn't thought of it that way before. True, he and Bellec had killed (or rather, Bellec had Arno drug himself, then Bellec killed) some predators that were preying on people on the Île de la Cité.

"But isn't that for the police? Finding villains from storybooks?"

"You are quite correct, Arno." Mirabeau leaned onto the arm of the couch. "The marshalcy is quite satisfactory at their jobs. Most of the time. But we go after those who the police can't get. The ones with too much power and influence, who are too hidden in the shadows as we are."

"So, we get the criminals who fall through the cracks?"

"Yes. That is one way to look at it. Especially those of us who have eagles, it's easier to track down, though that talent is exceedingly rare."

Arno nodded. Stay your blade from the innocent. Like M. de la Serre. Make sure you're correct and not just being in a rush. Safe and sound, only slightly delayed...

"The second tenant, and almost as important as the first. 'Hide in plain sight.' And?" He raised a brow at Arno.
Arno actually offered an ironic scoff. "Don't get caught."

Mirabeau smiled. "To a degree, yes. But the skill is not about simply not getting caught. What if a target was in a crowd of thousands? The idea is that an Assassin could be anyone at any time. Some of our Brothers in _ can dress as a man or a woman to hide and maneuver through to their target. You've likely seen your teacher switch between various roles and the like. Yes, it's about not getting caught, but more importantly, it's about not being known."

Arno held his immediate question back, that not being caught was the same thing as not being known. But he acknowledged Mirabeau's point that Bellec seemed to switch roles as easily as an actor switched costumes. It was strange to think of such theatricality being useful in hiding of all things. "Bellec did say he saw potential in that for me."

"Of course he did," Mirabeau replied. "Monsieur de la Serre raised you. You were exposed to the upper echelons of society and how to act and react with them. I imagine his daughter dragged you along to things as well?"

Arno's smile was completely unrepentant.

The responding smile was wide and amused. "So, yes, you can blend in with the nobilities. But I bet your man of the house kept kicking you out to deal with the peons?"

"In fact, he took great delight in me mucking out stalls."

Mirabeau nodded. "You may not have been as hard pressed as many, but you do understand the commoners. If you can relate to both, you can hide within both. You just need refinement from there. In fact," Mirabeau poured them both more tea. "we'll be adding that to your training. It should have been one of your first lessons. Our first priority with novices is that they are safe, so they need to be able to defend and, most importantly, be able to hide and escape."

Arno nodded this time. That made a certain amount of sense. Don't get caught.

"Now, our third tenant seems redundant. It is not. 'Don't compromise the Brotherhood.' Why is it not redundant?"

"Er," Arno tilted his head. "It is. If you're not caught, then nothing could compromise the Brotherhood."

Mirabeau offered a soft smile, as he shook his head. "Logical, if flawed," he replied. "To not compromise the Brotherhood is to not lead others to us, true. To 'not get caught' as you put it. But there is more subtlety than that." Mirabeau's aged eyes seemed older as seriousness settled around him. "It means you must never do anything that even barely hints at the existence of the Brotherhood. Yes, much of that is secrecy, stealth, research, and planning. But by being a hidden society, we must always act as if we don't exist. I may be pushing for all sorts of reforms at the Assembly, but I'm deliberately not pushing far enough to satisfy my personal beliefs. We don't need a king, Arno. Connor and what he's accomplished in America is proving that for every year of stability they have. But I'm not going to go that far. Not because France isn't ready, not because of belief in moderacy, not because of any of the reasons that people will ascribe to me, true as they may be in small pieces. But because I don't want to even wink at a hint of a thought that I might be an Assassin or that Assassins even exist."

Arno sat back, absorbing that.

That was...
All three tenants explained, yet with each one Arno felt like he missed more and more of what was meant. The only one he understood completely was the first. *Stay your blade.* But it seemed hiding and not getting caught weren't the same thing. Nor was not compromising, and all that. There was something... *deeper...* to this creed. Layers he hadn't been aware of. Layers he was only just seeing and that were hinting at even more.

His mind felt like it was swirling.

There was *something there.*

"Perhaps our creed can best be summed up by one phrase," Mirabeau sat back with a knowing quirk of his lips. "Nothing is true. Everything is permitted."

And just like that, the strange *almost* picture of what Arno was seeing was sent careening out of focus.

"What?"

Mirabeau smiled on. "That one phrase has defined our order for over eight-hundred years. Rather strange, don't you think, that a simple phrase can be the *raison d'être* for an entire society?"

"Do you mean... like in the Declaration of the Rights of Man? That a man can do what he wants as long as it doesn't break the law?"

Mirabeau beamed. "You're seeing connective tissue! Excellent. Keeping thinking on that phrase, Arno. Keep pondering what it means. Nothing is true. Everything is permitted. We all come to our own conclusions, but the true masters, they can live and breathe it."

Arno chose not to ask how one could live and breathe such a vague and obfuscated philosophy.

Chuckling, Mirabeau leaned forward to pour more tea. "You seem confused, Arno. Let it sit in the back of your mind. It will become clear, over time. Sometimes learning that lesson is the hardest one a person can learn. Sometimes it's the easiest. I wonder how it will be for you."

*Impossible*, was Arno's first thought.

"Let me know when you've realized," Mirabeau sat back again with his filled cup. "Now, enough philosophy. How are you doing? Outside of philosophically confused."

"Busy, monsieur, busy. Bellec always has something for me to do and if not he, one of the Council does." Arno gave an ironic smile. "I'm certainly not bored."

"Oh, no novice ever is," Mirabeau chuckled. "But it's been almost six months now."

"Six months..."

Oh.

*Oh.*

Six months since M. de la Serre was murdered.

Six months since Arno's life had been upended.

Six months since that mistake he wanted so desperately to undo. *Safe and sound, only slightly delayed.*
Thirteen years...

*I’ll return when this hand reaches the top. Arno, no exploring.*

All at once his eyes watered and Arno quickly had to dip his head down to prevent tears from being shown. One did not show weakness in front of one’s superiors.

"Hm... I thought so," Mirabeau said quietly, all joviality gone. "Between a revolution and being a novice, you haven't gotten much time to grieve, have you?"

Arno swallowed a sob, unable to see anything beyond the blurs of his teacup. He was sure a tear had fallen, but that couldn't be because he was *not* crying.

"I may have disagreed with de la Serre on many fundamental levels, but he was a good man, in his own way. He raised you well."

The sob *was* swallowed. It did *not* burst out in a hiccupped gasp. He most *certainly* did not set down his teacup with a clank, and he *definitely* did not bring up a hand to try and hold back any more sobs since there *weren't* any.

"Cry, Arno. You're allowed to grieve."

He did. Against his will he did. He wailed and sobbed. He scratched at tears that just *wouldn't* stop. He was senseless to the world around him as his mistakes swirled about, blinding him. For hours, days, *years*, he cried. He had lost his father. He had lost M. de la Serre. He had lost his life. He had lost Élise. He had lost *all that was*.

And he'd *never* get it back.

Why couldn't he go back?

Fix his mistakes?

How could he *fix* things?

---

When Arno finally came back to his senses, he rubbed his drying eyes with a damp handkerchief and blew his nose again. Pastries were in front of him, a glass of wine, and Arno realized he wasn't at the seat he'd sat in. He was on the couch, a blanket over him. Mirabeau was in the chair Arno had apparently vacated somewhere in his hysterics, calmly going through paperwork.

"*Desolée, monsieur."

"It's quite alright, Arno," Mirabeau said, setting aside his papers. "Grief hits us all differently. You haven't had the chance to cry. I gave you that. And it seems you've been holding it in for some time. Do you feel better?"

Arno nodded, not trusting his warbled voice. Sitting up, he took a sip of the wine in front of him, letting it soothe his vocal cords and finish settling his feelings. "*Merci,*" he mumbled.

Mirabeau nodded. "I imagine François also let you cry."

Arno nodded, dim memories of the *monsieur* asking if he was all right, a strong hand on his back making him well up all over again.

"I'd thank him if I could."
"Why, Monsieur?"

"Hm?"

"All the rest of the cult- er, Assassins, they'll expound for hours on how Monsieur de la Serre was a Templar and how evil he was. They say I was raised a Templar." Arno rubbed at his eyes, now dry and burning. "You don't. You believe me when I say I wasn't raised as a Templar. You don't disparage Monsieur de la Serre. Why?"

Mirabeau set down his own drink before putting a hand to his forehead. "Arno, I can't abide by Templar philosophy. Their ideas that a few need to control the rest are reprehensible to me. But I am a politician. One of the few good things about that is that I am trained to see both sides. The few times I spoke with François, he embodied what that Templar ideal was. I could see why so many believed in it. It is an alluring set of ideas, because we don't have to deal with responsibilities and mistakes then. Only those in control do. But of the Templars, I'd say François was the best at what he believed. My disagreeing doesn't make him a villain. My disagreeing doesn't turn him into evil. My opinions are just that. My own. By his actions, he was a good man. I acknowledge that. Do I wish you had learned other things? Critical thinking, philosophy, discernment, yes. But you're a good man. Monsieur de la Serre couldn't have been that bad to have raised a man like you."

And, for the first time in forever, Arno smiled.

Thirty kilometers west of Paris was Maison Royale de Saint-Louis, in Yvelines. Élise walked the grounds of her boarding school, not unaware of how much she had hated this place as a girl – whilst it now hid her from her enemies. The Madame had changed – once a stern and unyielding monster, Madame Levene was now quietly protective and understanding. Or perhaps Élise herself had changed. After blackmailing the Madame to let her go to England, Élise had suffered one adventure after another. Her excited thrill of the idea when she was a child was now dulled to dread anticipation. First had been the debacle with the Carrols in London and learning that not all Templars were created equal, then coming home to have her father brutally murdered, having her Paris house attacked by looters... Élise was uncertain what appeal adventure had ever had when she was a child.

For six weeks after Arno had just... fallen from the sky to tell her none of this was not his fault (a fact that she had brutally disabused him of the moment he tried to play his willful negligence as innocent happenstance), Élise had fallen into what could best be described as a malaise. The revelation of her lover's hand in her father's savage murder, the letter from Chrétien warning her father that treachery was in their midst, nearly dying from the Bastille riots, bereft of the only compass in her world... Élise was numb in a way that only melancholia could produce. Wine, burgundy, champagne, Élise had worked through over half the Paris estate's supply before Weatherall found her. He had brought a young recruit – Jean Burnel – in the hopes of distracting her and replacing Arno.

Her love for her teacher was unending for such a sensitive thought, but emotion had burned out of her with the death of her father. The gesture had woken her enough, however, to realize that life was still going on, and that she had responsibilities, and that the murder had yet to be punished.

Yes, the killer had yet to be punished.

That was the thought that roused her, and when she looked around she realized she was back at Maison Royale, Madame Levene smiling that she had come back to herself, and Burnel an excellent page as she sent off missives and inquiries now that she was out of her malaise. Her heart was still numb, but she understood now that inaction would not make it feel again, action would.
She had a mystery to solve: who killed her father? How could she find him? And most importantly, how would she make him suffer?

It was dull, as a spark, but it was enough.

Weatherall hobbled towards her, even after a year she was not accustomed to see him missing a leg, and he did not walk naturally with a crutch.

"We have our last reply," he said. "Your supporters will meet with you."

"Excellent," Élise said. "Were we correct, are they all already in Paris?"

"Yes. With the National Assembly doing their work in Versailles everyone wants to be nearby in case something important happens, and our work in the countryside can wait for a while."

Élise nodded. "Very well. As soon as possible. We need to marshal our forces. I want to interview who replied to see how loyal they really are and weed out the indifferent as soon as possible. Once I know they will follow me we can start looking for my father's killer."

Burnel nodded, his light brown hair damp in the grey morning. "I'll start writing letters. Where should we meet?"

"Not the Paris estate," Élise said emphatically. "The damage during the attack on the Bastille is still there and would send a bad message." And she did not wish to return to the site of her malaise, did not want to remember how low she had sunk and how easily she could fall again. "We want to project strength, unity in the face of danger, and solidarity against those who would war with us."

"The Marquis de Pimôdan, then," Weatherall said. "He has an hôtel on the Île de Saint-Louis that faces the Seine and the Temple. A display of power, if you will."

"Bien," Burnel said. "I'll write the drafts." He nodded stoutly and moved back to the school. He was only two years older than Élise, tall and well cut, from one of the new bourgeois families – he did his duties diligently and without complaint. Pliant, that was the word Élise was looking for, the man was pliant. It felt like she was in charge with him around – not desperate for her father's or Weatherall's advice, not a lost little girl without her mère. He made her feel the smallest wisp of a gasp of emotion, and at this point she could take what she could get. The sensation left with him, and she looked again to Weatherall for guidance.

"He's a good lieutenant," her instructor said, leaning on his crutch. Nom de dieu, it hurt to see that, hurt to know that it was her lack of practice that had created that mistake. Those feelings didn't go away, no matter how much she had drunk, and now she had to live with what she had done.

"Small wonder he's still here, instead of out there with the traitors," she replied, voice flat and sad.

Weatherall shook his head sadly. "Loyalty is not a fleeting gesture," he said, shifting his weight. "Look how long I've stayed. Or Chrétien. You've even managed to ply that shriveled up old Assassin who went after your mère when you were a child. That's not an easy feat, let me reassure you. You have it in you to be great, to inspire everyone around you."

"That's why this meeting is so important," Élise replied, turning from the amputee. No, that was weakness, face him. Face him. She turned. "I need to show them that I am my père's daughter and that I will lead as he did."

Weatherall frowned, leaning on his crutch again. "If that's the position you want to take you will have to choose your words very carefully," he said slowly.
"What do you mean?"

"I mean your père was murdered for a reason – some policy or decision he made angered someone, and we don't yet know why. I would suggest instead positioning yourself as stronger than your père, that you will not allow another baseless attack. You will need to be strong Mademoiselle, strong enough to kill those who would come after you."

Élise pursed her lips. "Let them come."

Weatherall smiled. "That's ma petite."

... He didn't understand. Élise didn't understand. Something was wrong with her, deep in the chambers of her mind. Something was broken, it was a struggle to feel, a struggle to function. She walked around the grounds of the school and knew that it didn't always feel like this: so grey. So numb. She was still in the city house, it felt like, drinking herself senseless just to feel... anything. Even sickness. The only thing keeping her going was the idea of killing her father's killers. Of making them feel the darkness she now lived with, to make them beg and plead. That image in her mind was the only thing that made her put one foot in front of the other, made her make decisions and act like the grandmaître she was supposed to be. It was the closest thing to a feeling she had.

As she reentered the academic wing, she moved to the room Madame Levene had reserved for her to work. Burnel was there, quill in hand, drafting the letters to her supporters. A smudge of ink was on the side of his nose where he must have rubbed it, hand efficient and quick, his writing elegant and neat. His face was lean, strong cheekbones, and the dim light of the candle made interesting shadows on his face. He looked up, seeing her, and immediately stood.

"Mademoiselle," he said quickly.

... He wasn't Arno, there was no charm or smile, he was not a puppy to be cared for. He was a hound to be given orders. ... Why was he here? She could no more give orders than – no. She was out of the malaise, she would not let it claim her again. She shook her head slightly, leaning against the door frame. "Why are you here?" she asked.

Burnel frowned. "To write invitations to the others so that we may meet and discuss our next course of action."

"Non," Élise corrected. "Why are you here? Why are you at my side? Why are you not cavorting with my father's killers?"

Burnel blinked, long and slow, mentally digesting the questions. "Mademoiselle," he said finally, "My grandpère was a pig farmer before we lost everything and had to go to the city. My père couldn't read or write, and it was only because my mère worked for the Monsieur that I received any education whatever. When the Monsieur said that I could do more as a merchant, when I was given a background to give me access to a world I didn't think I could ever live in, I knew I was destined to be here. When the Monsieur told me it was your suggestion, I knew I would follow you until my death."

Élise frowned. "We've met before?"

Burnel nodded. "I doubt you would remember. It was at a soirée at the Monsieur's house. I remember you danced with a house boy to prove a point to someone, and afterword he and I guarded your honor against the Seconds who thought you would... 'dance' with them. You sent a letter to the Monsieur saying I had potential. He's been training me ever since."
Oh... Chrétien... Something close to a feeling sparked in Élise as she remembered the party. She had danced with Arno because some fop thought he was owed a dance because of her status – she had been polite and cordial and demurred, but he would not take no for an answer, and she’d been forced to show her spine – accusing him of no knowing out to dance and calling Arno to a demonstration. It had been a scandal, her dancing with the Third Estate mongrel, and she had spent the rest of the evening sequestered with her père and Chrétien smoothed all the ruffled feathers. She hadn't even remembered Burnel, but apparently, he had made enough of an impression for her to compliment him in a letter...

No. She would have remembered doing something like that.

More likely Chrétien had been planning on inducting him for a long time, and used Élise as the excuse to instill loyalty before he even completed his induction. There it was again, that spark of feeling. Élise reached out to grasp it, to pull it closer to her so that she could feel more, and in doing so she embraced Burnel, pressing into his neck and listening to him sigh into her ear.

As a lover, he was passable. He understood his station and tried to please her, but the animal that was in all men eventually won out and she was very sore the next morning. It had been the most emotion she had felt in months, however, and she granted him the reward of being there when he woke before going back to work. She was tempted to let him pleasure her again, but that would muddy waters that were already too dark to comprehend. The malaise was no longer chasing her, and she had to start writing an impassioned speech that won her supporter's loyalty and list what she would demand of them as they searched for her father's killers.

October 5, 1789

After that, not much changed. Bellec still pushed him past his physical thresholds, showing he could do more and more. There was even the rare compliment that wasn't presented as a compliment. The Council members, who were there, pulled aside novices for educations of law, government, history, and things Arno didn't see a point to. He was often paired with Cosette, and that worked well for him. He enjoyed her company and she was perhaps the best insight he had on why all these incidental lessons might bear on being an Assassin. Fabre often dropped by to try and pick their pockets at the most random moments, always encouraging them to be aware of their surroundings and the slightest touch of a thief. Pontmercy also stopped by, parading around like a peacock about his new bookshop and how he was already making money for the Brotherhood as he sold the plethora of newsheets that were now circulating in the city. The one by Marat was often sold out within hours, given his sarcastic take on anything.

Breakfast was often about reading the papers, and Arno could admit that he could easily chuckle at Marat's ridicule. There was a clear anger and he aimed it at whomever he fancied with his paper, and Arno wished he could be so eloquent when he wanted to mouth off to Olivier. Fabre chuckled right along with him, when he was there. For the past few days, Marat was aiming all that bile straight at the king, and Arno smiled at another turn of phrase about the ineptitude of the monarchy and the calls for a march. He had been at it for days now, since October had dawned chilly and leaves starting to fall. But all the novices kept at their lessons.

Arno was sitting with Pontmercy, who had stopped by as he did every morning to drop off various papers.

"Are we sure he was a doctor?" Arno was asking. "His words cut so closely, I would think him a swordsman instead."

Pontmercy laughed good-naturedly. "Or a thief like Fabre over there, already eyeing your pockets."
"I saw him enter. He's not as subtle anymore."

"Not true, novice," Pontmercy stood. "You're just better at seeing. You'll get there."

"A year, they tell us," Arno retorted. "I'm underground for a year. I'm sure I'll do something monumentally stupid and make it two years or more."

He expected Pontmercy to laugh, but the peacock didn't. Arno looked to Pontmercy, but the man had pushed back his green hood and was narrowing his eyes at something. Looking around, Arno noticed that there seemed to be more motion around the dining hall than expected. Assassins were still around, of all levels, reading the papers, but there was something in the air. Another Assassin jogged in, spoke to a cluster, then they all stepped out. More Assassins were coming in. So many, in fact, that Arno hadn't realized just how crowded it was, as almost as soon as someone arrived, someone was called away. In fact, there were many faces he wasn't familiar with.

"Pontmercy?"

"Something's up," the man replied, rubbing at his neat beard. He pulled his green hood back up and adjusted his tailored coat. "Back in a moment." Then he disappeared into the crowd.

And Arno actually was starting to understand how that worked now.

He grabbed Fabre's wrist before his wallet was pinched. "Will you care to explain what's going on?"

"No clue, novice," Fabre laughed good-heartedly, accepting that Arno had beaten his approach. "Did Pontmercy point me out?"

"No," Arno replied, "I saw you once you came in."

That actually had Fabre raise his eyebrows. "Really? Huh."

They were interrupted when Cosette stumbled over to them.

"Are you alright?" Arno asked, snatching Fabre's hand before he lifted Cosette's wallet.

"Hnngh," she grumbled before mechanically starting to eat. "Late night," she muttered before sipping from her drink. "One of the female maîtres was here last night and pulled all the female novices aside for a long lesson."

Arno raised a brow. "On being a female? I think all people know how to be their own gender."

"Too tired to explain," she grunted back. Then she elbowed Fabre. "Stop going for a feel as a distraction," she growled, "it's predictable."

Fabre just shrugged. "Men are perverts," he replied. "We only think with one organ, and that's between our legs, not between our ears. Especially if you go out in trousers, you'd best be prepared for men to start taking liberties, whether they should or not."

Her eyes flashed at him.

He shrugged again. "Don't go thinking I'm actually attracted to you, child. There's nowhere near enough meat on your bones, and my own lady-fair wouldn't care for it. I'm only teaching you how to be aware."

Her words were less than pleasant.
Arno merely slid over more food.

"Why are so many people coming in and out of the Council chambers?" Cosette asked once she had more food in her.

Arno blinked. He hadn't noticed that, only the movement. "I don't know," he replied. "Bellec roused me before dawn to go running around the tunnels. I haven't actually been here that long."

"Hmmmm," she took another sip and rubbed at her eyes.

Pontmercy came back in, a deep frown digging into his face and perfectly trimmed beard. "I hope you're rested," he said softly. "It's going to be a busy day." Then he went to find other novices and headed out with them.

The three looked to each other. "What..."

"Merdeux," Bellec greeted. He looked well rested and as serious as always, despite dragging Arno up early for a run. He glanced around them. "You come too, Cosette. Might as well join, Fabre, we need all hands today."

That actually had the usually upbeat Fabre frowning as well.

The main hall up to the Council room was teaming with Assassins, from novices to maîtres, conversations hushed as the push and pull of the crowd kept everyone moving to whatever assignment had everything going along. Bellec was able to push aside enough milling people to get them up to the Council chambers, where Quemar was squinting at a map with Trenet, speaking in hurried tones.

"Bellec," Trenet said, looking up. She rubbed at her eyes and let out a sigh. "Good, you brought Fabre as well. Fabre, you are assigned to Bellec for the duration of this little event."

"Event, Madame?"

"Oh yes," Quemar grimaced. "Early this morning some ladies in Saint-Antoine started a drum and then forced a church to ring its bell. Those poissards are getting more and more women with them and the anger is palpable. And they have kitchen knives."

"Merde," Fabre muttered. "We've already seen an angry mob with weapons at the Bastille. We don't need another."

"Exactly," Trenet agreed. "Fabre, you'll stay close to Maillard. Arno can point him out, but don't let him see Arno. He should be at the Hôtel de Ville by now."

"Oui, Madame."

Trenet nodded. "Advise him without being obvious about it. Help him keep things calm. He's well known for everything from the Bastille. He might be able to keep heads moderately calm. Bellec, we want you and Arno to stay with Lafayette. The National Guardsmen are very sympathetic to the Third Estate. They've a good chance of joining. Help Lafayette keep them contained as well. Cosette, you'll be courier between all of them. Always be clear where to meet up." She sighed heavily. "Above all else, keep people safe. From each other and from opposition. The Bastille was enough of a mess."

"Let's go. Merdeux, I'll meet you with the Guardsman. Take Cosette with you. She actually knows the streets of Paris and can get you there." Bellec actually frowned. "Probably need to get you
learning the streets of Paris somehow. You'd be lost otherwise."

Fabre chuckled for the first time since the severity of everything settled around them at the dining hall. "Has there ever been an accurate map of Paris? With all its back alleys and twisted streets?"

They actually had a chuckle with that.

Bellec left to go find Lafayette once they exited onto the street, disappearing into the crowds.

"Okay," Fabre shifted entirely. He was no longer the jovial thief he was down in the tunnels. His bright smile switched to a tired frown. The hunch of his shoulders that brought him down to the level of others straightened into an imposing figure. The hood shifted and a hat covered it, looking like he was using a towel or fabric of some kind under the hat to keep the rain off his neck. Arno was amazed. He would never have recognized Fabre. Beside him Cosette had pulled on a heavy coat and wrapped extra fabric around her waist to hide her curves. With her hair all pinned up and also under a hood, she looked more like a gangly boy. All Arno did was pull up his hood and hope he looked as different as the others did from when he was down in the tunnels.

"Bien," Fabre murmured as he took off at a march down the streets. Cosette stayed behind them by several paces, not even appearing to be part of their group. Arno kept his eyes wide open and swerving everywhere. For all of the worry of the Council, nothing seemed that bad. People were going about their day as they normally did. Fabre lifted wallets as he went from those in finer clothes, but most were hurrying from one place to another as the rain continued to thicken.

But then Arno looked again, and he could swear he saw sparkles of color, fireworks, drawing his eye to certain things. Tension in shoulders, a rushed pace that had nothing to do with the rain. Then they came to the tip of the isle, and Arno looked across the Seine to the Châtlet and the crowd was massive. It had to be a half kilometer to the Hôtel de Ville, and the crowds were already that thick? *And* they had to get through that?

Fabre was already swearing. "We'll take the roofs."

"*What?*" Arno demanded.

To that, Fabre actually offered a wide smile more in keeping with how he was underground. "What else do you think Bellec has been training you for?"


But Fabre took led the way to a narrow alley, shadowed to almost black in the heavy rain, and started using ledges, clothes-line hooks, anything he could get his hands on to get up the wall.

Arno stayed at the street level, looking up wide-eyed and unbelieving what was going on right in front of his eyes.

Fabre glanced back when he was almost at the roof, then *let go* with one hand to gesture wildly that Arno needed to move.

"*Diable.*"

He tried to grab whatever holds Fabre had used, taking it very slowly, since any slip up would make him a carcass on the cobblestones. The driving rain didn't help. Everything felt slippery, even with the rougher texture of his gloves. He kept reaching for the holds Fabre used, but at the fourth story, he wasn't sure what they were any more. Everything was in shadows, rain was still
pounding down, and he didn't know what to do. Supposedly he could "ask his eagle" according to Bellec, whenever he was in trouble, but Arno still had no idea how.

And then Arno blinked and he saw sparkles of fireworks again. Bursts of color around small objects that were just within his reach.

How the hell had he...

He shook his head, wiping water from his eyes. Best not to question this at the moment.

The hardest part was reaching out behind him to the edge of the roof, something he basically had to do blind, nowhere near confident enough to twist and look without either getting vertigo and falling or losing his grip and falling or overbalancing and falling or... something else and falling.

Thankfully, Fabre grabbed his hand and helped haul him up.

Arno was already exhausted.

Fabre, once more the smiling thief he was underground, though his grin was subdued as he stroked his goatee.

Heaving his breath after that ordeal of climbing, (and how were they to get down?) Arno peered out from under his hood and through the sheets of rain. "What?"

"Nothing," Fabre held up his hands. "I thought Bellec was teaching you to climb."

Arno offered a flat stare. "He has me run the tunnels daily, regularly throws me down to the ground with the flat of his sword, then has me hanging by my fingertips if I ever disagree with him for hours at a time."

Fabre's smile was like the sun. "So he has!"

"Excuse me?" Arno's flat stare flattened to a glare.

But Fabre's smile just kept beaming through the rain. "Come on. It's not the best weather to learn how to run on roofs, but I can give you the basics now."

Arno's baleful glare did nothing to counter the statement, and soon Arno was learning how to judge distances he could leap, and learning what to grab for the steep roofs before getting to their peaks. The wider avenues were more difficult until Fabre pointed out the sopping flags that could be reached to swing closer to buildings, or thicker ropes that spread between for lanterns that could be shimmied across. Arno was certain his arms would be exhausted after all this, but when they reached the Hôtel de Ville, he was surprised that he barely felt winded.

"Bien sûr," Fabre easily replied. "Bellec has been training you. Hang from your fingertips for long enough and your body can carry you by those fingertips just about anywhere."

Once they reached the hôtel, Arno couldn't quite grasp the crowds. He had thought it was thick over the river. It was impenetrable below them. Screaming and shouting, various poissards holding their knives for scaling fish, thousands and thousands of women and many, many men. It looked like someone was strung up on a lamppost, the crowd jeering him even as items were pulled out from the public building.

"If these keeps up, they'll burn the building down," Fabre said gravely. "Where is Maillard?"
There was a crackle of fireworks and Arno's eyes went to that lamppost. "There," he said. "He's the one in front of that man on the lamppost, he seems to be calming the crowd around there down."

After a moment, Fabre nodded. "I see him. How do you even know him?"

Arno grimaced. "The Bastille." He hadn't. Maillard was one of the "Volunteers of the Bastille," the group that had led the charge into the prison to get powder and supplies. Arno recognized him from staring out the prison bars to the streets below. He even saw him, face to face after he had escaped, not that he had recognized him at the time. It wasn't till he was with the cult learning who all the important figures were that Arno realized he'd met the man.

Fabre actually turned and looked. "Desolé," he apologized. "I forget that you were imprisoned there."

Arno merely nodded. He didn't talk about that time after a kind man had fallen to treachery. Safe and sound, only slightly delayed. He didn't talk about another kind man with large hands who had smiled. I'll be back when this hand reaches the top. "Do you need me down there?" How the hell would he get down?

"No," Fabre was smiling again. "I've got it from here. You go find that old sourpuss and help advise Lafayette. Connor has nothing but good things to say about him. I'd hate to get a maître, hell a well accomplished Mentor, mad at us."

That still didn't answer Arno's fundamental question. "How do we get down?"

Fabre laughed.

Cosette came by a few minutes after Fabre had superbly demonstrated climbing down and then disappeared into the crowd. Arno glanced at her. "Please tell me you know how to get down and can explain it."

She smiled. "Yes. But we'd best stay to the roofs. The streets are far too crowded. Once we're away from the mob, we'll climb back down with far more safety."

"Merci."

Together they stuck to the rooftops, listening to the mob's cries fade behind them before they were on lower roofs and Cosette found a secluded alley, also in heavy darkness with all the rain, and carefully had him match her step for step as they climbed down.

"When did they teach you how to climb like this?" Arno asked as they weaved through the streets.

"It was the first skill I learned before I even arrived. My father had me climbing in the orchards as soon as I could walk." They both kept watching things around them as they moved through the tense streets. "He said that the man who had saved him had climbed like a lizard, and that I needed to learn if I ever needed to run."

Arno didn't feel quite so pathetic.

The rain had faded to a drizzle when they heard the precise marching of soldiers. One glance at each other and both Cosette and Arno rushed in that direction. As expected, it was the National Guardsmen, shouting their solidarity with the market women and slowly making their way down the streets to join them.
Arno looked around for Bellec or Lafayette, and thought he caught a glimpse of a dark hood off to the side. He gestured for Cosette and the two headed toward Bellec.

The old Assassin was calmly following along, nowhere near as drenched as Arno and Cosette were. Indeed, most of the Guardsman looked like they had started marching after the heavy rain had turned to a light drizzle. Arno scowled on principal. Then he shivered.

"Cosette," Bellec wasted no time when they arrived. "Here, find one of us with the municipal government. There should be a few there." He handed her a note and she merely nodded, taking off down the streets.

They walked with the crowd for a while. Bellec didn't say anything or seem to acknowledge Arno, fully into whatever role he was playing, though what Arno wasn't sure.

"How many?" Bellec asked without seeming to move his lips.

"How many?"

"Yes, petit merdeux, how many?"

"How many what?"

Bellec actually rolled his eyes. "How many were at the Hôtel de Ville?"

Arno shook his head. "The whole area was packed. Streets beyond were overflowing with people. Did you want me to count every individual?" he replied sarcastically.

"No, I expected an estimate. Did you learn the basics of maths as a house boy?"

"Estimating a budget isn't exactly the same as estimating a crowd."

"But you had to have been high enough to get a feel for it."

"Thousands, Bellec. Thousands."

"Merde."

They stayed with the Guardsman as crowds continued swelling. The march of the women was swelling and Cosette came back almost two hours later, out of breath and just as soaked as Arno still was. "Maillard has deputized women from the Hôtel de Ville. It's helping to keep the order. The city has ordered Lafayette to guide them to where they're going. Wherever that is."

Bellec shook his head. "Crowd won't know nothing till it decides. Once the whim is made, nothing will stop it. Go fill in the Council. Dry up. Merdeux can be runner for a while."

"Thanks," Arno drawled flatly.

"Pay attention, boy," Bellec growled back. "We've been walking with these people for hours. You've been running around the city all day. Haven't you picked up anything?"

"Like what? You were oh-so specific when I met up with you. 'How many?' without even bothering to explain anything. I haven't grown up in this cult like you have. How am I supposed to know what you want unless you tell me?"

Bellec glared at him. "Because you're supposed to use that damn brain of yours. Apparently, I need to break things down even further for such a baby novice as yourself."
Arno growled, but didn't respond otherwise. No matter how gruff, Bellec had conceded he needed to explain things more. He counted that as a victory.

"Just listen, boy," Bellec said tiredly. "Listen to everyone. Figure out what's going on."

Arno grumbled but just listened as the kept walking.

Rumors were everywhere, and Arno wasn't sure what to believe. Apparently, thoughts were mixed on how this started, but many, many, people were talking angrily about how the king, or his guard, or some noble, or someone at some party up at Versailles had taken of the cockade, the symbol of the king surrounded by his people, and stomped on it, defaced it, urinated on it, something. Arno had no idea how much, if any of that, was true, and there were the usual complaints of having so little to eat. It seemed that Lafayette hadn't been enthused with the crowds but his own men had threatened to kill him if he didn't get out of their way. That with the order from the city, Lafayette seemed to be going reluctantly along.

"If he's smart, he'll do as I suggested and send a messenger to Versailles," Bellec grumbled.

"People are protesting. How is that bad? We're making our voices heard. Isn't that the point of this?" Arno offered a tired glare. They had been at this all day and Arno was getting hungry. And that was nothing compared to others around them who spoke of having no bread for days because they couldn't afford it.

"There you go, getting swept up in the emotion," Bellec growled right back. "Listen boy, we're what, fifteen thousand people right now? Maybe more. Do you think every single one of them just wants to have a civil discourse on the way things are? No, they're angry and they're hungry. They aren't thinking straight on anything. If one thing goes wrong, this crowd will go violent. How many people will die then?"

"But we're fighting to be heard."

"Novice." Bellec rubbed his hands through his wet hair. "How do you want to be heard? Do you want to be heard as one voice crying out for change, or do you want to be heard as a violent mob to flee from? Those Americans at least understood about propaganda and tried to make sure they sent their version of events off to England first to sway public opinion before the actual reports came through. Same thing with all of their own damn papers. Doesn't matter the reality, America won the debate because enough English were on their side as well as us. These mobs aren't doing that. They're storming places, grabbing whatever they can. They aren't even trying to argue."

"Have you even read any of the papers?" Arno retorted. "Marat, or—"

"I'll stop you right there," Bellec bit back. "Marat is a bitter man who wants to spew hate at whomever he pleases. That's a far cry from Thomas Paine, who used sarcasm to actually make people see why kingship didn't work and swayed people's minds."

Arno scoffed. "Are you sure you're French? You sound more American."

Bellec actually reached over and cuffed his head. "I was there, merdeux. I was born in New France, I joined under Achilles Davenport, I served in the Seven Years War. I may have left before the Templar purge of Assassins, but I listened. I've read all the reports Connor sent over, read all those damn English papers. If you can't see it, I'm not teaching you enough."

"So now you're getting vague again. I need to 'see' it. What the hell is 'it'?"

"The damn Creed, boy!"
"Nice to see you not compromising anything." Arno and Bellec turned to see Pontmercy, looking less polished than he usually preferred after having such a rainy day dampen his fine clothes.

Bellec merely scoffed and stormed off, mud and muck splattering with every step.

"Pontmercy," Arno greeted.

The bookseller nodded his head like a peacock. Then crumpled and wiped more rain from his face. "I'm damn tired."

"I think we all are."

Pontmercy offered a weary glare. "Arno, how many of us are there?"

"Fifteen thousand, according to Bellec."

"No, Arno, how many of us."

"Oh..." Arno paused, thinking of the faces he'd seen in the tunnels, but he couldn't be sure. "I don't know. I'm just a novice, after all."

Pontmercy offered some colorful vocabulary, which Arno wasn't expecting. "Alright, some basics that Bellec apparently hasn't explained. There aren't even two hundred of us in the city. Usually there's less than a hundred-fifty, since we need to send people out to the countryside or to other cities in France. The various colonies have their own chapters of us, self-run. We try and keep people safe. Tell me, Arno, with everyone here working this crowd that is incredibly angry, hungry, and tired, how are we going to keep people safe?"

"That's what I'm not understanding," Arno grumbled. "How is protesting like this a danger?"

Arno got an immediate answer.

All at once the crowd that was lingering energized and started to march.

"Merde," Pontmercy swore. "I was afraid of this."

"What's happening?"

"The crowd has a purpose and objective. They've ransacked the Hôtel de Ville for food, yes, but they also took weapons."

Arno could feel his eyes widen. "Weapons?"

"Oui. And this anger that has weapons now has a goal."

"Merde," Arno agreed. That would be a problem. "Where are we going?"

"To Versailles!" someone down the street shouted. "Let's bring our bon papa home!"

The crowd screamed in agreement.

And Arno felt a pit in his stomach as the rain started to pour again.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so. After ragging on the thematic mess last chapter, let's talk about the themes WE, the twins, are going to use.

The giant .rar file that a reviewer sent was a page by page scan of one of the supplemental books. We were able to use some small bits here and there, but the biggest note the book gave was this quote: "Bellec is verbally abusive to Arno and he doesn't see it." In conjunction with the unity book and what happens to Élise, and how we are deliberately interpreting certain lines of dialogue, this fic is a giant exploration in mental health.

You'll see the start of it here in this chapter: Bellec never, ever, has something nice to say to Arno, and in the game while the English version has him call Arno "pisspot" in French he's called merdeux, which is, er, something else entirely. Other people kind of notice that there are gaps in Arno's training, but nobody's going to put two and two together for quite a bit. Arno is trying really hard to learn about the "cult" but his education is fundamentally broken with Bellec as his teacher and that will haunt him for most of the fic. Note that he was also brought above ground against tradition, once because the Women's March (remember that multiplayer where there were only two people you were following? Yeah...) was huge and the Brotherhood needed all hands to keep it calm, and once when Bellec broke all protocol and... well... that will happen a lot for Arno.

Élise, too, is suffering in her mental health. True to the books, she's also getting read for the Women's March, but unlike Arno she stays in Paris and you'll find out next chapter how that goes.

There's a lot to say here, but we'll try to segment it out over the course of the fic. Note that Mirabeau, like Arno's father and M. de la Serre, is a figure that gives Arno space to breath, to cry. As you read the fic, take now on how many people support Arno vs Élise.

Next chapter: Women's March
It was a strange mirror.

Walking to Versailles in the rain.

The last time he had done so, he had just escaped the Bastille. He had only one goal. Get to Élise. He had been in shoes that were too small, slept under carriages, and only had alcohol in his stomach. It was filled with memories of the death of M. de la Serre, strange dreams of his father, and filled with darkness.

This time his shoes fit. He wasn't in threadbare clothes. He wasn't alone.

But it was still dark.

The crowd had started towards Versailles at roughly four o'clock in the afternoon, after having spent a large portion of the day out in the rain tired and hungry. Now that twelve-mile walk was a daunting march. The rain kept pouring. Everyone was splattered in mud and muck. Clothes were soaked through.

People were getting angrier. If only the king, *le bon papa* was back in Paris with his people, then he'd understand the plight of the Third Estate. If only the king was removed from all those nobles and their conspiracies and plots. Plans were swirling of having Lafayette's men become the guard of the king instead of the guards who had defaced the cockade. Others spoke of having more control of the king if he was in Paris, to help ensure that the new government that was being created wasn't repulsed by the nobles or the church, making Paris the best place for the king to reside. If only the queen was dead.

It was a difficult march. The rain and mud kept getting thicker and thicker, and those further back in the march faced more turned up mud and sank further than those at the front of the crowds. Lafayette would often pause the march, if he could convince enough of his men, so that they could help the people getting stuck in the muck, but it just made people more frustrated that they weren't getting to Versailles. The crowds were getting cantankerous and Arno... was just numb.

The last time he had walked through the rain to Versailles was just as despondent.

The rain coated and engulfed him, draining his energy, leaving him tripping, and he wondered if his shoes were once again too small to have him stumbling. He kept adjusting his hood, the only real way he could remember that he wasn't the same as he was before. The crowds continued to surge around him, energy crackling, but Arno couldn't feel it.

He was only numb.

Pontmercy stayed by his side, glancing over worriedly.

Bellec was by at some point. Maybe Arno imagined that.

But those six hours of marching just reminded him of how hollow everything was.

He had nothing.
His father was dead.

His new father was dead.

He was dead to Élise.

All his own fault.

He couldn't fix it.

He was dead.

He had thought he was reborn.

But he hadn't been.

He was dead.

When they arrived at the town of Versailles, they were immediately greeted by the Assembly. Maillard and his various deputized women were brought into their hall, but everyone took that as an invitation. Many of the crowd just entered to collapse at the deputy benches, seeking somewhere warm and dry to rest.

Several members of the Assembly tried to stand up and speak, but they were shouted down by the poissards and everyone else who had stalked through the muck and rain to get here to bring le bon papa back home to Paris and get food, most importantly, bread that was cheap and no more famine. The poissards and their scaling knives demanded for Mirabeau to speak to the crowds.

But Mirabeau refused to, instead walked amongst all the women, stepped out to look at the canon that all the ladies had brought with them, didn't even look at Lafayette's men, but stayed amongst the women, listening to them one by one, letting them sit on his knee when stools and benches weren't available, and just listened.

Bellec dragged Arno to a table by Mirabeau and sat him down right on the floor before disappearing. Pontmercy sat with him, Cosette mysteriously joining him, along with Fabre. The three looked to Arno with concern, but Arno was dead, so it didn't really matter.

He was dead.

Food was placed in front of him, but corpses didn't need to eat.

After all, he was in Versailles. Where so many died. Himself included.

Words flowed around him. Shouts, sobs, exhaustion.

He just sat there, staring listlessly at his boots.

"Monsieur Mirabeau," someone was saying, "I'm so tired of being hungry. I'm so tired of not being able to afford bread to eat."

"I understand," someone else replied. "I've been in jail, I've seen how poorly people have been treated and I've lived it. There was a time I thought I was dead."

"Oui, monsieur! Exactement! We'll die if we don't eat and those nobles and clergy don't care!"

"Very true," was the reply. "But I learned something when I was dying."
"I learned I had a Brotherhood. Those around me who believed as I did, thought as I did, sought what I did, and yet still challenged me to think further. Think larger. It's why I fight here. It's why I'd rather face bayonets than leave this unresolved."

Brotherhood?

That was familiar.

"I don't understand, Monsieur."

"Look around you, mademoiselle, how many people have come with you? So much of Paris is here. And not the blustering men, but the women who see the worst every day when they try and make a simple meal. You have a brotherhood, mademoiselle, all around you."

Arno looked up.

"We fight for you. We work for you. We hear you."

Arno saw three worried faces staring at him.

"We can fix the mistakes of the past."

Fix.

Arno let out a heavy sigh and tipped his head back, still exhausted. His eyes were watering, but he couldn't tell if it was because emotion was returning or because more water had dripped into his eyes. With a breath he sat forward and reached for the food in front of him.

The three in front of him gave various, quiet sighs of relief.

"I don't like Versailles," he said softly.

"Then we'll make sure you're never assigned here," Fabre said seriously.

Within an hour, the president of the Assembly, Mounier, with some reluctance, brought the six of the women to the palace to meet with the king. Arno stayed behind with Bellec who was in a small room at the Assembly.

"Your head finally on straight?"

"Enough," Arno replied. He didn't wish to discuss it, their previous argument still hanging about them, unresolved.

Bellec let out a heavy sigh. "Look, boy, I see what should have been with you. I see what you could be. It's not easy seeing you're not there yet."

"Fine," Arno replied quietly. He was too tired to deal with all this.

"Boy, your father—"

"Bellec," Arno continued to stare out the window to the dark, rainy night, "stop looking at me like my father. I barely remember him, and what I remember is his death. I'm not my father. I'm not a
raised member of your little cult. Treat me like I am: Brand new to all this."

Arno paused.

"I've just been reborn. I know nothing." He sighed as he rubbed his eyes. "Nothing I ever knew was true."

He turned, wanting to just find somewhere soft to sleep, soaked clothes or not, but Bellec was looking at him strangely.

"What."

"Rien," Bellec denied. But he smiled. "Come on. Let's see if we can find Lafayette. Keep that hood up. You're still not supposed to be recognized."

"Yes, yes, yes."

Lafayette was a few doors down, having a quiet dinner, speaking with one of his officers when Bellec knocked on the doorframe.

"Ah, you must be associates of Connor," Lafayette gave a tired smile. He turned to his officers. "Your pardon, messieurs, but I have not heard from this old friend in a number of years. And knowing those Connor keeps around, these gentlemen will likely disappear with how busy they are."

Most of the officers nodded. While none of them looked happy, they didn't seem offended. Arno hadn't even realized he was paying attention to that until they stepped out and closed the door.

"How is Connor?" Lafayette asked, gesturing them to sit down.

"Well as of his last letter," Bellec replied. "His three children are keeping him busy."

Lafayette gave a happy smile. "Ah, he found a wife. That is good to know. I still wish to convince him to visit France, but he ever declines." Lafayette took a small sip from his cup. "I should write him. I have not had much opportunity, particularly these last few months."

"We've all been busy in one way or another," Bellec replied.

Arno just sat there, amazed. Lafayette knew of the Assassins? Lafayette? The great hero of that American Revolution? Did all Assassins know such influential people? But then he shook his head. Mirabeau was le Mentor. Of course influential people knew Assassins and visa-versa.

"I have told my men to keep the peace," Lafayette nodded to the door where his officers have left. "I will be leaving soon."

"What?" Arno hissed, surprised.

Bellec glared at him.

"I will go to the King. If needs be, I will die for him."

Arno's jaw dropped. "But..."

Lafayette shook his head, exhaustion creeping in. "It was different with the Americans," he said softly, rubbing at a temple. "They had been governing themselves for well over a century. They had to. When I arrived everyone debated, discussed, had discourse on every little thing. Even
something as simple as who should command a military unit and why. *Monsieur* Washington, he applied military structure to a mess. Yet they still won.” Lafayette looked to Arno, eyes gentle. "I explained to Connor that America is dark and dirty, barely surviving, yet America's heart is pure. Here in France, it is the opposite. We sparkle and shine as the most cultured and civilized nation in Europe, but our heart is darkened by centuries of decadence, corruption, and villainy."

"Then the people need to rise up, as we *have* been," Arno hissed. "If France's heart is as blackened as you say, we need to scrub it clean."

"Yes," Lafayette nodded. "But we still need a king for that. America has already governed for a century. They know what they are doing. Tell me, young man, do you know how much to tariff foreign goods in order to get enough money for *any* of the things the people are demanding?"

Arno stuttered.

"Or how much money is brought in by tariffs at all?"

"Er..."

"That is why we need a king," Lafayette said sadly. "The king, his advisors, they have been doing this for a long, long time. They have the basics. Let them train the common citizens. But we still need experience leading us. But this mob..." Lafayette stood, reaching for a heavy cloak in case the rain started to fall again. "This mob isn't fighting for an ideal, like Americans were. They are screaming for blood. One point that Connor made very, very clear, is that seeking blood only begets more blood."

Lafayette went quietly to the door. "I know you likely wish to advise me, as Connor often did, but I have made my choice. Connor's people will always have my support, but in this, I must act as I see fit. And try and turn that darkness back to light." Lafayette gave a soft smile. "Tell Connor I will write him when I can."

"But—"

"Of course, *Monsieur,*" Bellec gave a respectful nod. "As you wish."

After Lafayette left, word started spreading that the King had been gracious and generous when he met with the women. So gracious, that one of them fainted dead away. The royal storehouses had been opened for food and more was promised.

Many of the market women were contented with that. Maillard and many of those women started the long walk back to Paris, through the rain but triumphant. But many stayed, still angry that something would change between the promise and something being done. After all, in Versailles, they were surrounded by clergy and nobility who viewed them poorly by being the Third Estate.

Bellec told Arno firmly to get some rest while he could, and by that point, Arno did so. He was already exhausted. So he slept on a small cot that the Assassins had commandeered. Bellec went out to ferret out more information and Fabre was following Maillard back to Paris. Cosette was already running a message to someone else and Pontmercy told Arno that he'd wake him later to switch shifts in case they were needed.

That was fine with Arno. Versailles was bringing up bad memories, Lafayette's views were bizarre, Bellec had been an ass most of the day, sleep sounded like a damn-good idea.

When Arno awoke, he realized that Pontmercy hadn't done what he'd promised. Pontmercy was supposed to have woken him in the wee hours of the morning and instead had let Arno sleep the
whole night through.

"Pontmercy —"

"Not a word, Arno," Pontmercy said tiredly. "I've done my generosity for the day. Don't get used to it. Now get out of here. I need to sleep."

Arno did so, feeling greatly refreshed and not quite as despondent as yesterday's walk to Versailles in the rain has left him. He still wasn't happy about being in Versailles, there were too many memories of Before that just hurt to think of now. But he knew he wasn't in that time or place any more. Bellec was at the door and gave him a once over. Arno just rolled his eyes and headed out. If one of the many things he was supposed to do was listen, he needed to be out and about doing so.

As he walked about, hood down, he learned a few things he hadn't realized when they'd arrived so late into the evening. For one, the king had agreed to the August decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, no question. That actually made Arno smile.

Progress.

So why was everyone so damn worried about such a large crowd speaking with one voice? Speaking together had gotten an accomplishment. Many people had just fallen asleep in the square, too exhausted to make a six-hour trek home in the middle of the night. It seemed Lafayette's men had mingled with the women and there was a certain solidarity amongst them. In fact, it was sparking energy everywhere Arno walked.

The people spoke of Lafayette as a traitor, how he had been slow to start the march and reluctant to even begin. To this, Arno couldn't believe it. For all that he disagreed with the need of a king at this point, a radical view, no doubt, he had seen that Lafayette was doing what he believed based on what he had experienced. Arno's personal opinion aside, Lafayette cared about the French. To denounce him as a traitor seemed a bridge too far.

But that was nothing compared to the vitriol about the queen. Rumors of her and her affairs had been around for years before she finally bore a child, and being Austrian certainly didn't help, as Arno well knew. Everyone knew of her extravagant gowns, hair stylings that took hours to accomplish, and the poissards did not have good things to say.

In fact, the vitriol was getting more heated as light started to dawn.

As Arno continued to walk around, the crowd around him energizing and giving him more energy, he noticed something. A door unguarded.

"Nom de dieu," he hissed. The way the men and poissards were talking, to say nothing of scaling knives, muskets, and Liberated weapons that were being brandished, Arno realized that a calm march home wasn't going to be on the agenda. He was quick to find Bellec, sparkles of color drawing his eyes, and Arno spared barely a thought to wonder how the hell this eagle vision decided to activate or deactivate. Bellec kept saying it was about reaching for an eagle in his mind, but he had no clue what that meant.

"Merdeux," Bellec growled. "You get inside and get Lafayette. I'll stay here and find the hotheads."

"But what if—"

"Allez!"
Arno bit back his first response but slipped back through the crowds. He paused near the edge and took a deep breath. He had been underground for so long, he knew the basics of how the shadows worked. But underground was nothing but shadows. No one dared bring him above ground for stalking shadows as he had only been there a scant few months. He wasn't ready, they claimed. Well, now he was going to have to sneak across the shadows of the early morning unnoticed to get into that unmanned door.

_Diable._

Torchlight cast shadows, and while the sky was lightening, the problem was the distance. Versailles was staggeringly large, with nothing but wide-open space around it to provide unobstructed views for the people inside, either to the vast jardins, fountains, manicured lawns and copses of trees, or the long expanse that one needed to cross in order to enter as a guest as Arno had done when he had snuck in that fateful night. That made for long stretches where there just weren’t any real shadows to hide behind. So Arno stayed low to the ground, prayed that his dark coat did enough to hide him, and moved on silent feet. Or as silent as he could be on the cobblestones. In that, he was grateful for the crowds behind him. They were talking quietly, or not so quietly in some pockets, and providing enough noise that if he stepped in a puddle of morning dew, no one noticed as he slipped across to the unguarded door.

Standing, Arno pushed back his hood to better see and rubbed his face to get a little more warmth in it. Parts of his clothes were still damp from the previous day and he was incredibly chilled. He glanced back at the crowds, then adjusted his hood back and silently slid inside.

What Arno hadn't realized, however, was that glancing back without his hood had been a mistake. Especially at six in the morning. His white face was easily seen against all the shadows. And the crowds realized there was a door open and unguarded.

Arno snuck through the ornate halls, wondering where the hell Lafayette was. He was also wondering what the hell Bellec wanted him to do once he "got" Lafayette.

"Hey! You! You don't belong here!"

_Diable._ Suddenly it was like he was back at the Bastille again, having to think of a lie on the spot. Well, he couldn't think of one. He went with the truth.

"Where is Lafayette?" he demanded in the same haughty tone that Olivier always took with him. "Or the guard? Hm? Where?" Arno stalked forward. "I was able to get in through an unguarded door. Who is in charge of security here? Hm? Where?"

"Merde!" the guard swore. "What door—"

The question was cut off as cries entered the palace.

"Où est la Reine? Where's the Queen?"

"Diable," Arno swore. "Where is Lafayette?"

But it was chaos. Guards raced through the palace, trying to find the crowd and then stop them in their tracks. Arno wasn't getting his question answered by busy soldiers, and he wasn't a soldier to conscript, so he was back to being ignored. That was fine by him. He may have a sword and gun at his hips, but he continued to carry himself as haughtily as Olivier did and prayed that worked.

It seemed to as he rushed down another long hall.
He was upstairs, looking down when he saw the chaos he had finally heard. The guards had barricaded halls, bolted doors, anything they could do to contain the mass of Parisian women who had swelled into the palace. There was anger on both sides, shouting and screaming. The guards were calling for reinforcements and the poissards who had stayed through the night were screaming for the Queen and her extravagances to face them.

Then a guard aimed his rifle and fired.

There was a moment of silence, before the roar turned into a scream. One of the young Parisians had been shot. Arno surged at the railing, angry. Why the hell had the guard opened fire on their own people? That was insane! The crowds below agreed, screaming anger and resentment, and rather than running in fear, the Parisians stood firm and pushed. Several broke through and the barricades fell apart. Arno, shouting from above with the crowd, watched as two guards were brought down, cried out in victory, and then went cold.

Scaling knives were pulled out.

Heads were chopped off. Heads were placed on pikes.

And suddenly Arno realized that calmer crowds got things done but a mob just brought death.

Diable. He staggered back, suddenly sick. He wasn't seeing guards' heads on pikes, he was seeing blood on M. de la Serre, the stagger... what would this angry crowd do to someone who needed help? Would they notice? Or was their thirst for blood the only thing they could see?

"Where is the Queen?"

Forget Lafayette. Arno needed to do something else.

The mob was on the lower floors, Arno the upper. He had an advantage. They didn't know the palace. Arno had at least been here once before. He took off racing.

No more death.

Not like this.

Where the hell did he need to go?

He tried to ask for his eagle's help, as it has helped the previous day. But nothing came but an ache to his head.

Where, where, where?

Dimly in his memory, he remembered Élise mentioning that the Queen had a lovely view of Lake of the Swiss Guards, something he saw when he had been sneaking into the palace that fateful night. He had a rough idea where to go. Any guard he saw he told the same thing. "Protect the Queen!" And since the guards actually knew where to go, he followed them through the halls. Barricades were once more set up, but not fast enough as the screams and vitriolic shouts of the crowds kept coming closer.

Arno pounded on every door he could. "Protect the Queen!" Staff screamed and ran away to hide; the guard was a disorganized mess. Would the Queen die today?

... Would someone else die? Someone that Arno could prevent? If he had stayed instead of wandering off. He had delivered the letter instead of wandering off? He would protect this time.
"Get the Queen to the King!" he shouted. And suddenly the guards seemed to have an objective. Orders started to be given.

"Blockade this hall! Ignore the rest!"

"You! Get to the Queen! I don't care what she says, get into her chambers and get her to the King, now!"

Arno followed, screams and shouts behind him.

At a door, a guard was pounding on the door. "It is not safe, my queen! You must come with us to the King! It will be easier to defend you there!"

"In my night clothes?" was the muffled response through the door. "I am safe here!"

Of all the highborn nonsense! Arno was trying to help protect this woman!

Arno didn't bother with subtlety or demure propriety. He raised his foot and kicked the door in.

"How dare you—"

"Do you want to die?" he demanded bluntly, in German, ignoring the fluffy, frilly lace of the queen and several ladies in waiting.

"Who do you think you—" her German reply was cut off.

"Where is the Queen!" was clearly heard behind him.

And all at once the Queen wasn't the highborn noble. Arno saw a young woman, barely clothed, hair still a mess from bed, surrounded by her ladies, with fear in her eyes and paler than her nightclothes.

"Upstairs!" was another shout.

Arno wouldn't let another person die. Not even a woman who could only use superiority to hide her obvious fear. Arno grabbed her arm and pulled. "Go!" he shouted in German.

No other prompting was needed as the Queen raced, bare feet slapping on the floor behind her with Arno, the guard and the roar of a crowd behind her.

"It's the Queen's chambers!"

"Look at all that finery!"

"Tear it apart!"

The Queen was praying in earnest, and in German. Arno's dusty memories of his mother flitted about, but he was too busy to examine it. Noise was surrounding them. The shouts of the crowd were thunderous, and the destruction of a royal apartment could be heard behind them as they raced through halls of apartments, to an antechamber, and then started pounding on the King's rooms. But nothing could be heard because the mob was screaming and crying out for blood behind them.

The mob was approaching, pounding on the door did nothing.

The Queen was sobbing.
The ladies in waiting were shaking and huddled together.

There weren't enough guards to hold off that mob.

"Open the damn door or the Queen will die!" Arno bellowed through the door.

They continued to pound at the door, nothing could be heard over the approaching crowd, and then the door was magically open, everyone poured inside. Arno made sure to be the last, slammed the door shut, and ignored everything else as he spied a heavy chest of drawers and started to shoulder it to the door, barricading it. One of the guards who had spilled in with him helped, and soon another chest of drawers was brought over to barricade the door.

Outside was a roar of anger, blood denied.

But they were safe.

For now. Arno let out a long breath, the adrenaline still buzzing through his system. But his brain was starting to work, and he realized something.

He was locked in the King's apartments.

_Diable_. He was supposed to be dead. No one was supposed to know of him. There were going to be questions...

"Ah, I'm glad you are safe," said a familiar voice.

Arno blinked, but didn't dare drop his hood. Instead he looked up carefully, to see Lafayette there, smiling under exhausted eyes that didn't seem to have slept since he last saw the soldier.

Right. He'd been far too direct. Time to go back to propriety. Which was going to be damn hard when his heart was still running at top speed.

"Monsieur," he greeted. "I tried to find you..."

"Yes, word reached me that you were trying to find me. I am so glad you took initiative in protecting her Majesty instead."

"Bien sûr."

"One of your men?" someone asked, and Lafayette just smiled.

"Come, you can brief me. Your pardon, Messieurs, but I believe I must hear this report."

"We can all hear it."

_Merde._

So he slipped into German that he barely remembered without realizing it and spoke to Lafayette. "Please, no."

The effect was immediate. Several of the people started to scoff and discuss why on earth Lafayette was using an _Austrian_ in his men.

The Queen, however was much more direct. "This man saved my life," she stated clearly in flawless French. "He shall protect me as I change to something more suitable."
"Protect?" someone said. "My dear, we are safe here—"

"Louis," she said softly, "allow me to compose myself."

"Ah. Yes, of course."

Arno firmly kept his eyes down to the ground.

"Now, come," she said softly. Arno nodded, eyes and hood down and followed her bare feet. Lafayette followed as other guards did as well.

The Queen seemed to know her way around the King's chambers, and was soon at a bath chamber where she firmly stated no men were allowed. The guard and her ladies of waiting were to be at the door to the apartments. Lafayette and Arno could guard the door to the landing. That was fine for Arno, as the landing lead to halls and stairs he could use to disappear again. Because he was feeling far too exposed at the moment. After months in the tunnels in Paris, it felt so strange to be around so many people, and all that talk of hiding and not being seen was ringing loudly in his head.

Once in position and the sounds of the women getting water for the bath ready and all the feminine ways that required so much talking, Arno let out a long breath and rubbed at his face. "This has been a hell of a morning," he stated. Glancing around, he saw a clock nearby and couldn't believe the time. "Not even 8:00 yet? It feels like it's been longer."

"It always feels that way," Lafayette said tiredly. "I don't believe I've gone to sleep yet. I've been meeting with one person after another to make them see the situation. The people here at Versailles, they only know the finery. They don't know or see hardship."

"No one in the palace would," Arno replied bitterly, memories of what Olivier would have him do raced briefly across his mind. His time on the streets before joining the cult. Of only having alcohol in his stomach because there was no bread.

"So, your report," Lafayette rubbed at his eyes, dark bags prominent. "Then you can slip away because I told you to look into something."

Arno snorted. "Is the cult that obvious?" he asked dryly.

Lafayette actually chuckled. "Not at all. But I know Connor. Any who associate with him couldn't be any less."

That sparked a twinge of pride in Arno, though he couldn't say why since he didn't feel like a part of the cult. Not really. Not the way Cosette was or Fabre. He gave a small smile and reported everything. From arriving with the crowds the previous day to how he ended up dragging the Queen to the King. It felt almost like giving a report to the Council, as he had only a few times when Bellec insisted he get experience.

Lafayette nodded. "It is as I have heard." The noble soldier gave a heavy sigh. "When all this chaos dies down, I would like you to find your captain again. Keep an eye on the hot-heads. Do as you feel needed. Let them know that I will protect the King and Queen." Lafayette gave a wan smile. "I expect I'll be seeing you around Paris."

Arno gave his own wan smile.

Lafayette chuckled. "No, I suppose I won't see you unless you chose so."

"Cult rules, and all that," Arno replied dryly.
"Indeed." Lafayette looked to Arno seriously. "Be safe, Arno."

Arno nodded. The mob had quieted, and from the guards who went by and sometimes gave reports to Lafayette, it seemed the rage had finally burned out. After all, the French Guards who were a majority of Lafayette's National Guard often worked together with the Royal Guard. Lafayette breezed between them, leaving Arno at his post, discussing things as he went, charm on full display despite the clear exhaustion that weighed so heavily around him.

There was a nod, and a guard came to take Arno's post. And Arno caught Lafayette's eye and nodded beneath his hood.

Silently, he slid away, sticking to empty halls and servant staircases.

Order, it seemed was being restored.

Outside, he couldn't find Bellec. With his eagle refusing to answer his calls, he just found a spot and waited. The crowds were slowly trickling out of the palace as both guards, National and Royal, established peace within the palace walls and brought things back to calm. Within an hour, the people were all in the main drive, the Marble Court, still talking and discussing and arguing, but far calmer than those tumultuous first hours of the morning.

Bellec appeared by his side, scowl threatening to drop from his beard down to his neck. "Where have you been, merdeux?"

"Busy," Arno hissed back. "Lafayette will start speaking soon." He kept his eyes pinned to the balcony. "He said he'd protect the royal family."

"Damn fool," Bellec replied softly. "He won't be able to do that forever."

Arno just shook his head. He didn't feel like arguing.

Sure enough, Lafayette appeared at the balcony, speaking to the crowd that suddenly went quiet to hear. He didn't speak long before he turned and, with all the ceremony and pomp, introduced the King.

The reaction from the crowd was instant and visceral. "Vivre le Roi! Long live the king!"

From where Arno was, he couldn't see details, but he was certain he saw relief settle on the King's shoulders. Lafayette capitalized on the moment, pulling out a cockade and pinning it to the hat of a royal guard, effectively undoing the staining of a cockade that had started this whole mess. The King's speech was brief, reinforcing how he was opening royal stores of food, and acceding that he would be joining his people in Paris. The crowds' riotous cheers were joyful, several women openly weeping in relief and joy.

"That's a class act, that Lafayette," Arno muttered to Bellec.

"And sincere with every move," Bellec agreed. "Life's going to beat him down, eventually."

"I hope not."

"Hope doesn't matter a damn."

The King withdrew and the crowd's joy slipped again to ire. If the King could see them, why not the Queen? The cries began for the Queen and Arno just hung his head.
"Do they really think after destroying her home and chasing her barefoot across the palace that she wants to see them?"

"Doesn't matter, merdeux. They want their piece."

"They've taken enough pieces from a scared young woman."

"That's why people have to learn the Creed, merdeux."

But the Queen appeared, children with her, and Lafayette presented her.

She stood stoically, hair plain and simple in style, her children shuddering by her side, clearly scared.

The crowd demanded that the children be taken away, and there was little doubt why that was demanded when Arno saw muskets aimed up at the balcony.

But the Queen said nothing, kept her children close, and crossed her hands over her chest in prayer.

"She's taking all that vitriol?"

"What choice does she have? Use that damn brain, merdeux."

Arno rolled his eyes. Still, she stayed there, bravely praying in front of a crowd that despised her. But as the insults continued, as the vitriol spread, it started to drain. Instead, the crowd started to talk about how brave the Queen was. How she stood there, piously praying, while surrounded by hatred. That took strength and bravery. Slowly the fury died away, and then Lafayette, with dramatic flair, turned, bent to one knee, and kissed the Queen's hand.

Many ladies were instantly charmed, men smiled, and while not as loud, a cry surged through the crowds. "Vivre la Reine! Long live the Queen!"

"Cunning, theatrical, connard," Bellec smiled. "That should calm them for now. The crowd still won, though: The royal family's being brought to Paris." He turned to Arno. "I think we're done, here, merdeux."

"About time," Arno murmured.

To say that the past day and a half had been eventful was an understatement. Women had gathered, women had fought, women had marched, women had demanded of their king. Women had attacked the palace and women had sought the Queen. The Queen turned the crowd with quiet bravery.

Arno couldn't help but wonder.

What would Élise to say to all this? She would often complain to him, only in the most private of settings, how women were so limited in what they could say and do. But all this had come from women.

Arno wondered if Élise would be proud.

It was something to think about on that long march back to Paris. Bringing le bon papa home to his people.

"Grandmaître, I should be there."
"No, Chrétien, if something happens we need at least one true Templar uninjured to marshal forces. My father's killers are still invisible to us, and this could be a bloodletting. I would rather have a proverbial ace up the sleeve, if you will."

"... You are right of course, Grandmaitre," her old friend said. "I'll stay with Weatherall here and await your return. If you are not back by sundown..."

"Assume the worst, that I have been killed, and then build an army," Élise said. "Make them suffer."

Chrétien grinned. "As you say."

Élise nodded, and she left her lodgings, Burnel at her side. The October day was raw and rainy. It had taken her an hour to decide what to wear – the choices were an ornate dress to display elegance and presence, or men's pants and a sword at her belt to display power and authority. She had finally decided on the latter, a lacy feminine look would turn heads but not hearts, and she needed hearts – if not aligned to her cause then impaled on her sword so that they understood who was in charge. It all disappeared under her cloak regardless, and she moved delicately through the crowds, Templar necklace for now hidden under her cravat. Burnel made no comment, dutiful as ever, but stood closer than proper for his station. That had started after that night at the Maison Royale, and Élise allowed it for the moment. He had not managed to make her feel since that night, but he was, as Weatherall said, an excellent lieutenant.

They moved south, toward the Seine, and as they approached the Hôtel de Ville, the seat of the city government, the streets became packed with peasants. There was a veritable sea of humanity, and they were forced to take Rue Sainte-Antoine instead of Quai de l'Hôtel de Ville, turning instead on Rue Saint-Paul where there were fewer people and then exiting out on the Seine. Élise hated the delay but didn't dare inquire what the fuss was about. The peasants had been cantankerous ever since the Estates General and forming the National Assembly. It was probably the work of that damned Mirabeau, Assassin chien that he was, and Élise did not have time to deal with them until her père's killers were taken care of. If the killer had used and Assassin, well, all the more blood to be spilled. The thought brought warmth to her chest, temporarily fighting off the malaise, and her steps felt firmer as she crossed Pont Marie and turned on Quai d’Anjou. She could see the Marquis' hôtel particulier down the street.

Constructed in 1658, it did not have the traditional entre court et jardins, entrance court and gardens in front of the structure to reduce street noise – why would it when it faced la Seine? – instead there was a courtyard in the back and the home reduced noise by have the ground floor raised, with the added bonus of a better view of the river.

Said river was an iron grey, reflecting the overcast. The desaturated world threatened to numb her again, but she pushed it aside and focused on her goal: meet her allies. Establish her dominance. Find and kill the killers.

She took a deep breath, preparing herself, as she entered the noble abode. Inside was a stark contrast to the grey outside: gilded accents, lush curtains, elegant furniture, rich velvet. She was home, back at her estate in Versailles, when things were good and warm. Oh, something that felt almost good swept through her.

Burnel watched her, ever proper, before he gently cleared his throat, breaking the spell Élise was under. She shook her head, mad at herself, and pulled over her cloak. The lower floor was used for service, and she hung her cloak and shook out her damp hair, Burnel watching with slightly dilated eyes before doing the same. He is smitten, she realized. Well, if he could rid the numbness then she would allow it, for now.
The servant led them up to the main level, and then up again to the Marquis' private chambers.

"Mademoiselle," Pimôdan said grandly.

"Grandmâtre, s'il vous plaît," Élise corrected. "I must set a firm example, and that includes the correct titles."

"Bien sûr, Madem—Grandmâtre," Pîmodan said, bowing appropriately. "The meeting is not scheduled for another hour. You are here early."

Élise nodded. "As I stated, I must set a firm example. While we wait for my other supporters, I would like to ask you a few questions."

"... Bien sûr, bien sûr," the Marquis replied, nodding after only a pause. "Let us retire to my office, I will have some documents you will no doubt require. The rain has been ghastly, hasn't it?"

"No more than the mob in front of l'Hôtel de Ville," Burnel replied.

"Honestly," Pîmodan said, "the city isn't safe for the very people who guide it. I've hardly left my home since the National Assembly started making what they call laws. Once this matter is settled we can sic Louis on them and put this little rebellion down."

"Hardly," Élise countered. "I've seen what mobs of that size can do. Killing them won't erase their resentment at not being smart enough to lead. Instead we need to let them burn themselves out, like the pressure on a kettle. Once they've sated their bloodlust they will go back to the sheep that they are, and we can assimilate into whatever structures they've concocted to give them the illusion of power and go back to business as normal. For now, this little revolution of theirs makes finding my father's killers easier, because no one will think twice about another body."

They moved through the ornate hall, everything warm golds or cool blues. Even the parquet floors looked warm and inviting, enticing Élise to feel at ease, to remember good times, smile fondly at the past. The sensation immediately burned through the malaise and sharpened her instincts. Nothing about this meeting was to be warm and inviting, and the very sensation caused her unease. Nothing was warm and inviting anymore, nothing was safe because her père was dead and murdered and for all she knew the people she was meeting were a part of the conspiracy. A shiver ran down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

Burnel noticed her change in demeanor, dared to reach out and touch her arm as they entered a modest gallery. Élise yanked her arm away, synapses firing in her brain. That pause, that fraction delay from Pîmodan, what had that meant? What was he not saying? What was he hiding? Was he one of the traitors?

Her hand moved slowly to her sword hilt. Burnel saw it but otherwise did not react. She drew it as silently as possible, the clicking of their boots making the noise seem soft. Past the gallery was indeed an office – just as ornate as the rest of the house, just as inviting, just as dangerous. Pîmodan turned and by then her rapier was out and held professionally at her throat.

"Monsieur," she said cordially, eyes as cold as the rest of her. "Since you so generously offered to answer my questions, I will start with the most important: did you have anything to do with the death of my père?"

Wide eyes, pale face, the bob of an adam's apple to show a gulp. Then, a small shake of the head.

"But...?" she prompted.
Another gulp. "Grandmaître," he said, voice cracking, "please... I'm only alive because..."

"Because they knew we were coming," Brunel said, face suddenly grim. "Are the others alive?"

A shake of the head.

"Killed or missing," Burnel concluded. "A complete coup d'état."

"No," Élise corrected. "Not complete. I am still alive."

Pîmodan shook his head again.

Élise realized the truth but Burnel asked regardless. "Are they here?"

A nod.

... Very well. Élise punched Pîmodan with the hilt of her sword. "We broke free," she said simply, and turned and darted back the way they had come, through the ornate gallery. She kept her sword drawn, Burnel pulling out his flint-lock pistol as they swiftly moved to the stairs. "We'll split up once we cross the bridge," she said. "Get back to our allies by sundown tonight."

"If the mob is still at l'Hôtel de Ville, I can lose myself there."

They nodded, ignoring their cloaks, Élise keeping her sword up as the moved through the front door.

"Élise, in case we don't make it, je t'a—"

Burnel's declaration was silenced as something appeared from above and pulled, Élise only having a split second to lift her sword higher in some kind of defense when a similar thing – a ligature – swooped down and tried to catch her. Her blade was suddenly flat against her neck as her weight started to lift. Her toes could barely touch the street, and looking up she saw two shadows on the balcony of the hôtel particulier. It was true, she realized, nowhere was safe.

Burnel was making gurgling noises, Élise was half terrified she would cut her own throat but it was the only way to free herself: she pulled her sword down, wincing, twitching, but whatever string or twine they used was thin, and it snapped, sending her slamming to her knees and sucking in a breath. The numbness was certainly gone now, all she felt was blind terror, and she ran down the street and away from the assault. There might have been shouts, she wasn't sure, but all she could think about was getting passed the bridge. She risked looking behind as she rounded the corner to the bridge, saw three men in cloaks – no one else was on the road – and Élise knew they would overtake her if she didn't do something drastic.

Cursing she climbed the rail of the bridge, la Seine filled with boats and ferries, and jumped. She had enough time to process there was some kind of boat under her – off centered, before something crashed into her ribcage and she felt something else, deep within her, break. Everything left her lungs, and then she was surrounded by the freezing water of la Seine. The cold of the water fought with the fire in her ribs and the rawness of her neck – pain. She was nothing but pain, and she wondered if she should stay in the cold, in the malaise.

But they hadn't suffered yet.

Her father's killers were still out there.

She had work to do.
She started pumping her legs, she tried to breath in but it was all foul water and she coughed it out, nothing was in her lungs she had to get air she had to she had to she—

Élise broke the surface of the river and sucked in a watery gulp of air. All she could think about was breathing, and she did so greedily, everything numb and on fire at the same time, and all she could perceive was water and air.

Her next clear memory was seeing the shore – of which side of the Seine she didn't know, but she finally started thinking, and she started the arduous task of getting there. A ferry slowed, hands reaching down and scooping her up – she was still coughing, still struggling to breath. Her sword and disappeared, she was defenseless, she wasn't safe. That thought forced her to straighten, to back up and away from the hand until her back hit a wall. She stared, seeing but uncomprehending, at people around her – she was surrounded by people, no one she knew that was bad there might be a killer among them! She pulled out her boot knife and waved it threateningly.

"Stay back!" she tried to say, but the words were a cough-garbled mess. Everyone backed up, however, and she eventually found the strength to get to her feet. She was soaked through, her chest was on fire, and she couldn't tell if it was water or blood on her neck – she dared not check.

"It's all right," someone was saying, a woman, plain wool and white apron. "You're safe now, mademoiselle, it's all right."

"Get me to shore," Élise ordered.

Miraculously, they complied, and she walked backwards off the gangplank until her feet were solidly on the ground. Then she turned and ran down the street. She needed to get back to her lodgings, she needed to know where she was. She ran down the quai, eyes darting around, trying to figure out where she was.

There, the Place Dauphin. She was on the tip of Île de la Cité. Still coughing, now shivering, she dimly realized it was pouring rain. Warm. She needed to get warm as fast as possible or she would catch her death. She crossed Pont Neuf, rubbing dripping hands over dripping sleeves, water stringing her hair down into her eyes. She wiped at them with her good arm, one she was unable to lift because of whatever hell she had done to her ribs. Her teeth were chattering. Grunting, she ducked into a narrow alley. A clothes line was hanging above her, she took the first thing she could grab – a bedsheet of some kind, and wrapped it around herself as some form of measly protection against the weather. Now she had to figure out how to get back to Weatherall.

It was sunset – right at the deadline, when she finally returned. She could not remember half of the trip here – at the end all she could comprehend was the cold and the pain and the numbness. The malaise had returned, and she needed to fight it off, but she was so tired, so very tired, and maybe she shouldn't have fought when she fell into the river. She stumbled, uncertain why but she would clearly remember the look of terror on Weatherall's face, and Chrétien turning as white as his beard as he reached out to grab her.

Ah, there were still people she could trust...

Now she could rest.

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April 25, 1790

Élise woke slowly, listening to spring birds.
... why was she listening to spring birds? Wasn't it... autumn...?

She turned her head, taking in her surroundings, and realized she was back at her room in Maison-Royale, the finishing school she had been sent to after her mother's death. She took in the details slowly, tried to sit up and realized how much energy that took. What...?

Élise took inventory of her memories: Pîmodan, the ambush, jumping into the Seine – where was Burnel? Where were Chrétien and Weatherall? She tried to sit up, marveled at how much energy it took, and standing failed spectacularly – she tumbled to the floor before she even understood she was falling. Cursing, she struggled to get her weight under her hands to sit up on the cold floor, but her arms were shaking with the effort. What happened? Why was she so weak? Why was she so...

A gasp turned her eyes up to see a child – likely a student – staring at her, hands over her mouth. Élise glared at her. "Get me Weatherall," she ordered.

Twenty minutes later she was back in bed, covered in blankets and leaning on pillows to keep her upright. Weatherall was there, sitting heavily on a chair with his missing leg, crying over her return to senses as she heartily at a bowl of soup.

"It's been seven months!" he said, sobbing into his hands. "We didn't think you would return!"

"Stop being such a baby," Élise said, impatient. "Tears are the last thing I need right now, I need answers. What happened? Where was I that you didn't think I would return? What's been happening in the interim?"

"Ah, ma petite," Weatherall said, leaning back and showing his tear-stained face, his overly wide smile. "I don't know how much you remember – but you came back to us soaked to the bone, three ribs broken, white as a sheet. The fever took you for the better part of a month, we weren't sure you would survive, and after... after you were lost to the chambers of your own mind. You did not speak, hardly ate, you were a prisoner in your own body. Maître Lafrenière had to assume you would never return, and he made sure he would carry out your final act: he is raising an army to make the King of Beggars suffer."

Élise listened, her mind turning over the events. She remembered the malaise, the hollow emptiness of her mind, walking around and sensing something was wrong but uncertain what. She remembered her desperation to feel. She looked inside herself, and those things were still there – she had no tolerance for Weatherall's tears when before all of this she remembered thinking she would have felt touched or worried. Her heart was still as empty now as it was when news of her father's death had struck her. The malaise was still there, but the empty chasm of numbness had... changed somehow. Shifted.

Anger.

That's what she felt now. Anger. Anger that her father was dead, anger that her allies had been so systematically removed from the board, angry that they had lulled her into security by using Pîmodan's estate to lull her into a sense of home before almost killing her. Anger that Burnel, the closest thing she had to being able to feel again, had been stripped of her. They had nearly killed her, nothing, nowhere, no one was safe, and the only feeling left in her was anger.

They would pay. They would suffer. She would find the King of Beggars who wanted her mother dead, the killers of her father, and she would make them beg for the malaise that she had suffered. She would have to dig into the archives, look up how grandmâtres of old tortured traitors and use every single one of them on the fools who thought she could be pushed aside.
She turned to Weatherall. "Send a letter to Chrétien," she said. "Tell him I'm back to myself, and that I want to be read in to everything that's been going on. Also, get me some papers, I need to know what's been happening in the last seven months. After that I'll return to Paris."

Weatherall's joy almost immediately faded to concern, a look Élise quickly realized she would have no tolerance for.

"Élise," Weatherall said, his voice soft, gentle. "You've been bedridden for almost a year. You've lost weight, muscle, strength. It will take another seven months to get you back on your feet. You don't see how gaunt you are. Let Chrétien raise your army, let him learn where the traitors are. Take the time for yourself first. Once you can carry a sword, then we'll talk about you leaving." To prove his point, he pulled out a small hand mirror, and Élise saw herself for the first time.

Her red hair was dark and clumped together, a knotted mess. Her cheekbones were sunken in, as hollow as her spirit, and dark circles were under her eyes. She could see under her nightgown that her arms were thin instead of toned, and felt at her abdomen and realized her ribs were easy to find. Weatherall was right – she was in a state. She needed to recover.

... She had recovered enough. Merde, a delay before she had even started.

"Very well," she said, handing the mirror back. "Seven months? November then. Let us see where we are by November."

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**July 14, 1790**

Arno left his small room and moved with practiced, silent steps to the galley. Cosette and Urbain - Fabre - were at their usual table. No sign of Pontmercy today, but that fancy green coat had shown less and less now that his bookshop was getting off the ground. Breakfast was café au lait and - the increasingly rare treat - a croissant. He grabbed two just because there was so little bread these days. Cosette was having bread and honey - also savoring the luxury, and Fabre was of course drinking café noir, no sugar or cream or anything else. He saw Arno's frown and lifted his cup in cheers, "I'll convert you yet," he said as he always did.

"What's on the docket today?" Arno asked.

"Depends if Bellec takes you topside again," Fabre said after a sip. "Don't think he will though, just saw him leaving a meeting with Mirabeau, so you might be off the hook."

Arno nodded, taking his seat and taking a bite large enough to engulf half his croissant.

"I do not understand why he still does it," Cosette said. "Monsieur Beylier has not taken me above ground except for that women's march last fall."

"Bellec said there's too much going on, that we have to bend the rules to get the results."

"You said that before," Cosette said, shaking her head. "I think he just wants to get drunk."

Arno... didn't disagree. Bellec had burgundy in his fist more often than not when he was dragged above ground before his "death" was complete. He said it was part of his cover but by the end of whatever mission they were on Bellec had to be nearly dragged back underground, and twice was so drunk Arno had to put him to bed. His teacher was adept at physical training - Arno had never known he could achieve the shape he was in - but forever assumed Arno somehow could magically understand the esoteric dribble of the brotherhood... the cult.
It wasn't as if he wasn't learning - all the work with Descartes and the other philosophes had been enlightening, to coin a phrase - he couldn't imagine himself ever going back to being a houseboy and not speaking up when something was being done. He could look back on his memories now and understand how wrong it was that the only way for him to earn money was to look over the accounts and find a way to save the money - Mirabeau's staff at his quarters all received a salary - something a shocked Cosette had to explain to him. With the Revolution going on above he felt he learned his lessons even more keenly - but there was some ethereal something that everyone expected him to understand that was always outside his grasp.

Mirabeau was the only one of the maîtres who seemed to understand. Even Quemar and Beylier and especially Trenet did not budge one inch when he asked how these invisible lines connected. Quemar would lead into an impassioned speech about law and Beylier would guide him to Cosette, but Bellec and Trenet, they just looked down their noses at him in disdain.

That he was raised by M. de la Serre did not help. More than once someone would come up and ask him for a "training duel," as an excuse to beat the senses out of him until he learned to duck and hit back. Bellec didn't even refute it: "You have to learn to fight somehow, merdeux, and I told you I wasn't going to pull punches."

It wasn't until Mirabeau had heard of the challenges - how Arno didn't know - that they came to a stop, and the Grandmâtre had hosted him at his domicile for the better part of two weeks for personal training (re: time to recover from his latest bout). The Master Assassin was hardly in his home for all the meetings with the assembly, but Arno could hear him come home in the wee hours of the morning and somehow that prickled the memory of his père tucking him in in the darkness. In the mornings he was guaranteed croissants and café au lait with the grandmâtre, as the old man always seemed to have energy.

"You have to know your own mind," Mirabeau would say. "You have to know what you agree with and what you don't, what is right and wrong, and have enough foresight to try and get it. You must always pursue your ideals, your virtues, so long as they don't harm others."

"Difficult to imagine hearing that from a man who orders the death of people," Arno had said.

"Ah, that's an irony men greater than I have queried. Our first true Mentor, Altaïr ibn' La-Ahad, wrote of those ironies. We have a copy of it somewhere, Grandmâtre Ezio Auditore da Firenze, once he reassembled the codex, had copies forwarded to all the Bureaus in Europe and East Asia. It's in Latin, of course, but by now you should be able to read it comfortably."

The memory made Arno smile at breakfast with Cosette and Fabre. La-Ahad had been the most difficult read yet, but he was slowly growing accustomed to the challenge and could break down esoteric works like that far quicker than when he had first started. At least someone in the cult was self-aware.

It was just... between the maîtres not explaining things to him and most of the brotherhood convinced he was a Templar spy... he had been reborn here, yes. He would still dream of that... that dream when he stalked a shadow and killed himself, killed the lackadaisical, irresponsible, failure - and it would affect him so deep in his heart... but then the day would start and he would still be the failure, still be the plant or the idiot and... how did any of this lead to the redemption he so craved?

"Arno," Maître Quemar said, walking over to their table. "Grandmâtre Mirabeau wants to talk to you. Cosette, you will be with me."

"Of course, Maître," Arno replied, stuffing his second croissant into his mouth and chewing
rapidly. Breakfast was meant to be quick but not this quick. He nearly choked on his café au lait, Fabre laughing grandly as Arno stood and moved down the overlarge tables and down the narrow hall to the stairs that lead to the observatory of the Sanctuary.

The observatory was the highest location of the Sanctuary without going above ground and clearly the oldest part of the Sanctuary. Stone have been removed and replaced with parquet floors and well-worn carpets, walls were wood with wainscoting and chair rails and covered with inlaid bookshelves. To the left were the grand stairs that lead to the Seine exit of the Sanctuary, and stout pillars coated in marble held up the paneled relief of the ceilings - dotted with chandeliers filled with candles, as well as candelabras to give a full sense of light even though they were underground. A dais held a giant globe of the known world with yet more books and scrolls and a map of every location anybody could think of, some with pins and strings, other with charcoal and encoded notes, others with rows and rows and rows of numbers. Arno moved to his right, passed the paintings and down three steps to the Council room itself. Even more bookshelves and the scent of worn leather, two fireplaces ensconced in expensive marble with busts of assassins prior - and most importantly - a circular table that had been split in half - three chairs at either semicircle, for the meetings with the maîtres. Though everything was richly made nothing was new, there was a sense of age, time, that this was accumulated pragmatically and slowly - it lacked a sense of austerity in vogue fashion and instead evoked a more timeless flair.

Sitting at one of the semicircle desks was Mirabeau, surrounded by papers as he always was. "Ah, Arno," he said, looked up as Beylier quickly departed. "Good. I have an assignment for you. One I think you would take to heart."

"And that would be?"

"Why, La Fête, of course."

Arno straightened, eyes doubling in size. "La Fête de la Fédération?" he asked. "I'll be… above ground?"

"Yes," Mirabeau replied. "As of yesterday, your 'death' is complete."

Nom de dieu… at last…! The revelation flooded Arno's brain, temporarily clogging his ears as emotions burned through him. He let out a hot breath, breathing deeply through his nose as he tried to master himself. He was free to be above ground… not only was he free to be above ground but now he was going to the Festival of the Federation…!

"Merci, Monsieur," he said, quickly bowing his head.

Mirabeau smiled, pleased. "You've demonstrated that you can blend into crowds, your climbing and lockpicking are beyond reproach, and given the events of two months ago you've more than proven you can handle yourself in a fight. Bellec will lead the missions and you are to follow directions. Whatever his faults, he is gifted at what he does and now he will have the freedom to send you out without being at your shoulder, so to speak. For today, many of us will be at the ceremonies - work with the Assembly, you understand." Mirabeau gave a self-deprecating smile. "I need to talk to the King about Lafayette regardless, and this will be as good a time as any. You and Bellec will be observers mostly. Unlike some of the other 'events' this year this one promises to be genuinely positive. There's still a lot of work to do with the constitutional monarchy, but the groundwork has been laid, and the feast will feed the people - and not just literally - but their hearts as well. The revolution is full of contradictions, as is our own Creed, but once their stomachs are full and their worries sated the worst will burn out of us. Then the real work can begin.

"For now, you will go the Bastille - I think it will do you good to see a dark place take part in
something positive. People from all over the country will be gathering there, and they will take a
tour of the city ending at the Champs de Mars, where the King and the Assembly will be."

"Not the Queen?" Arno asked.

"No, her house arrest is still ongoing, even if some of the restrictions have been lifted. I hope to
meet with her later today or tomorrow."

"I understand."

"For now, watch and take notes," Mirabeau said. "This is a prime opportunity for ne'er-do-wells to
sneak into a city already rife with unrest. Most of the bureau will be there, contact them only when
you need to. Go out to the Seine, Bellec will be waiting for you."

"I understand."

Mirabeau nodded, before standing stiffly. He leaned heavily on the table before offering another
lean smile. "Age and infirmity will be the death of me," he said smoothly.

"Non, Monsieur," Arno said quickly. "The brotherhood has too great a need of you."

"Ah," Mirabeau said as he straightened. "That's the first time you've called us a brotherhood and
not a cult. A miracle on a day of miracles, I'm sure."

Arno was bright red as he left the observatory, uncomfortably warm with such an innocuous
sentence. The cult was still a cult, and he was hardly a full member, even now with a complete
death, outside of Mirabeau and Cosette and Fabre - maybe Pontmercy. But having them... having
friends... That was not something he had at Versailles. Olivier, the Second Estate, people looked
down their noses at him. Most of the staff knew he was a favorite of the monsieur, and resented
him because of it. He was charming, certainly, and the women of the house liked him well enough
- but only to a point, because everyone knew about his feelings for Élise. The artisans in the town
might have liked him if he wasn't constantly cheating at cards to win back the watch, but he had
never really had... equals.

Even then, Cosette and Fabre and Pontmercy came from widely different backgrounds. Cosette the
daughter of a former slave, Fabre from the Court of Miracles before being recruited, Pontmercy
originally from Nice. They all had different levels of education, of intelligence, of physical
prowess, but somehow, they all accepted each other. Arno had never experienced anything like it.
He was... fond of them. Not the same as with Élise or M. de la Serre, they weren't family, but there
was... a camaraderie there, a closeness that made him stay even when the others challenged him or
the maitres looked down on him or Bellec yet again called him "petit merdeux."

"Brotherhood" was... perhaps a strong word, but "cult" was no longer appropriate. He wondered
when that had changed.

Bellec was where Mirabeau said, down the grand staircase and the main hall, at the Seine exit. He
leaned against the iron gate, arms crossed and hair as oiled and unkempt as always.

"Heard you're no longer a novice, merdeux," he said, inclining his head. "Let's go."

... Of course Bellec wouldn't say anything. Arno chaffed but said nothing. He had no right to be
resentful of Bellec, the man had broken him out of the Bastille and given him a place to stay and
had trained him. The old dog had said day one that he would not pull his punches, and Arno had to
remind himself that verbal slings and arrows were a part of life. He needed to be better.
They exited and walked up the wharf's stair to the tip of Île Saint-Louis, passed the run-down café and to the nearest bridge, moving first north and then east, eventually merging to Rue Saint-Antoine and making their way to the Bastille.

It was gone.

… What?

Arno looked at the empty plaza, lost as to where the imposing towers, were. He turned around, walking around the boulevard, and finally recognizing the roof their tiny window always saw. He threw a glance at Bellec, wondering what had happened, and the scarred man shook his head slightly, silencing him, before giving a subtle gesture to go up to the roof. Arno followed his teacher to a narrow alley and then up a downspout, hands well accustomed to finding handholds when he and the other novices practiced climbing Notre Dame in the moonlight. He moved on silent feet to the roof that had been his landmark. The rain made is slippery, but July shower warm and humid.

"What happened?" Arno asked.

"The Revolution, merdeaux," Bellec said. "Watch. Here come the fédérés now."

There, beyond where the ancient structure had been, was a swell of people and banners. Arno squinted in the grey light, mentally counting - easily over fifty… possibly a hundred banners, all with symbols of the different provinces in France. Fédérés, National Guards, from all over the country had arrived to celebrate the year anniversary of the revolution. Arno was amazed as they marched up to the worn away location, and from their vantage point Arno saw what could best be described as an altar. He squinted more, praying for fireworks and feeling his senses expand, pops of color drawing out the details.

"Are those… chains?" he asked, incredulous.

Bellec nodded. "And restraints and other toys recovered from the Bastille. Whoever oversaw tearing the place down had a sense of poetry to him."

"I don't understand."

"It's all theater, petit merdeux. The Bastille was a symbol of everything wrong with the ancient regime, so they broke in to give them what for - only for them to realize we were treated pretty damn good for prisoners. Now they have this place, they want it to be a win, but they don't know how to market it to everyone else. Turn it to a city militia post? Preserve it as a monument? Then Mirabeau, monarchien that he is, swoops in and symbolically starts to tear it down, and the rest is history. Damn happy we got those etchings when we did. I wouldn't have been able to come back for them otherwise. See there?" he asked, jutting his head in one direction.

Arno followed his gaze and saw several stalls of vendors selling their wares: mostly food and wine of course, but also trinkets of some kind. "Relics of freedom," Bellec explained, then turned to spit his disdain before continuing. Rain made his hair look even worse. "Whoever got paid to take down the Bastille is still making money by selling it off. For a revolution over the betterment of man they sure send mixed messages."

Arno frowned as the fédérés continued marching through the former site of Arno's imprisonment. They were almost to their roof, some looking up and waving in the rain. Bellec returned the wave, just as cheery, and Arno had to follow suit after a beat. "What are you saying?"
"Merde, merdeaux, you never think. People are making money off of this revolution. How does that look good?"

"But why would that matter?" Arno countered. "They're almost done writing the constitution, that's what the papers are saying, that means that soon we'll see a true improvement of the country. The good times are already coming, isn't that enough?"

Bellec said nothing, spitting again. "Come on," he said after a pause. "Let's get a closer look."

Arno followed Bellec back down to the street level, both of them adjusting the buttons on their coats and cuffs of their sleeves - Bellec running his hands through his hair and Arno retying his to look more militaristic. Bellec coughed once, twice, and then seamlessly merged into the march, Arno following suit. The banner closest to him was the symbol of Bourge - Arno didn't know a lick about the central province but listened to the accents and practiced mimicking it under his breath in case he needed it. The people around him were talking happily - honored to be chosen to travel all the way to Paris - if it was two for every hundred and with so many flags everyone had a keen sense of solidarity that so many people were doing the same things as them. Someone asked how many flags there were since he couldn't count, and the reply was over eighty. They marched through Rue Saint-Antoine and then Rue Saint-Denis, passing l'Hôtel de Ville, the seat of the city's government and soon to be the seat of the country's government, many supposed, and were cheered in every window, every alley. It was a raucous cheer at l'Hôtel de Ville, the plaza filled with men and women, waving flags of their own or standing on lampposts to get a better view of the Guard as they marched passed. Tricolor cockades were everywhere, and after Rue Saint-Denis was Rue Saint-Honoré. Everyone around Arno was pointing, sometimes waving as women swung handkerchiefs and men cheered. Several sat on the roofs even in the pouring rain just to see the march - though Arno recognized the distinct hunch of his fellow cultists when two of them moved to go below. They almost made it to Tuileries, the royal palace in the city, and several wanted to drift off and see what wealth of that magnitude looked like, but the captains of the different sectors clearly kept their men in line, and Arno and the others moved south to the Seine.

There was no bridge big enough to handle the different departments of the guards and the Parisians who were going to the fête, and so several boats and been lined up and moored, gangplanks and the like connecting one to another to make a temporary bridge across the river. No one fell into the river, the ships' respective captains helping the provincial men to navigate slippery or dangerous parts of the crossing.

On the other side of the Seine was the Champs de Mars - a newly constructed parade grounds for the military academy that had also been created. The field had massive earthen stands already filled to capacity, even in the rain. At the far end of the field was a massive tent Arno could just make out, and beyond that a triumph arc, but right in front of them was an altar and a priest that the departments walked up to, taking their respective places on the green. It would be a while yet before everyone filed in, and a touch on the small of his back told him that Bellec thought it was time to go. Arno merged with a crowd still marching to their place and just… drifted away, meeting up with Bellec at the base of one of the stands where he could hear singing:

"Ah! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira

"Par les flambeaux de l'auguste assemblée,

"Ah! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira

"Le peuple armé toujours se gardera.

"Le vrai d'avec le faux l'on connaîtra,
"Le citoyen pour le bien soutiendra.

"Ah! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira

"Quand l'aristocrate protestera,

"Le bon citoyen au nez lui rira,

"Sans avoir l'âme troublée,

"Toujours le plus fort sera!"

Arno listened to the lyrics with intense interest: "Ah! It'll be fine, it'll be fine, it'll be fine! By the torches of the august assembly: Ah! It'll be fine, it'll be fine, it'll be fine! An armed people will always take care of themselves. We'll know right from wrong, the citizen will support the Good. Ah! It'll be fine, it'll be fine, it'll be fine! When the aristocrat shall protest, the good citizen will laugh in his face, without troubling his soul, and will always be the stronger!"

Those were bold lyrics to sing when the aristocrats were right there in the stands. Arno realized just how far the revolution had come: that Thirds like him could sing something like that and not suffer some kind of recompense. He'd been underground for almost a year (mostly) and so much had changed so fast. The Bastille was gone, the ancient regime was gone, the old ways were gone.

… M. de la Serre was gone.

… His father was gone.

The changes were so rapid as to be hard to follow, and Arno wondered if he had changed too, if he really had killed the failure in him. He had yet to test himself, yet to see if he could right the wrongs he had committed, yet to see if redemption was even possible. But if it was… if it really, really was… Élise… could she…?

"Do you think," Arno started to ask before he shut his mouth.

"Spit it out, merdeux," Bellec said, wiping rain and hair from his face.

"Do you think we can ever go back?" Arno asked.

Bellec looked at him, gaze narrow and inscrutable as it always was. "Who would want to go back?" his teacher countered. "Look at where you came from, boy: you were a slave in the house you grew up in, not even a paycheck to your name, forced to get into trouble to get any money for yourself - so they could enforce the stereotype they'd created for you. Your education and your mind were squandered, you had no hope of being anything other than a houseboy and deliberately held back from everything that could have made you great. Look at them," he gestured to the crowds. "They're all like you were: ignorant, uneducated, trying to step into a larger world and with no damn idea what to do. Damn what Mirabeau says, this revolution will take years because everyone here has to start from scratch the same way you did. Go back? You're outside the caves, boy, why would you want to go back to looking at shadows?"

Arno frowned, looking out to the crowds. That was true, perhaps, but… M. de la Serre, Élise… He missed them both dearly. One he could have back, if only he proved himself worthy. Surely that was a noble goal…? But he knew better than to ask Bellec - one mention of his beloved's name and his teacher would duel him himself, beating him to the ground thrice over to make him forget the "damn Templar slut."
The mass was said by a bishop, Arno recognized the accoutrements, and afterward he saw Lafayette stand and address the crowds.

"We swear to be forever faithful to the Nation," he shouted, "to the Law and to the King, to uphold with all our might the Constitution as decided by the National Assembly and accepted by the King, and to remain united with all French people by the indissoluble bonds of brotherhood!"

Everyone repeated the oath dutifully, some crying as they did, moved by the festival. Bellec had another burgundy in his hand and was taking a very long draw, cynical to the last. Arno took the vow under his breath, hand in his pocket gripping the watch: faithful to the Nation, united with the French people, bonds of brotherhood. He might not belong with the cult, but he belonged to France, and that had to mean something, and Arno closed his eyes and felt the pulse of the people around him, felt the power of the moment. He breathed in deeply through his nose, and for a brief moment he was in his dream again, killing the part of himself that was derelict of his duties. Yes. He could do this. There was a connection from that to this - Mirabeau was right: The Bastille had been erased, so other things could be erased as well - including his mistakes.

He opened his eyes and everyone was looking to the far end of the parade grounds, to the tent. He stood on his toes, could just barely see someone stepping out from - the King!

"I," Louis said, "King of the French, swear to use the power given to me by the constitutional act of the State, to maintain the Constitution as decreed by the National Assembly and accepted by myself!"

Everyone cheered, roused to see the king support the revolution, everyone noting that he had changed his title: no longer King of France and Navarre, he was King of the French - more closely aligned with the people, a wonderful gesture from the Second Estate to show their support. As the cheering subsided the hated queen also came out, lifting the Dauphin onto her shoulders. "This is my son," she announced, "who, like me, joins in the same sentiments."

Arno remembered the scared young woman, barefoot and desperate for a bath to compose herself, and marveled that she could smile and make such an announcement.

"Don't get swept up in the emotion, merdeux," Bellec muttered, cuffing him on the back of the head. "I see it on your face, a pretty presentation and you're swept off your feet. You never think.

What words did the Queen use?"

Arno blinked. "What do you mean?"

"She didn't declare anything. She just said she agreed with the sentiment. That woman is universally hated by the people as the symbol of extravagance and austerity. After everything she's been through - after what you saved her from - she said the bare minimum to keep herself alive just a little bit longer. Nothing is true, petit merdeux, and that includes spectacles like this."

Arno pursed his lips and risked disrespect: "Do you think anything good will come of the revolution?"

"Blood, merdeux. A lot of blood."

A week later Marat of the L'Ami du peuple, called for the immediate execution of six-hundred aristocrats to save the revolution.
Yeah, that tiny little multiplayer where you're escorting two women to one place and sabotaging canon? It might of gone just a liiiiiittle bit different in real life.

There's a lot to talk about in this chapter. First: Versailles is not a good place for Arno to be, for obvious reasons later in the game. But also, we start to see that he's formed a little clique, and that they're going to look out for him as they can. He is gaining a support group as Élise violently loses hers.

Second: Élise. In keeping with the theme of mental health, though we don't say it outright, she suffers some symptoms of clinical depression. She spends seven months locked away in her own head, no energy and - most importantly - no emotion. She is numb and knows that something is wrong with her but can't understand what. There is personal experience here, one of us had that exact same thought before we sought help, but that's a story from other Author's Notes. Élise by contrast, lives in a world where there isn't a lot of understanding of this kind of sickness. La Salpêtière is only just getting two doctors who famously take the chains off the insane and talk to them. Without proper treatment, Élise has to find motivation to go on living wherever she can, as we see here.

She's also a little (a lot) emotionally cut off. She didn't even recognize Brunel was confessing his love, and that kind of ignorance will come back at her later in the fic.

Third: Arno has bad luck with caretakers. Though he will never actually recognize it - de la Serre kept him financially dependent on his good graces, which is all levels of f**ked up, Olivier was condescending to the point of abusive, and Bellec is the literal definition of abusive. As we will say many times: Arno needs a hug. As twins who read fanfiction where abuse is attempted to be written about, let us speak from personal experience: the worst part of abuse are the good times, the moments where one gets one's emotional needs met, because it complicates the relationship as one tries to work out how the good and bad parts work together. Bellec has it in him to say a kind word, but in the end he wants Arno to be something he isn't and every time Arno fails to meet those expectations, Bellec tears into him either physically with the challenges or verbally with the derision of Arno's mental faculties. More on that later.

Fifth: History! Huzzah! We got both the Women's March to Versailles in all its imperfect glory and also the only happy moment of the entire revolution: the Fête de la Fédération. Arno's favorite song comes up, and we realize that the Bastille has no business being on the game map because it was destroyed in pretty short order after it was stormed.

Next chapter: Café Théâtre
December 1, 1790

The ensuing months were a blur for Arno. He was outside almost daily as an apprentice, following mostly Bellec but sometimes Fabre or one of the other full Assassins. He visited Pontmercy in his new bookshop on the north side of the Seine, near Rue Saint-Honoré, usually during one of his jobs as a courier. His duties varied day by day: sometimes he was a messenger, sometimes he helped an Assassin by tailing someone and reporting their destination, sometimes he was up in the middle of the night opening locks for an Assassin to look for specific documents, sometimes he was at a printing press learning how to make forgeries.

He read about Marat and Desmoulins being sued for the cries of revolutionary violence, and read about how justices of the peace would replace the Second Estate from presiding over legal matters in courts of law. He read about Necker - who had called the Estates General and started the revolution to begin with, be removed from the post of Minister of Finance in disgrace and read with disgust that the Assembly had agreed to reaffirm the institution of slavery - he sat with Cosette well into the night as she cried over the setback. He saw the fleur-de-lys replaced with a red, white, and blue flag; replacing the symbol of the French people and monarchy. He read about the plan to make clergy members take a vow of loyalty to France instead of Rome, to ensure that the church wouldn't abuse its power against the interests of its own people, and read about how many clergymen would not take the vow.

It felt like for every step forward there was a step back, and though Arno was relieved to finally move about the city, he did not yet have a direction, and he was frustrated that for all his progress he had yet to truly accomplish anything.

He was once again summoned to the observatory at breakfast, and Mirabeau was there with Maître Trenet.

"Apprentice," she said, voice always cold as she stood.

"Madame," he offered, bowing his head. She left without acknowledging the respect, briskly walking away.

"Do forgive her," Mirabeau said, "Circumstances beyond her control have made her as she is, and only four people know the full story."

"Ça ira, Monsieur," Arno said, adding a charming grin.

Mirabeau laughed. "I do enjoy your humor, Arno, when you choose to show it. Well, the Madame and I have found a position for you."

"A position?"

"Yes, a cover, if you prefer. Your friend Pontmercy runs a bookshop, correct? Well, now you, too, have been secured employment."

Arno blinked. "Oh. I had not thought..."
Mirabeau gave a good-natured smile. "You thought you would live down here forever? Non, child, this is only for Novices and Apprentices who are not placed, or others who do best without a center of operations like Monsieur Fabre. You will be close by, at a café above ground on Île Saint-Louis. It's been open since the late fifties, but has fallen to other cafés in the city. You will be steward there; your task is to help Madame Gouze rebuild its reputation and make it an intelligence network. As steward you have greater freedom to move about the city and about the societies as you order supplies from both high and low locations. Madame Gouze will be in charge of hiring new staff and arranging the entertainment and be the public face, as it were. It will make an easy cover as you do more specific errands for us, and there is an entrance to the café from here in the sanctuary."

"In other words, I'll be kept on a short leash," Arno muttered.

Mirabeau seemed to hear him, because he frowned. "Not at all, boy, whatever gave you that idea?"

Arno gulped, fright driving him to silence. Only Cosette had heard every negative thought he'd had about the brotherhood.

Mirabeau seemed to sense his thoughts however, and stood up on stiff legs, limping over to him and placing a hand on his shoulder. "I know," he said gently. "And I understand how it looks. We're not keeping you on a leash as you insinuate, we're waiting. You have asked many of us how all the things we teach connect, and none of us answer, because that is an answer that we all arrive at on our own, in our own time. Your experiences will teach you the Creed, your missions and your friends and the people you meet. When you can at last recite the Creed, you will see a remarkable change."

Arno wondered if he would ever be that lucky. He nodded anyway, grateful for words from the only kind man in the whole of the cult.

"Well, then, go upstairs."

Arno cocked his head to the side, uncertain how to go "upstairs" if he had never seen the entrance. Mirabeau chuckled, limping along and leaving Arno to follow: down the grand staircase and around one of the twelve-foot tall statues. Hidden behind it was a rather narrow crevice that lead to a door. Mirabeau opened it, hobbling in and giving space for Arno to so the same. He nodded before going back below ground.

Beyond the door was a staircase, old and well-worn but also well maintained. At the top of the steps was another door, and beyond was what he assumed was his assignment. The floor was a blue and white stone tile, old and poorly maintained - what looked to be years of dirt and muck and boot prints littered the tile and pushed against the molding that met the floor. The walls were bare of art and decoration, and when he moved right and down the hall he found a dining room: seating covered in burlap to protect whatever was underneath, chairs askew, wood floors again grimy and unclean, ceiling soot covered from candle light. Area rugs under the table smelled of rotten rood, painting touch ups were necessary everywhere, and crates stacked on the table. He backed up and reversed his steps, going the other way and seeing what could pass for a grand foyer, if the rugs weren't worn to brown and covered in leaves. Walls were dingy and clearly not cleaned in at least a year, possibly more. His eyes traced up well made stairs and an admittedly beautiful bannister, but he didn't go up, instead following the faint sounds of sweeping.

The tile abruptly changed from stone tile to dark wood - again worn, the planks were down beyond their stain, and more faded area rugs, temporarily pushed aside as a small wisp of a girl held a flat-headed broom and tried to sweep - her bucket of water and method just swishing wet dirt around. The service girl was below Arno - the main floor of the room was set down from two small steps
that lead to more tile, the perimeter aisle letting him walk around. The maid's area had several
tables and chairs – little more than bare, worn, ill kept wood, aged, and made to look poor and
unkempt. On the far side of the room were booths, the upholstery dated and torn. The booths were
only half the wall, the other dedicated to a bar that was light on... everything.

At the bar was a woman in an intricate green dress that was head and shoulders above the
establishment she was standing in. Her hair was intricately pinned, and a small hat with artfully
placed feathers that arched over her face. She turned, her lips were full and slightly pouty.

"Something I can help you with?"

Arno looked around. "What is this place?" he asked. "Is this my assignment?"

The woman head tilted back, recognition painting her features. "Ah, you must be the new steward.
Dorian, I believe it was?" Arno nodded. "Welcome to Café Théâtre, monsieur. I am Madame
Gouze."

"Enchanté, madame," Arno responded with a polite bow.

She nodded in return. "Perfect angle. Straight back. Lowered gaze. I see why the maîtres thought
this was a perfect fit for you. You were a steward before this?"

"Non, madame," he replied.

"Well, you worked somewhere before the Brotherhood picked you up. We'll discuss the details
over café au lait. I hope you don't mind. Our cook just moved back to Austria. He wasn't one of us
regardless, and honestly, he was a terrible cook. The hard times hit all of us, even we in the
Brotherhood. Unless next year's crop is good, things will get even harder. I assume you came
through the cellar? Less flashy than walking through Sainte-Chapelle, but we own the building and
as steward you will have to make sure we can afford it. Our intelligence network ran out of here,
but in the last twenty years everything has gone downhill."

Mme Gouze moved behind the dusty counter and began her work. The coffee was shockingly good
given the state of the cafe.

"Now, what experience did you have before your Death?"

Arno pursed his lips, remembering M. de la Serre. If the madame didn't know his connection to the
Templars he would rather keep it that way. "I was a house boy."

"Oh, you were more than that," Mme Gouze said, turning her head slightly to see passed her array
of feathers. Only then did Arno realize there was an old burn scar, just above her temple, hidden by
the hair and hat. "A house boy doesn't learn manners like yours unless you were more than a house
boy."

"I was..." Arno frowned. "I'm not sure what I was. The family took me in after my père... passed
away. The monsieur, he would take me hunting and riding, Élise would take me to her parties to
keep her from being bored. They were like family to me."

Mme Gouze nodded, spoon swirling her coffee. "What kinds of duties did you have?"

"Whatever Olivier thought would make me suffer," Arno said, voice bitter.

"Can you read and write? How is your hand?"
"Yes, and yes. My handwriting isn't artful, but it is legible."

"Let's take a look."

For the next hour the *madame* interviewed Arno. She studied his handwriting and had him look over sample ledgers, she asked about supplies and how to know if they were good, how to handle deliveries, how to handle horses, all the little chores Arno did about M. de la Serre's home. He answered as thoroughly as he could, though he knew he was weak in several areas - the most important of which was finances. He had a decent understanding of numbers when he was forced to go over accounts to save money, but those numbers were meaningless if not faced day-to-day, and it wasn't like he had any idea what it was like to receive pay.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Mme Gouze said. "Experience is the greatest teacher, and you know enough to be a good steward."

"If I may," Arno said, shifting his weight. "How can I help? A public establishment needs an Intendant, rather than a steward."

"In the old days, we had both," the *madame* replied. He hadn't seen her scar since the first time, his eyes kept darting to her temple but the feathers distracted him - exactly as they were supposed to, he realized belatedly. "The steward took care of supplies and staff; the intendant took care of customers and entertainment." She sighed. "All the important work was in Versailles, and for a while the Templars were only ever there. For the last year though we are in truce with those rats, so work went even further downhill. Now that the government is moving here, though… I'll keep an ear out for any opportunities that come up. We'll have to renovate, of course, we've been fighting the disrepair ever since we purchased the building and it's all built up."

"I'm not exactly flush with coin just now," Arno countered, voice flat.

"More than you think," Mme Gouze replied. Then she blinked. "Oh, you might not know, since they didn't pay you in Versailles. You've been collecting a stipend ever since we picked you up. It's been under lock and key for the last year so you would have a nest egg when you were finally found a position."

"I… what?"

"There's a bank down the street, he's one of ours. Go in and ask to set up an account with the Auditore branch; they'll know what that means and look up your name. I doubt it's very big, we can't pay as much as we used to, but any revenues the café generates will be yours to do as you see fit. The more improvements we make…"

"The more revenue. I understand."

"Quite." The *madame* sighed, shaking her head. "I have dreams for this place… But. First things first. Let's see how much you've collected."

Mme Gouze escorted Arno to the bank; as soon as Auditore was mentioned they were escorted to a back room to see a man Arno didn't recognize nod to them both. There were more *lire* in Arno's account than he'd had his entire life, he had to suck in a breath to realize he had been *paid* for the last year, and marveled at how much he had even as the *madame* clucked her tongue and muttered that it wasn't much. Back at the Café Théâtre they looked over the accounts more thoroughly. Arno struggled to keep track of all the individual numbers but he picked up the gist quickly, and summations had always been easy for him.
"So, steward, where do we start?"

"I can hardly guess," Arno said, blinking and rubbing his eyes.

"I'm hardly expecting a miracle in less than a day," the madame said generously. "It's enough to bring you up to speed."

Arno almost said something bitter but was cut off when a booming voice came from beyond the café proper. "Charlotte! I'm back!"

Mme Gouze turned a bright shade of pink before standing. "In here, Monsieur Grisier!" she replied, her tone much softer. In came a painted man, not as dark as Cosette but unmistakable nonetheless, of an impressive build and a light bounce to his steps. He swept right up to the madame and kissed her on both cheeks. Only then did he turn to see Arno, sitting in the booth.

"Ah!" he said. "Here for a fight, monsieur?"

Arno blinked as Mme Gouze hid her face behind her hand. "... Come again?"

"A training match. An Assassin can never be too well-prepared and it's about the only service we have left that's regular - and we can't charge!"

"Bellec has been training me," Arno said slowly, still trying to catch up with this man's energy.

"Ah, then you've just made apprentice then? You've proven good enough to join the senior classes then. Come upstairs, I want to test your mettle before deciding where you'll best be placed. Charlotte, kindly excuse us."

"Don't hurt him too much," the madame said, still bright pink. "He's our new steward."

The man, Grisier, stilled slightly, taking Arno in again, and nodded more seriously. "I understand, Charlotte. Assessment only. Come, monsieur, upstairs."

Arno followed broad shoulders out of the café and down the hall he had begun in. He eyed the doors to the Sanctuary and the rundown dining hall before going upstairs, empty weapon racks hanging on the walls that needed to be re-plastered. The wood floor was again dirty and unkept, with the deep scratches of footwork and more unusable rugs. Grisier walked across to a small table and chair and pulled out a pair of swords. Without so much as a preamble he took a stance and looked at Arno expectantly.

"... Isn't our mandate to work in the shadows? Stay undetected and all that?"

Grisier smirked. "Call this the fallback options. Better to practice here in safety than pick a fight with ruffians in the streets, non?"

"Or the other cult members?"

Grisier straightened immediately, lowering his sword. "That was you?" he asked, suddenly serious.

Arno took a deep breath through his nose and took a stance. "Let's just get this over with," he said, bitter. His reputation preceded him it seemed, which meant this man knew about the challenges and had probably formed some kind of negative opinion. His luck with the cult seemed to still be holding. Better to get his defeat over with and go back to the madame.

Grisier resumed his stance and advanced on a straight line. The bout lasted maybe ten minutes,
Arno conceding defeat four separate times as Grisier made a move for his neck or back or shoulder, fatal blows if he didn't stop. "Enough," he said finally. Arno had worked up a sweat by then, even down to his waistcoat as he was, and gratefully pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his brow. Grisier had a light sheen to him as well as he took the swords and replaced them.

"Well," he said. "You're not a master swordsman like myself, but you clearly belong in the advanced courses."

Arno blinked. "Sorry, what?"

Grisier repeated himself. "You've clearly been in training since you were a boy under someone who knew what he was doing. Your stance and form are perfect; most street thugs won't know what hit them."

Arno blinked again. That was... the exact opposite of what Bellec had been telling him since the Bastille. "What about looking like a training manual?"

"What about it?" Grisier asked. "I hope you don't mind me using you to demonstrate technique to some of the others."

"... but doesn't that make me easy to predict?"

"Only if you're up against someone with more than a decade of training. Honestly, that's not as big a concern as it used to be. Fewer and fewer people know swordsmanship these days, guns are far more effective. You'll beat most people you face in the streets, and with the truce of the Templars any chance of a challenge is just about gone now."

"I'm sorry, truce?"

Grisier nodded. "You wouldn't know being underground. Mirabeau made a truce with the Templar leader, de la Serre, until the revolution was over."

Arno stilled, hearing M. de la Serre's name so suddenly. His mind flooded with that night, the stagger, the blood, the name Sivert... a hand touched his shoulder and he snapped to attention.

"Are you all right?"

Arno tried to pick the best words: "Is the truce still in effect? Now that Monsieur de la Serre is dead?"

Grisier nodded. "I don't know what you were told growing up, Dorian, but we are honorable people. Mirabeau has kept up his end of the bargain, and if you are any indication the Templars will have as well."

"... me?"

"Nom de dieu, what have they been telling you underground? You're the novice that came from a Templar family that rose to every challenge that was thrown to you - even when it wasn't right or fair. That last bout that Mirabeau had to intervene? I read the reports - you have a heart and a sense of principle, and that's very rare in this world. That's why Charlotte and I asked for you."

Wait, wait... someone asked for him?

"Augustin..." Both men turned to see the madame at the top of the stairs, artful hat off and her old scar visible. "Dinner is ready."
"Of course, Charlotte. Come, Dorian. We'll eat with little Célestine - she's not one of us so keep your guard up - and we'll talk more in the morning."

After eating, Arno was escorted to his room, little more than an old storage room with a bed and boxes. The fireplace was covered and empty of wood, a bucket with a wash board slimy and the clawfoot tub once again worn with a ring about the middle. The far side was little more than crates and old paintings, green wallpaper torn and again, the damn floors... Mme Gouze demurred about the state, saying she would get the serving girl to help clean it out, and Grisier explained when the next training class would be. Arno slept under warm blankets and soft pillows - a surprise given everything else - and woke before sunrise. He lay under the covers, the air beyond the warm confines chill. He hadn't slept well, his mind full of every criticism Bellec made and the sudden flood of praise from Grisier and Gouze. He was sure it was a set-up, somehow: make him feel good before they turned it around. He groaned at the thought, remembering how hearing that praise had felt, how warm it made him.

… Sweat from the bout, surely.

Arno groaned and finally got out of bed. He placed a bucket of water on the fire to warm it for a bath before sliding back under.

So much had happened in a year: the loss of M. de la Serre, the Bastille, the loss of Élise hurt the most. She was his world, and she had shut him out so thoroughly he had nowhere left to go but the brotherhood. The brotherhood was hardly Versailles, but it was all he had left, and it was the only place he could fix the mistakes he had made. Arno had understood that he couldn't go after M. de la Serre's killers while he was "dead" underground, but now he was free to traverse the city, and still he had not had the chance to seek his redemption. He reached back, recalling the name: Sivert. He did not know the second man, but surely even catching Sivert would help erase the black stain on his ledger, undo his most irresponsible act.

But instead… he was a steward. Like Olivier.

Well… not like Olivier.

That thought made him close his eyes. This was all he had. He had to make it work. If he was going to be a steward then he would strive to be a damn good steward. Yes. That had to be something.

It had to be enough.

He got up and poured the water into the tub. It burned at first with his cold toes but he warmed up quickly and washed as best he could before dressing: brown culottes and white hose, two waistcoats for the weather, and a dark blue coat. He looked at his hidden blade, extended it, wondered when he would use it again. Missions with Bellec had forced him to learn its use but he could hardly say he was comfortable with the weapon, nor could he say he understood how it held such weight in the brotherhood. He shook his head and instead moved around the boxes to the roof - as overgrown and unkept as the rest of the place, but he leaned out on the rail as the grey sky started to bleed color. Like fireworks.

Père...

Arno took a deep breath of the chill air, holding it in his chest until it was warm, and looked down to the main driveway of the café. His eyes could trace around where the carriages would pull up and drop off customers, into the grand hall that currently wasn't overly grand and then to the café
The weeds needed to be pulled up, and some of the cobblestones needed to be straightened - puddles indicated an uneven surface. The facade was in good shape, beyond weeding the outside was in good repair for the time being. There wasn't enough money for the interior... the exterior... but how to even draw them in? There were so many cafés how could anyone distinguish themselves? No one had bread and that would be an instant draw, so what could they do that was unique? It had to be cuisine... He turned the problem over in his mind, leaning his elbows on the ice-cold rail of the roof, the sky slowly pink and purple as the sun rose.

A cook. They needed a new cook. But not a traditional cook. Different. Somehow different...

He was still working on the problem as he went back inside. With the sun rising and no cook to wake everyone with the smell of food, Arno built a fire and tried to decide what they could do for a quick breakfast. He looked through the cabinets and found the flour store - precious little indeed. Right, crêpes it was - hardly a breakfast but it would have to do. Eggs, butter, sugar, the precious flour, and he had a very small breakfast to put to plate as he grabbed a couple jars of jam. His three compatriots came down with the smell and ate silently, most still waking up slowly.

"All right," Mme Gouze said. "What's the plan for today?"

Arno nodded. "Full inventory," he said, "And broken down in a way that all of us can understand, how long it will all last and how much it would cost. We also need to start cleaning the main hall. If we're to have guests then where they eat needs to be presentable."

"Excellent ideas," Grisier said.

"We also need a cook."

"That goes without saying."

"Non, I mean a different cook," Arno said. "Something to make the food different. Unique. Maybe Spanish. Maybe Caribbean. Just different enough to keep people coming back. Flavor. We need a different flavor."

Mme Gouze leaned back. "That's an interesting idea," she said, mulling it over. "I don't know anyone. You? Monsieur Grisier?"

The master swordsman was rubbing his chin, head tilted slightly. "Not immediately, but the idea has only just been presented. I'll go out and see if my friends know anyone."

"And I will start the inventory."

"Then we will start the sweeping," Arno said, nodding.

The tiny serving girl, Célestine, blinked. "'We'?"

"Yes. We."

By midmorning Arno was once again down to his waistcoat, emptying out the umpteenth bucket of dirty water and refilling it and coming back inside. It had taken the entire morning, but the main hall floors had been swept, mopped, and hand washed all the way to the grooves. The worn rugs were on a clothesline, Célestine beating them with whatever she could find to shake what must have been decades worth of dirt and muck from them. The December air was cold, freezing the sweat on Arno almost as soon as he was outside, but then he was back in again, on his knees with a rag, pushing back and forth and back and forth - old rhythmic motions from when he was a child and the staff didn't know what kind of chores to give him without upsetting M. de la Serre.
chore was far easier now that he was an adult and in better shape - but his mind could still remember the simple motion, the sensation of movement, and the pleasant feeling it gave him as a boy.

Once the hall was clean, next was the café proper. Mme Gouze helped him move tables wherever there was space and it was once again the floors: sweep with a broom the worst dirt into corners or dustbins, soak everything in water, and then on the knees and sweeping the excess up in a rag and dumping it in the bucket of water. Empty, refill, repeat. He could still hear Olivier criticizing him, berating him over the smallest speck of dirt, and it made him work harder here, knowing he was starting so far behind. Célestine wasn't nearly as exacting, content to have lines of swept dirt here and there, and that was why she was beating rugs until he said otherwise. He needed to set the baseline first, and then instruct her after the fact. Slight imperfections were easier to notice and to repair than this mess, and he needed the worst of it taken care of first.

The next day was the laundry - every drapery, curtain, towel and rag were soaked in soapy water, running them over wash basins to scrub out stains while the women had needle and thread to make basic repairs. Arno could see the hint of fine material - the velvet drapes were high quality and needed better launderers than he to restore them to their original color, but even after soaking and sunning the area rugs and runners and carpets were beyond salvage. Nobody had the skills to clean the chimneys, and the kitchen was terribly smoky as a result.

Mme Gouze and Arno poured over the lists and accounts in the intendent's office, trying to figure out how much longer they could last. Breakfast used to be a full house, but with the grain shortages everyone suffered; lunch was only ever okay, and at night the place was deserted. Staff meetings were first thing in the morning, and in the evening the training room had half a dozen Assassins of varying age and ability working under Grizier. As promised, Arno was used to demonstrate form and technique, and faces Arno never recognized nodded or slapped him on the back, thanking him for the help. Afterwards was the advanced class, Arno and Fabre and two or three others usually sparring. Then at night Arno would go over accounts in his room and try to mull over the problem of the Café Théâtre and wonder what invisible expectation he needed to meet before he could start looking for Sivert.

The next day was pounding the streets and hoping Célestine could adequately keep floors clean as he shopped around the island looking for better deals from grocers and bakers and farmers. Everything was expensive - everything that was good, at any rate - and Arno remembered at Versailles when he would just make his purchases and leave rather than haggle. He also kept an ear out for cooks, as did Grizier when he was out and about, though he didn't find any when he did look.

He was looking at his list, making notes as he went in the chill air when a hand touched his arm. "Pardon, Monsieur," said a stooped man of simple clothes. "Can you read?"

"Oui, Monsieur," he replied.

"Ah! Bien! S'il-vous plaît, read this to us. My friend wants to know if they say anything about the Patriot's Whore. We haven't had a good story about her for months."

Arno blinked, a little surprised at the question. "Oui, Monsieur," he replied.

"Too bad," one of them said. "I wanted to hear what else she did with her legs. Some of the stuff
they report on is so... interestin'."

Arno held a flat gaze. "You realize some of these papers are not always... accurate?"

The man snorted and the other had a very specific look on his face. Arno decided not to examine where his hands were. "Slut deserves it," the first replied. "If you're gonna sleep with every revolutionary in the whole city it's only fair it gets to be publicized for all to read. Hey, you know where we can find her? I'll be a revolutionary for a good eight hours just to lay with that Théroigne de Méricourt!"

Arno had never heard of the name, and was about to shrug when inspiration struck. "Tell me," he asked, "If there was a place you could go to reliably have the papers read to you, would you go there?"

"'Course!"

"Merci," Arno said, handing the paper back to the lechers. He rushed through making the rest of his purchases and all but dashed back to the Café Théâtre. Mme Gouze helped him put the foodstuffs away but then Arno was out again, buying every paper he could find and taking them by the armload back to the café and up to his room on the second floor. There was little place to sit other than boxes, but he brought an oil lamp up with him and read every single one well into the night. There were over sixty papers he could find and each one had an idea or a stance of a gimmick or an opinion. Mostly all he could do was compare the stories and how they were covered. It was almost two a.m. when he was done, he collapsed to bed, realizing after the fact he had never wound the watch.

The next morning he walked right up to the madame. "I have an idea," he said by way of introduction. Grizier nodded and left for his own assignments, Célestine nowhere to be seen.

"You certainly sound it," the madame said.

"How many people can read here in the city?"

The madame frowned, tilting her elaborately pinned head. "I don't know."

"But everyone here wants to be a part of the revolution, correct? They want to be kept up to date? They want to know about events even if they can't read them?"

"... Yes. What are you suggesting?"

Arno held up the papers. "We read them. Every evening. People come for the café and eat whatever we can scrounge up for them and they can listen to the events of the day and feel caught up and knowledgeable about what's going on around them."

Mme Gouze straightened. "Of course. Of course! A free service for coming here. But what papers? There must be over a hundred of them."

"These," Arno said, spreading his selection from the previous night. "It's hard to know for sure, but these papers seem to be mostly factual."

"Hmm," the madame said, looking over the titles. "Not these two, but you have a good eye. We know some of the publishers, their hearts are in the right place. We'll also want Marat's paper, so we look like we're pro-revolution."

Arno looked up. "Aren't we?"
Mme Gouze gave a soft smile. "We're for the equality of men and women, the right for laws to be derived from reason, and for everyone to see that nothing is true and everything is permitted. We are not for revenge born of resentment, bloodletting for sport or satisfaction, or the inability to reach out to the other side. The revolution - for now - supports our goals, but many people find out that power is easily abused. That is why we have the Creed."

"What," Arno asked, a little derisive. "Cult rules promote world peace?"

The madame gave a mysterious smile. "Of a kind," she said with a subtle role of her shoulders. "We all learn it in our own time. But back to the point: add Marat to the list, not Desmoulins. You'll have to do the reading for now - Célestine can't read and they won't accept a woman updating them on events lest they all think I'm the next Théroigne de Méricourt, poor woman. We only have you and Monsieur Grizier and he is not pale enough to be taken seriously. That leaves you."

Arno gulped. "Me? Are we sure that's wise? Wasn't the whole point of my 'death' to ensure that I wouldn't be recognized?"

Mme Gouze smiled again, touching his arm gently. "You've been underground for over a year, and before that you were a prisoner in the Bastilles for months. You have a scar on your face and lines in your eyes that depict your experience. Your waist has narrowed and your shoulders have broadened, you look nothing like the de la Serre houseboy. Gone is the whimsy and the pleasure, no one could possibly recognize you unless they knew you intimately."

Élise...

"Have I really changed that much?"

"We all do," Mme Gouze replied, hand reaching up to touch the hat that hid her burn scar. "We rip out a piece of ourselves, or it has been ripped out of us, when we come here, and we are new people when our rebirth is complete. Before I came here I was nothing like I am now. And I paid for it bitterly. We've heard about you, Arno, in bits and pieces, since Monsieur Bellec found you. He dredged up every report on Charles Dorian the minute he returned from the Bastille, demanded to know how we lost track of his son, and got into quite a shouting match with Maître Mirabeau about how you ended up with the de la Serre - even though he wasn't Mentor at the time. What few accounts we found in Versailles said that you were charming, lazy, and flirted constantly with the marshallcy. Here you have been serious, diligent, and morose. For the last few days I have seen how hard you work, and how good you are at your work. Once you learn the Creed you will be remarkable."

Warmth flooded Arno's cheeks again, and he pursed his lips and said nothing, uncertain how to respond to such honest, sincere praise. Only M. de la Serre could make such a frank compliment, and even he had the edge of Arno never knowing his standing with the nobleman. Here Mme Gouze simply... simply said what was, and Arno wasn't sure how to take it.

That night he stood on the small stage, no candles to light him, and read the main articles of ten papers in slow, measured tones. The only people there were Cosette and Fabre and Pontmercy, but they all clapped at his presentation.

"Not bad, Arno," Fabre said, offering a cup of café for the parched man. "Your voice has just enough weight and carries well. I'll spread the word with my contacts during the next heist."

Cosette nodded. "I will too, once I have an assignment."

It was Pontmercy, however, who pulled Arno aside. "I know what it's like," he said, his usual air of
superiority absent. "To take over an establishment so suddenly. You've clearly done your homework, and I want you to know that you look like you will do fine. I've only had my shop a year but I can give you one piece of advice: accept the fact that you will be overwhelmed and instead delegate whenever you can. Never, never show that in front of the customers and the staff, save it only for the Brotherhood. Look me up when you can. I will listen. A lot of us will, because we've all been through it."

"I'm surprised, Marcel," Arno said.

Pontmercy shook his head. "I know my clientele, Arno. I know how I'm supposed to act. I play a part - we all do, once we're above ground - and I endeavor to play it well."

Two days later, the main theater of the café was serviceable, and Arno read the papers during the lunch crowd - if crowd was the right word. Nobody said a word except for a man and woman who came up and asked him two questions about one of the articles. He answered as best he could with his limited knowledge and they left afterward.

The evening, however was significantly more stressful, as Mirabeau himself swooped in with a contingent of the assembly.

"You see, Robespierre?" the Assassin Mentor was saying. "Freshly opened, still undergoing renovations, but I wanted to show you how the people find out about our good work. Here is Madame Gouze, it's her family that ran it I understand, is that right?"

"Oui, Monsieur," Mme Gouze said, completely transformed with a public face. Soft smiles and nods of the head were replaced with a wider showing of teeth, polite giggles and delicate gestures of the hand. It was still Mme Gouze, but somehow different… more… Arno didn't have the word. "My uncle ran the establishment as I understand it. I've only just come to Paris a few months ago when he passed. I hope to make it flourish again."

"Monsieur Mirabeau," the other man said. "This doesn't change the fact that you just ensured that only the rich will serve in the Guard, and that you spent the better part of the day preventing me from pointing that fact out. It's our job to argue a decree, even after it's been made. I fail to see how one café will change that."

"That's because you haven't seen the magic yet," Mirabeau replied.

Arno eyed the man, tall and dressed in finely tailored clothes, he cut a strong figure and wore spectacles with green glass in them. Arno didn't understand it at first until he walked by a candle and realized how green the man's eyes were. The man was attractive and knew it, and dressed accordingly. Arno disliked him immediately. Still, they ordered their café au lait, and Arno pulled out his newspapers and began reading them. Cosette was there, an obvious plant since she was sitting right up front and listening in rapt attention, but the familiar face made Arno feel at ease as he performed his duty. He read through his ten papers, focusing on the words and not once looking up to the Assemblymen. Cosette clapped eagerly when he finished: "Merci! Merci, monsieur!"

"Did you hear?" she said gleefully, "The Assembly said the clergy have to swear allegiance to France!"

"Don't see what good that will do," Fabre said artfully, sipping his drink. "They'll still hand over all our money to Rome."

"Non, not with the oath - you'll see! Loyalty to France will make them give the tithes back to the
people. I'll be able to feed my children!"

Arno quickly bit his lip and stepped off the stage, taking a moment in the dark to breath. Once composed, he stepped back out. Mirabeau was there with three other Assemblymen.

"You read the papers? Every day?"

"How many people do you receive? Mirabeau says you've just opened?"

"How do you know which newssheets to read?"

"One of the articles was wrong, we'll have to draft an addendum to clarify what we meant about that most recent bill…"

"More comfortable than listening to a seller standing on a crate…"

Arno was flooded with questions and comments and… noise. After so long in the quiet of the Sanctuary he wasn't quite sure how to react, but he smiled and nodded and answered to the best of his ability, remembering Pontmercy's advise. The last did not leave until almost midnight, and only then did he feel he could breath.

"That was good work," Grizier said, standing at Arno's shoulder. He jumped at the presence. "The classes were all talking upstairs, you presented well."

Arno looked to the dark-skinned man, exhausted and hungry and wondering what showing his face like that could gain. "Have I passed the test, then?" he asked. "Or is there another obstacle that will conveniently befall me?"

"What do you mean?"

Arno realized his mistake and turned away. He didn't want them to know about his greatest mistake, the failure that drove him to the cult in the first place. But, like Mme Gouze, Grizier was more perceptive than Arno was comfortable with. "You mean the killers of de la Serre? I don't know the details of the assignment, unfortunately. Charlotte might know."

"Not as much as he would like, Augustin," the woman in question replied. Her hat was off, something Arno was beginning to realize meant she felt free of the public façade. "We only have the name: Sivert. He was born in New France, and retired from governor of Saint Pierre and Miquelon last year. He is a smuggler and we suspect he was the financier of Haytham Kenway before Connor brought him peace. When the Americans started their war he was transferred to the Parisian Rite. We weren't sure what he was doing until Arno's interview. He already knows all of this."

Arno blinked. "Non," he corrected slowly. "Nobody told me anything."

Both stared at him. "Wait, wait," Grizier said. "You've been here over a year and no one's told you…" his head whipped to the madame. "Who would be in charge of that?"

"His teacher," Mme Gouze said. "Monsieur Bellec. Je suis désolé, Arno, I assumed you were apprised of this as soon as you made apprentice. Many come here because of a sin, and while they are being reborn we research the event as much as possible to give them closure. Yours was a special case, with the truce, but you should have been told once you made apprentice. To give you closure. Direction. Oh, Arno, I'm so sorry."

But Arno could barely hear her. All he really understood was that people knew.
January 3, 1791

Pierre leaned by a wall, watching with narrow eyes. Mirabeau sat with the others in the observatory in their split circular table, flooded with papers and books and notes, the warm candle light casting cheery shadows. "That's why we're so worried," Guillaume was saying, his dark skin almost a silhouette in the candlelight. "This is the third Templar body we've found that wasn't done by us. We need to know who this new player is and what their goals are."

"The money isn't in the usual places," Hervé added. "Their entire structure seems to be changing, all behind closed doors and meetings. They're raising funds, however, and are pulling from both the Second Estate and the First, and whatever they are planning will be big."

"Our best chance is a man named Arpinon," Sophie said, her voice as hard as it always was. "Low ranking Templar with aspirations, and the one most often described when extorting the other estates."

"Bellec, we charge you to go to the Conciergerie and to find there the Templar Arpinon. You will learn his secrets, and when you have done so, you will bring him peace."

"You realize what you're asking, right?" Pierre Bellec said. "You want me to kill a man for getting money out of the nobility."

"We want you to kill a man who is maneuvering behind the scenes to do something big - what we don't know," Mirabeau corrected. "In accordance with our tenants."

"And what will you do with the money they've been collecting?"

Mirabeau frowned as if Pierre had asked a stupid question. "We report the money to customs," he said, as if the answer was obvious. "So that they can redistribute the wealth the way the Assembly has decided on."

Which meant not at all. *Nom de dieu* Mirabeau was a diluted *cul* sometimes. Pierre simply nodded his head and turned.

"And one more thing," Mirabeau added. "Take young Arno with you. Having him participate in the halt of corruption will do him good."

*Merde.* Pierre didn't say anything, just kept marching out of the observatory and down the grand staircase. Stupid pompous.... And now he had to drag the *merdeux* into this. He needed a drink.

When Pierre had first seen the watch, Charles' watch, and realized who had held it, he had thought God had given him back a piece of the good times: when Charles was alive and the Brotherhood was *productive*. He had thought Arno Dorian would be just like his *père*, perceptive and quick-witted, solid and pragmatic. Pierre had thought he had found another maverick, another voice to question the council and demand they return to some of the older ways.

But Arno Dorian was not his father, and that pissed off Pierre more than sour burgundy.

The boy wasn't a *man* but a *boy*, clinging to whatever coattails he could and desperate for a pat on the head and a "good job!" for every little thing done. The *merdeux* whined about being called *merdeux*, thought life would let him catch his breath, wanted other people to do the thinking for him. Instead of the son of an Assassin he might as well have been given the son of a Templar. The boy was simpering and emotional and such a damned *woman* - and not an Assassin woman, who manned up like any true warrior. Pierre was confronted every day with the fact that Arno Dorian...
was not Charles Dorian, and the wasted potential was a punch to the gut every time the boy opened his mouth.

Pierre tried to bring out the potential, did everything under his power to make the merdeux think, really think, to understand the Creed the way he was supposed to since childhood. But blood didn't come out of a stone and Pierre could only do so much with rotten wood. And that damn bastard Mirabeau had taken a shine to the boy and wanted to coddle him. Bah. The boy needed to learn, really learn, just what the Templars were like and why they needed to be eradicated, and Pierre had no idea how to make him see.

Merde he needed a drink.

He went above ground and to Café Théâtre to collect the merdeux. The boy was wrapped up in an apron, on his knees cleaning the floor with the serving girl, giving instructions and demonstrating what she needed to do before getting up. He glanced at her before giving a charming smile. "What can I do for you, mon ami?"

"Got a job, merdeux. Need you for it."

The boy's face straightened out immediately, turning serious and nodded. "I understand. Let me get changed. Célestine, like I showed you, all right?"

"Oui, Monsieur."

Pierre glared at the girl after the boy went upstairs, frightening her away and giving him some peace. He wondered if the place had a wine cellar, and debated going below to see what the stock looked like. He shifted his weight, debating, when he saw a green dress sweep in. Charlotte, then, the spy master.

"Bellec," she said, voice as soft as ever.

"Madame," Pierre replied.

"A mission, I take it?"

"Yeah."

She nodded, a natural pause drawing out before she took a slow breath through her nose. "You're his teacher, n'est-ce pas?"

"Yeah."

She nodded again. "Why didn't you tell him what we knew about Sivert?"

Pierre frowned, surprised by the question. "Cause we don't know anything."

"We knew more than Arno did," she said, tone very careful. "All he knew was a name, he didn't even know Monsieur de la Serre was killed by a fellow Templar. He didn't know there was an investigation into the murder."

Pierre didn't reply. It wasn't her business how he tried to fix Arno, nor was it her place to say anything. Pierre would break the petit merdeux however he saw fit, that was his right as teacher, and the last thing that boy needed was anything to do with Templars unless it was to kill them. Pierre's greatest fear was the boy wouldn't have the stomach when the time came. He could kill smugglers and brigands easily enough, but didn't have an eighth of the blood-thirst necessary to kill
a Templar, and Pierre half expected the boy to freeze when the time came.

Charlotte eventually left, disapproving frown on her face, and the merdeux came back downstairs, in a blue surcoat.

"What's the mission?" he asked, all business.

"The mission is to get off your cul and follow me, merdeux."

"... I live to serve."

Disrespectful piece of merdeux. Pierre took off at a brisk jog, startling some people just outside and crossing the Pont Saint-Louis and to the Île de la Cité, taking to the roofs and slowly circling around Notre Dame and to the Palais de Justice. The Conciergerie was constructed in the tenth century and these days was just another prison. Bellec's cynicism noticed the irony of having a palace of justice right next to a prison and the message that sent. It was the perfect place for back alley deals and under the table bargaining - Pierre knew, because since it was above the Sanctuary the Assassins had used it more than once throughout history, it was a legend that the Assassin Tomas de Carneillon had hidden there leading up to the assault on the Temple where Jaques de Molay, the last public grandmaitre of the Templars, was arrested for heresy.

The main courtyard had three obvious guards, obviously there to stake out the location and keep it secure for the deal with Arpinon. Pierre glanced over to the merdeux, and the boy nodded, face serious. Silently, they descended from the roofs, using the evening shadows to their advantage and taking them and the alarm bell out. The boy was an efficient killer, low to the ground and in dark blue that made him almost invisible in the shadows. Twice Pierre saw him creep up from some kind of cover and grab a guard from behind - used the handhold Pierre taught him, good. The petit merdeux proved he could listen, now he just had to get him to think. They deposited the fresh cadavers behind a low wall, deep in the shadows as the mid-afternoon sun sank lower and lower.

"Take position," Pierre said, jutting his head to a stone column. "We need information first and foremost, so wait until it's all done. I'll make the kill, you take care of runners. You understand?"

"Oui."

"Good. Move."

Pierre scrambled up to a low roof. The sun was behind him, so he had to be careful of his shadow, but he had a perfect view of the boy and the meeting. They couldn't have waited more than fifteen minutes before three men came in, eyes sweeping around but not seeing anything. One was a bodyguard of some kind, one was an artisan, obviously Arpinon, and the other had a distinctly noble cut - top hat, rich grey coat and a belly that said he'd eaten well his whole life. Only the blind eye spoke of an unsavory life. Pierre wondered at the story.

"Lord Guillaume de Rossel has generously agreed to our price of forty percent."


The noble gave a dark smile. "He'll come around."

Arpinon chuckled. "Your confidence is infectious, Sivert." Pierre stiffened to hear the name, his eyes snapping to the merdeux, saw the boy's entire body tense. He started to lift from his crouch - merde he was going to give himself away! - Pierre lifted himself up, making himself more visible and waving his hand. If they saw his shadow…!
The boy glared at him, hard, Pierre could see from up here, and Pierre motioned for him to stay still. He was going to kill that boy…!

Arpinon: "... My boys will have the wagons ready."

"Here are the details," Sivert said, handing over a book. "Make sure it goes smoothly."

Pierre watched the noble leave, one eye on the merdeux - no, on Charles Dorian's son - as he very nearly vibrated with trying to stay in one place. Sivert disappeared, leaving Arpinon to look through the ledger and the guard to watch. His last words were derision. " 'Make sure that it goes smoothly.' Crétin. When have I ever-" But Pierre struck from above, hidden blade out and sinking deeply into the soft tissues of the neck and the body breaking his fall.

And did the merdeux do his job?

No, of course not.

"Murder! Murder! Help!"

Pierre growled as he stood. "Well?" he demanded, advancing on the hapless guard currently pissing himself with fear. A hand appeared from the dark to cover the shouting mouth, and the telltale sound of a death-groan lead to the fall of another body. Finally, stupid boy. "Next time, do that before he starts screaming." Pierre was half turned to his kill for searching when he realized Charles' son was starting to power across the courtyard and realized the boy was going to follow the noble. Fast footwork put him in front of the boy and for the first time he saw bloodlust on his face. Pierre concealed his surprise, focusing on wrapping a fist on the merdeux's arm with bruising force, holding him back from his blind assault.

The merdeux tried to break free, twisting his arm and turning, but Pierre held firm. The boy threw a punch but Pierre caught it easily, getting a second grip and swinging it around the boy's head, spinning him around and kicking him in the cul. Charles' son staggered forward and spun to face him. He was livid.

"He was right there! You're letting him get away!"

"There's no telling where he's gone, merdeux, we lost our chance to get him."

Pierre studied the boy, waiting for his next move. Time was pressing on them, Arpinon's body hadn't been searched yet and it was only a matter of time before prison guards actually did their job. The boy was taught as a wire, eyes wide and full of rage, breathing heavily through his nose as he struggled to master himself. That face was an open book, Pierre had never seen anger like that on him, and to see it directed at a Templar relaxed a muscle between his shoulder blades. He was Charles' son after all. Relief swept over him.

"Why do we hang round here?" the son demanded. "Sivert still lives! He killed Monsieur de la Serre!"

Mentioning the damn Templar almost soured Pierre's positive moment, but he chose to ignore the comment temporarily in favor of offering comfort. "Patience," he said. "Sivert is not the target. Not today." He finally bent over the body and collected the manifest, nimble hands quickly looking for other documents but finding none. "Come on," he ordered. "Council is waiting for our report."

They scrambled up the walls of the Conciergerie and over its roof. Once they were on the ground two guards stood at the opening arch. Pierre took care of one, the boy another, before cutting east and around the corner of the building, down the street and then left through an alley, so on and so
forth before the road opened up to a moderate square. Pierre read the crowd in an instant, arm pulling out to stop the damn novice again. He recognized several men sans culottes, reading some kind of paper and cursing at it, faces getting red as they discussed whatever had happened in the news.

"Merde," he cursed, "Patriots."

The merdeux looked at him like he had grown a second head. "What's wrong with patriots?" he demanded. "They believe in the revolution!"

… Merdeux de merde imbécile. "Think!" Pierre hissed. "These imbeciles will pick a fight with anyone, even us. Try not to draw their attention."

Charles' son was nonplussed. "Shouldn't we stop them?"

Of all the… "Stop them, avoid them, kill them, it doesn't matter. There's always more fanatics. You can't save everyone, merdeux."

The boy pursed his lips. "Well," he said slowly. "There's a cheery thought."

Nom de dieu did the boy have to joke at everything? Pierre shoved him aside and skirted around the malcontents: priests had refused to take the Oath of the Nation they were saying. Like oaths meant anything if they weren't paid in blood. Pierre ducked into a winery, the merdeux following and bought a bottle of burgundy. They stood at the door, content to pass time idly to the eyes of the world, while the patriots continued to work themselves into a frenzy. Then,

"Heads up, mes amis; Remy found Monsieur Arpinon's body in a courtyard not far from here. Stabbed through the throat."

"Merde. We'll have to keep our eyes open."

Pierre looked to the boy to see if he heard. He had, and he cast his eyes to the roof, still taught as a wire - he was so strung out he missed two handholds and Pierre had to help him to the roof. Novice. "Careful, merdeux, you'll hurt someone."

"I can't believe this! We've not seen Sivert for a year, and you're letting him walk? All because his name wasn't on a fichu piece of paper?"

Impatience. Desperation. Petulance. The boy wanted the kill, could taste it, and couldn't understand why it was being denied him. That was a feeling Pierre knew all too well, especially since the damnée truce. Pierre tried to console the boy. "The timing is not right: too many variables, too many loose threads."

Charles' son shook his head as they started to move across the roofs. "And what if we lose him again? What if he disappears for another year? This would be my only chance!"

"There'll be plenty of chances, merdeux," Pierre said. "Templars are like weeds. They always come back. You'll get your blood soon enough."

"But-!"

"We're street side, merdeux; nom de dieu you're supposed to have a head in there after a year of training and you can never think when you need to. Shut up."

They crossed the bridge and walked down to the riverbank. Pierre didn't want the boy to go back to
his assignment where the spymaster Charlotte would coddle him. Boy was finally displaying a backbone and Pierre intended to capitalize on it. They announced themselves, but the Council was already debriefing another team, and they were forced to wait. The boy paced, still full of energy, trying to contain it. Pierre ignored him, instead using his time to start reading the ledger.

To say Arno had too much energy at the moment would be something of an understatement. He couldn't sit still, couldn't stand still, couldn't even walk still, every step seeming to rebound up his leg with all the energy he needed to use or else he'd do something stupid. And if Arno had learned anything, it was doing something like this always led to stupid. Whether it was letting Élise egg him on into a mountain of trouble, or deciding to face down the latest cult member who thought being raised by a Templar was some sort of sin. But the anger, energy, frustration, it didn't go away. He kept pacing about, not knowing what else to do.

Another team that was waiting was brought in to debrief.

_Diable, was the whole Brotherhood being debriefed at this moment?_

And Bellec just sat there, reading as if nothing had happened.

Arno grit his teeth and kept his opinions to himself.

He stopped, trying to contain everything inside him, his foot tapping hurriedly on the floor and he couldn't even stand that sound, so he went back to pacing.

"Arno?"

Arno blinked, hearing his own name cutting though the black cloud swirling around him. He turned, surprised, and looked to Cosette, who rushed forward, worry etched on her face.

"Cosette?" he asked. "Are you alright?"

"Have you seen Brasseur?"

"Mountain of a man, paler than you, never takes off his hood or scarf? Pistol with a nickel handle?"

She nodded, hope filling her eyes. "Yes! Please, have you seen him?"

Arno stopped and actually paused, the question piercing his energy and making him still as he thought back _before_ seeing Sivert set his brain on fire. "No," replied finally. "Not since last week. He's Beylier's apprentice, too, right?"

Cosette nodded. "He was sent to la Cour des Miracles, but I haven't seen him since. He's one of my instructors and I'm getting worried."

Arno could see that. Despite being a massive and imposing man, Brasseur was known as one of the gentlest Assassins, despite how deadly he was. A voice that was never above a soft mumble, and ever helpful whenever he was in the tunnels. Brasseur, like his name implied, was a brewer, and was someone Arno had been hoping to get a decent deal from for the Café. Arno frowned.

"When was he due back?"

Cosette's hands worried. "He should have reported back yesterday. He promised me another lesson."

Arno's frown deepened. "You think he's in trouble?"
She nodded. "Maybe. It's not like him to be this late. You can set a watch by him with his punctuality. If he's vague on a time, it's because he doesn't know how long it will take. And he was precise on seeing me yesterday for the next lesson."

"Has anyone else seen him?"

"No, that's the problem. Not even his brewery."

"Just mention it to Guillaume," Bellec stated and Arno stiffened. He still hadn't discussed Bellec's knowledge of Sivert and the murder of M. de la Serre yet, and he frankly knew better if he didn't want to give Bellec another chance to have him hanging by his fingertips for hours on end. Arno grimaced, then let out a sigh. Best to just ignore it.

"I will, Monsieur," Cosette replied, worry still evident. "First I will ask others."

"Have you seen Fabre?" Arno suggested. "He's always going one way or another, and he's definitely of that ilk from before joining the Brotherhood."

Cosette nodded. "He was the first person I asked."

And Fabre didn't know? Very worrying indeed.

The Assassins that the Council were briefing came out, talking quietly. One was Pontmercy.

"Can you believe it," Pontmercy said, stroking his curled mustache. "Three more Templars killed last night."

His companion shook her head. "Wasn't us. Templars have been killing each other like it was going out of fashion since '89."

"A Templar civil war?" Pontmercy managed to drop his usual arrogance. "Will this complicate things, or make our life easier?" he mused.

"Harder," the woman replied. "Nothing is ever easy for us."

Cosette nodded to Arno, then chased after Pontmercy. "Have you seen Brasseur?"

Arno quietly wished her luck. Back to pacing then. Except he wasn't stuck in his head any more, Cosette had unconsciously made sure of that. So, Arno took a deep breath. "So, what happens next?" he asked Bellec.

"We hand over our findings to Mirabeau, who proceeds to do nothing with it."

Arno refrained from rolling his eyes. Barely. "You don't seem terribly fond of him," he observed dryly, just to see that twitch in Bellec's eyes. "He's our maître."

"He's a politi-chien," Bellec growled back. "Sees himself as a great peacemaker. He thinks he can end the war between Assassins and Templars, bring this Revolution to a happy conclusion, and convince dogs and cats to live together in peace," Bellec scoffed.

Arno offered a flat look. "And that's... bad?"

Bellec snorted. "It's a self-aggrandizing pipe dream," he replied bluntly.

Arno's hackles rose, despite his best efforts. Mirabeau was one of the few cultists who was actually kind to him and understood him, and the only maître who seemed to understand Arno.
Bellec continued unhindered and clearly intent on slamming this lesson home. "The Templars are at their weakest since Jacques de Molay burned, and we're running around after second rate smugglers!" Oh yes, Bellec's bitterness was strong. "All because Mirabeau wants to secure his legacy."

Well Arno wasn't going to let that stand. There was a flaw in that logic.

"Monsieur de la Serre believed a truce was possible," he countered carefully. So clearly something of what both Mirabeau and M. de la Serre sought was possible.

Bellec scoffed. "And look where it got him."

Safe and sound, only slightly delayed.

Arno held the wince in. His failure pushed him to pacing again, the silence making him sink back to that night of the party, seeing the Monsieur stagger and trying to help him breath. Diable, Sivert had been right there! He needed this. He needed to be sent after the man, to fix his greatest mistake. He needed...

"Bellec, Dorian."

Bellec stood, eyes on Arno. "Calm down, merdeux."

"I can't," Arno confessed, feeling the tension all through his shoulders. "We've lost our chance, we might never find him again." They started up the grand staircase.

"Don't worry," his teacher said, sounding almost consoling. "He'll be at Notre Dame cathedral tomorrow, if he keeps to this schedule." He lifted up the ledger.

What? How long had Arno been pacing and Bellec reading? What... "You might have shared that earlier!"

"Shut up, petit merdeux, and let me do the talking."

They entered the observatory, the maîtres sitting at their tables covered in books and papers, murmuring to themselves in the warm firelight. Bellec tossed the book onto the table by Mirabeau. "The customs agents of France can rest easy," he said without preamble. "Arpinon is dead."

"Excellent," Maître Quemar said as Mirabeau opened up the book. "What did you observe?"

Bellec went into detail but Arno slowly stopped listening, again losing himself in his own thoughts, twitching over Sivert and how close he was – he could have killed him right there...! He would be at Notre Dame...! He wanted so badly to move!

Mirabeau's voice cut through his ears, his deep voice gentle even now. "Shaking down imprisoned nobles seems a bit out of his oeuvre. Finances were never a concern for them, but now they are amassing money like it's going out of style. What are the Templars up to?"

"If we hadn't spent the last year hobbled by your damned truce, we might know that," Bellec said, tone as derisive as any time he spoke to Arno.

Beylier turned to the Mentor. "He has a point, Honoré," he said gently. "The truce was with Grandmaître de la Serre. He was dead almost before the proverbial ink dried."

Mme Trenet quickly agreed: "The man's been dead for over a year. Whoever is in charge now, you
can be certain they aren't sitting idle."

It was all noise to Arno, none of it meant anything because he could only think about one thing, and he found himself opening his mouth. "We might have learned more had we not allowed Sivert to escape," he said, petulant, desperate to voice even a fraction of what was bouncing around in his mind.

Mirabeau leaned forward in his chair. "Sivert? He was there?" he asked, surprised.

Arno blinked.

...Opportunity! No, no, be careful, phrase this delicately.

Arno held his hands out passively, energy bubbling up in him but fighting to not sound desperate. "I know your heart is set on keeping the peace," he said carefully stepping forward, trying for charm but uncertain what he was portraying, "but bringing Monsieur de la Serre's killer to justice would count for something wouldn't it?"

Mirabeau was staring at Arno, eyes narrow in a way he had never seen before. The shadows of his pot marks made him look older than he was, and he stood, turning to face Arno more fully. "Yes," he said gently, the sound of the only gentle maître in the entire brotherhood. "It would." But then everything changed, Mirabeau's slouch straightened, his voice hardened, his face darkened. "But do not confuse your personal vendetta with a sound strategy. Wanting the kill is far different than planning the kill, and—"

"If he wants to kill Templars," Bellec said, arms crossed and glaring across the room. "Let him kill Templars."

Arno held his breath.

"Do you think he's ready?" Quemar said from his seat. "His rebirth was less than six months ago."

Bellec threw his eyes to Quemar, but only briefly, determined to have say this specifically to Mirabeau. "I've taught him all I can," he said, his voice soft for the first time to Arno's ears. "The boy is ready."

Arno snapped his eyes back to Mirabeau, not daring to even blink, desperate and hopeful and too afraid this would be snatched from him at the last second. He gulped, and wished.

Then, at last: "Very well." Mirabeau turned to Arno. "Assassin," he said with gravity, command in his voice so strong the other maîtres stood with the weight of his next words. The air seemed to thicken, Arno couldn't quite believe what was happening, he stared as Mirabeau – slouched with fatigue, straightened and gave his orders: "I charge you to go to Notre-Dame de Paris, and to find there, the Templar agent Charles Gabriel Sivert. You will learn his secrets, and when you have done so, you will bring him peace, in accordance with our tenets."

Arno nodded, the only thing he could do, relieved that he had the opportunity to fix his mistake and reclaim a piece of what he had lost. He let out the breath he had been holding, an explosive huff before straightening and turning to the other maîtres. "I won't let you down," he said earnestly. There was too much at stake.

"We wish you luck, Assassin," Quemar said.

"Keep your head about you," Mme Trenet said.
Beylier nodded, and Mirabeau sat heavily back in his chair.

Bellec followed him out, Arno almost jumping for all the energy inside him. He took a breath, and then another, trying to calm down. He had gotten but he wanted!

... He had gotten what he wanted...! He was about to kill a man. Not a guard or smuggler, the man responsible for killing Sivert. The enormity of it...!

He turned to Bellec. "What's our plan?"

His teacher scoffed. "'Our' plan? You're not an apprentice anymore, boy. Study your surroundings and devise your own plan. I told you, I'm not here to hold your hand. This is you. All you."

"But how...?"

Bellec sighed. "Think, merdeux, no target's unreachable. If you can't find a weakness to exploit, make one. Opportunity is everywhere; it's on you to take it. And if all other plans fail, why not sacrifice yourself for the cause? Your life for his. Before Altaïr, that was the Levantine approach."

Arno stopped to turn to Bellec, incredulous. "You mean a dagger in broad daylight, as I'm cut down where I stand?"

Bellec gave a dark smile. "It sends a powerful message," he said. "Let's the enemy know just how strong your convictions are, how much your people will sacrifice, and it makes them think twice before crossing the Brotherhood. If a man did that in this day and age, anything he said would be taken as gospel before they hung him. Better legacy than what Mirabeau has planned."

Arno shook his head. "I'll do it my way."

A snort. "Whatever you think best, Assassin."

That... was the first time he'd called something other than merdeux or boy – a title, one taken very seriously, and Arno swallowed to see respect for the first time from his teacher.

He moved up to Café Théâtre. It was the dinner hour and Mme Gouze was immediately at his side with the day's papers. Diable, he'd forgotten about that. He needed to get to his room, start planning, but he was also responsible here as well, and he knew better than to shirk a duty. He gulped his anxiety and quickly changed, stepping out onto the stage and reading about the oath to the nation and the priests of the Assembly who refused to take it. The words washed over him, an event so big muted to the noise banging around in his head, and once he was done reading the papers to the crowd he immediately disappeared upstairs. Grizier was there and pulled him aside. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Arno said. "I have an assignment. Tomorrow I bring peace to Sivert."

Grizier blinked, then straightened. "They found him? Excellent! Where?"

"Notre-Dame."

The sword master nodded. "I'll send up Charlotte once the café is closed. I think she has some old plans of the building, and of course there's all the racing tunnels underneath, and the crypt... We'll help you plan."

"No," Arno said, lifting up a hand. "Thank you, but I need to do this myself."
Grizier nodded. "Some of us are like that. I understand. I'll still send the plans up, though. Information is the most important thing you'll need, and this is a very short turnaround. I assume it's time sensitive, I'll let Jacques and Célestine know you won't be around tomorrow morning."

Chapter End Notes

... almost made it!

Two more people are added to Arno's support group: Mme Gouze and M. Grizier, and we spend time in our favorite location in the entire game: Café Théâtre. Cue all the small details that we love to add, and of course we'll slowly start getting to know everyone who works there, as Arno also slowly starts calling them all by their first name. We are in love with Charlotte and Augustin.

We also start to see that there are some fundamental problems with Arno's induction to the cult. Arno mostly passes as functioning so the Assassin's don't really understand that he has some issues - partly from growing up always unsure of his footing with M. de la Serre and the treatment by Olivier, but also by the abuse of Bellec, which Mme Gouze and M. Grizier are just starting to notice. Café Théâtre is the only real place that give Arno what he needs emotionally outside of his friends, and at this point in the fic even they don't quite get how bad it is. If Arno has parents in this fic - real parents - it's Charlotte and Augustin.

Second, this is a good a place as any to start talking about the politics of the day. There are a LOT of names to keep track of because people rise and fall in the span of five seconds during the Revolution, and trying to set them up early is, well, it's a pain. But we tried. The Incorruptable Robespierre was able to sneak in, dandy that he is, though he hasn't yet started looking for conspiracies around every corner. We'll state outright right now: Robespierre is not a Templar. In fact the core thought that the Revolution was orchestrated by the Templars is thrown out the window in this fic, because that was a royalist conspiracy theory that came out in the mid 1800s that Ubisoft thought "sounds cool, let's do it." Grain hoarding and all the other BS the game goes about claiming is cut away, hence this fic being a rewrite.

Third, newspapers. Okay, so, when the Revolution starts the country went from something like 3 papers to over a hundred in less than a year. The best comparison is to compare it to something like modern day internet news: there's a zillion of them, everyone has a hot take - it's a crapshoot to know if any of them are factually accurate because it's less about the facts and more about the opinions. You don't really have echo chambers like you do in internet news, but instead you have everyone sitting around in a café talking about what they're reading and working themselves into a frenzy. You even have papers attacking other people and calling for their blood - the kind of news sites that inspire the mass shooters and alt-right nationalists of today. The only difference from then and now is the side of the political spectrum where all the rhetoric is taking place. It's a little scary to see that kind of parallel.

Arno chooses to read to the customers to help keep them informed. Paris' literacy rate is actually pretty high. Illiterate people are the exception not the rule, but we couldn't find an accurate estimate of what the literacy rate was - not in English, anyway, so we made a best guess.
Also, we get a scene from Bellec's POV, and we realized how screwed up his opinion of Arno is. It doesn't justify the abuse, but it gives us an insight on why he holds Arno in such contempt, something that will come back later. This is, perhaps more than even AC3, the most focused we've been in writing a fic - some scenes equate to the purported 4d chess in making sure everything does something: either a payoff later or an idea that needs to be presented or something else. We were very, very deliberate with our themes and constantly checking Arno's mental state and making sure it was always in line with what we wanted and in line with the pulse of the Révolution - the word hasn't been capitalized yet, but it will as it draws out.

Next chapter: Notre Dame.
Death of a Smuggler

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arno settled in his room, sitting on the floor, surrounded by papers, maps, notes, schedules, anything that he could get from the Sanctuary and anything Grizier had brought up. Tomorrow was his one chance, and he refused to squander it. Idly, the back of his mind realized he might want a desk for his room, but that could be dealt with later. After reading from the papers, he knew that Notre Dame would likely be a contentious spot the following day. The Assembly had told the Church: swear fealty, and the Church had said "NO!" with great emphasis. That meant trouble. And no wonder, the Church and it's ten-percent tithe and high-handed rule had left France very bitter to anything so pompous. So, Arno would have to anticipate crowds and a lot of anger.

The schedule had a meeting between Sivert and a priest at about mid-morning. That didn't give Arno much time to prepare. The maps were most useful, and Arno buried himself in studying. Stairs for the bell towers, stairs for the choir, layout of the nave, ambulatory, cloister, apse, the lists went on and on until Arno didn't think he'd ever forget them.

He continued learning and memorizing, everything that he had done learning philosophy and history for the past year, every strategy to study was utilized to its fullest so that this would not be a mistake.

Arno had made enough mistakes. This wouldn't be one of them.

He didn't crawl into bed till somewhere around two in the morning, if his clock was accurate. He slept for maybe four hours before getting up at the crack of dawn. He breezed out of the café, barely glancing at Gouze and Grizier before stalking out and over the bridge to the Île de la Cité, walking the brisk walk to the cathedral.

Construction of Notre Dame had taken almost a century, starting in 1160 and ending somewhere in the 1260s; the Cathedral was a monument of France. King Louis VII had wanted such monuments to show off France's political, economic, and cultural dominance, and the imposing edifice certainly embraced the idea. With flying buttresses added in the fourteenth century to distribute even more weight off the roof, allowing for taller thinner walls that could hold more windows for more light, it was a marvel of construction for over half a century and defined France and its clergy.

So it was no wonder that a huge mass of people were shouting and screaming at the massive western façade, decrying the symbol of the First Estate and its heavy taxations, strict rules, and hardships forced on the average person of France. The crowd was massive, filling the small plaza in front of the western façade to bursting, spilling out around the cathedral and the streets around it. Screams were loud, vitriolic, and vicious as anger at the church was swirled.

Arno knelt on a roof above it all, absorbing every little detail he could. He'd already stalked the roofs entirely around the cathedral, at least twice, matching the maps he had studied to match to the actual building. He had explored the graveyard thoroughly in the pre-dawn light, looking for everything and checking whatever he could. He wasn't sure he could know the grounds around Notre Dame any better than he could at this moment.

On the roof, he took a deep breath. Above the crowds, he was detached. Up with the eagles, he could focus. He breathed.
He opened his eyes as the grand bells of Notre Dame rang the eight-a.m. hour, and cleared his mind. And he breathed again.

His mind emptied of everything that was crashing around for attention, all the worries, anxieties and fears. He let go because he was no longer down on the ground surrounded by such worries. Instead, he was above it all, and his eyes could go exactly where they needed to go.

Fireworks unseen to all drew Arno's attention, with a crackle that sounded like an eagle's screech.

A man, bald, tricorn hat, angry face. He was speaking with an officer, blue coat stained with what the crowd was throwing around. "You've secured the cathedral?"

"Oui, Monsieur Duschesneau."

"Bien. Tell Sivert I'll meet him inside."

"Oui, Monsieur."

Arno marked him. He kept half an eye on him as he shifted through the crowds. But the eagle was already drawing his eyes away. A cleric on the edges of the crowds was stumbling up after what had to have been a beating. "You!" he cried through his bloody nose and blackened eye, "get back here with my keys! Thieves!"

Arno narrowed his eyes. Something…

The thief was laughing and jostling a friend. "Did you see the expression on that fat old cleric's face?"

They laughed.

"Priceless! Turned the color of an aubergine! I thought he'd faint with outrage! Clergy don't have any spine!"

The first chuckled. "Well, seeing as how I stole his keys, why not raid the Archbishop's wine cellar?"

The other guffawed. "You? Never!"

"To reason, and freedom from superstition!"

"Here, here! Á votre santé!"

Arno smiled. Keys to a cellar. Or rather, keys to the cathedral. Very useful indeed.

Then he blinked and hissed. That had given him a headache. Useful as this vision was, it hurt. He rubbed his temples briefly before heading back down to the streets. He needed that keyring first. The two brutes had left the crowd, heading north, likely for the northern entrance to see if they could sneak in that way instead of going through the massive crowd in front. Since they were already at the edge of the crowds, Arno stalked up easily, still rubbing at his headache.

"The Church may have signed the Civil Constitution, but everyone knows the bishops are in bed with the royalists!"

"I'll drink to that!"

Arno rolled his eyes. The Civil Constitution had been passed the previous summer, and the Church
had agreed that Rome was no longer in charge, but that the French government was, in terms of who it ultimately answered to. If the Assembly said something, then the Church would do it, and they needed to swear an oath to do so, making the religion state-sponsored. It had removed the clergy from being an estate to begin with, and put them firmly under the thumb of the people's representatives.

Many had refused of course, mostly in the country, but many within the city as well. Arno hadn't paid much attention at the time, because of the *Fête de la Fédération*. And now the Assembly had told the church to swear fealty or suffer and the resounding denial was why the crowds were so thick.

Arno shook his head. He didn't have any love for the Church. He wasn't even sure there was a heaven where his father or M. de la Serre resided. He was happy to see the French people finally getting the austerities of the Church under control with each new law the Assembly but forward. But beating up a cleric just to steal from a wine-cellar?

Perhaps his time with the cult *had* changed him. He would have been all for a chance to get drunk on sacramental wine back at Versailles, but now he just saw the two he was tailing as thieves. There were *issues* with the Church. But beating up an old man just to get drunk wasn't right. Fabre had taught Arno much about the art of pickpocketing, and Arno lifted the keyring without either of the crooks being the wiser. He had already pocketed the keys and was slipping ahead of them and around the eastern end of the church with the cloister and apse to head to the graveyard.

Once on the southern side of the church, Arno faced more sunlight and his slightly faded headache became far stronger and he had to stop and rub his temples again. He stayed there for almost ten minutes, trying to get the pain to fade enough to move. Finally, he headed back west, walking past the graveyard, intent on finding Duschesneau again. His inner eagle had drawn his eyes to the man for a reason, and he had worked with his eagle enough to know that it was important. With one final rub of his shoulders, he just happened to glance ahead and paused. There was Duschesneau, talking to a guard. A member of the police, no less.

"You said you secured the cathedral. I just had to order one of your men to plug a whole in security."

The guard only nodded, lips tight. "*Oui, Monsieur* Duschesneau. And it has been resolved per your orders and I've ordered more police to the area under the auspices of crowd control. There is only one way in or out, and I've paid off others to ensure it remains so."

Duschesneau nodded. "*Bien*. With Arpinon dead, I don't want to take any chances."

The policeman nodded stiffly.

"When *Monsieur* Sivert arrives, tell him I've gone to arrange matters with the priest. I'll join him inside."

"Of course, sir."

Arno nodded to himself. Perfect chance. With Duschesneau dead, Arno could sneak in to the meeting before Sivert showed up and hide somewhere discreet.

Arno leaned against the graveyard's wall, and looked up at the church, keeping a look of contempt on his face. Duschesneau walked right by him without so much as a glance.

*Parfait.*
Seamlessly, Arno stalked Duschesneau into the graveyard, watching the man take off his tricorn to scratch the back of his head before hastily putting it back on against the cold. January whipped a wind through the relative quiet of the gravestones, making Arno shudder, but he paused at a headstone and watched from the corner of his eye.

"Where the hell is that priest? *Le connard* could bother showing up on time..."

Arno smiled. He crept around a crypt, eyes locked on the cold Duschesneau, flexing his hidden blade.

He almost stepped around the corner to handle the situation, but a priest entered the graveyard and stalked angrily up to Duschesneau. "That *connard* wants *thirty* percent?" he hissed without preamble.

"Yes," Duschesneau smiled coldly.

"God only gets *ten* percent! Who the hell does Sivert think he is?"

Duschesneau scoffed. "What choice do you have? How long will it be before the revolutionaries running things descend on Mother Church like locusts? How much wealth do you have stored away, hm? Can't you see that Assembly confiscating it to fill the national coffers? You pay a percent, we keep the revolutionaries busy elsewhere."

The priest scowled. "And what will you do with your percentage?" he growled. "We may make churches ornately, but that's to educate the masses of God's work, we offer the best to God because He's *God*. We don't ask for *thirty* percent for God, we leave enough for people to live off of. We have to feed ourselves, cloth ourselves, *build buildings*, the list goes on and on. We don't have the tithe for *selfish* reasons."

Duschesneau actually laughed. "You actually *believe* that? Bless your ignorant little heart. So, will you donate thirty percent of that ten percent you always collect?"

The priest actually grunted, frustration on every line as he shook with rage. "Very well," he ground out. "It seems we must pay for your protection to keep doing God's work."

"There now," Duschesneau patted the priest's cheek, though the clergyman swatted it away. "That wasn't so hard now, was it."

"God will take care of you some day."

"I'm sure someone will. Someone pretty with open legs, preferably. In the meantime, *you* will take care of things." Duschesneau looked down his nose with a contemptuous look that Arno had seen so often on both Olivier and the nobility. "See that the confessionals are closed. My employer prefers to discuss business away from prying eyes."

"*Oui, Monsieur,*" the priest's reply bled sarcasm and contempt.

Arno breathed out a laugh. *I think, Monsieur, you're going to miss that meeting.*

The priest stalked away and Arno had little difficulty easing up behind Duschesneau and stabbing him in the back. With all the chaos around the church, someone would think this part of the protests and the mobs. Briefly, Arno wondered how Assassins did this *without* the clamor of a revolution around every street corner.

More importantly, Arno had a place within the cathedral. One of the confessionals. *Parfait.* In such
dark confines, perhaps he could interrogate as well. After all, he recalled that Sivert had not worked alone. Some raspy whisper still haunted part of that night: "Sivert, come away!" Arno needed that second person. Sivert may have killed M. de la Serre, and Arno would be glad to erase that mistake, but it wouldn't be erased until both members of that little conspiracy were dead.

But first, Sivert.

Arno went underground. His training was under the streets, and no one knew the tunnels under Paris like the cult did. Even though he entered the sewer far from the church, he navigated it with ease until he reached the crypts. That required more knowledge that he memorized hours ago, but with slow caution, he moved up through the crypts and bones, all stacked atop one another without any rhyme or reason that Arno could discern, not that he was paying attention. He'd been around the bones and crypts for so long with his training, he didn't even glance at the hollowed-out eyes any more. He ascended the steps into the cathedral proper, and used the keys he had to enter. He arrived in the back, in the apse. The crowds from outside had apparently made it within the cathedral itself, their screams and shouts echoing like a perverse choir about the tall ceilings and stained windows. The police were keeping the crowds to the nave, but there was still pushing and yelling.

That worked to Arno's advantage. He stayed to the shadows. He stood behind a column, unseen to the crowds and took a moment to focus.

Pain seared through his head, his eyes watered and light flashed across them, but he could hear the fireworks and let his eyes draw to a confessional on the north side of the church. He gasped in great gulps of air, letting go of the eagle as fast as he could, suddenly exhausted.

In the shadows of the column, he sat down and just breathed, trying to make the headache recede to something manageable. He failed spectacularly, but he kept trying. This was his one chance to get Sivert. He wasn't going to squander it because he couldn't hold his damn eagle vision for more than a blink. Through squinting eyes, he found stairs and ascended to the upper levels of the church, once more using the keys he had lifted to navigate.

Notre Dame itself had seen better days. Granted, it was centuries old, but up above, Arno could see more even with his strained eyes. Repairs were needed, and the crowds before weren't being kind as they vented their anger. If this kept up, the cathedral would end up in disrepair. Arno sighed. If the clergy did what they were supposed to and swear fealty to France, this wouldn't be a problem being exacerbated by angry crowds.

Arno looked to the confessional. Sure enough, Sivert stepped out, face annoyed. Arno smiled. That annoyance was going to get far worse, momentarily.

Sivert stalked his little guarded section of the cloister, pacing impatiently. "Where the hell is Duschesneau? What's keeping him? Does he expect me to wait forever? Intolerable! This is getting absurd!"

Arno took grim delight in even this small upset for Sivert. He glanced around, then slipped over the rail to a golden crossbeam meant to hold flags. Ducking under an arch, he eased into the cloister, observing the guards and Sivert from below.

Temptation flooded him. Sivert was right under him. He could drop down with ease and erase half of the mistake with M. de la Serre. But Sivert had guards posted around the cloister. Arno himself would be dead in an instant, and Arno still had one more to kill to erase that mistake. With as much slow silence as he could, Arno started to climb down a column. His head was ready to split open, the exertion making every heartbeat cudgel his head with a blacksmith's hammer, but Sivert had
finished pacing and stalked back into the confessional.

*Opportunity! Don't waste it! Now!*

Arno hopped down on silent feet, all eyes away from him and on the perimeter. He pushed back the curtain and slid easily into the dark confines of privacy.

"About time," Sivert muttered.

Arno smiled. Sivert had his blind side facing him. Even better. All that planning had worked. This was going to go perfectly. "Everything's in place," he said, pitching his voice down, closer to Duschesneau's tone, and with the crowds outside, it masked his voice even further.

Sivert smiled. "Finally saw reason, did he?" Sivert was calm, like he expected such a result. "What's our cut?"

"Thirty percent," Arno answered promptly.

"*Bien, bien,*" Sivert nodded. He looked about to speak, so Arno thought it was time to ask his own questions.

"There is one caveat," he said, keeping his voice deep. "Priest wants us to take care of something."

Sivert chuckled. "Oh?"

"And old lover," Arno replied. Vague enough, he hoped. "Preferably publicly, but with no connections to him. Who should we use?"

Sivert chuckled again. "As if that's a question. Ask our dear *Roi de Thunes* to handle it. Contact La Touche."

Unbidden, an eagle screeched in his mind and Arno squinted against the flashes of light that made his head ring.

Sivert continued, unknowing of Arno's double vision and wavering focus. "This is our moment, my friend. Petty nobles are ripe enough fruits for extorting, but the Church has been leeching off the people for centuries. If we crack their vaults, the *Grandmaître* cannot fail to recognize our work."

Arno held in a gasp of pain. Something about that sentence didn't seem right.

Wouldn't Élise have inherited being the *Grandmaître* after M. de la Serre died? Or did the Templars use different inheritances like the Assassins, based on seniority and merit instead of blood? Was Élise in danger? Arno shook his head, sending new pains shivering down his neck and into his shoulders. "As you say, *Monsieur.*"

"*Bien.*" Sivert nodded to himself, well ensconced in his own ego. Arno blinked back tears. He needed to focus. Now was the time. "Now," Sivert shifted, "if we're done here, I'll take my leave and wait for our holy friend to deliver the goods. The more money we have, the more power the *Grandmaître* can exercise."

Now or never! No slight delays this time!

Arno's blade unsheathed, he twisted in his seat, and his gloved hand went through the wood separation, right into Sivert's neck. There was a gurgled choke, then silence. Arno pulled back the blade and took a moment to just *breathe* around the pounding in his head. Once he could see
straight, he fingered the curtain open to observe the patterns of the guards. He waited, watching, head still trying to split open, before slipping out when everyone's backs were to him, then slipped out into the crowds.

The crowds worked to his advantage, there was no doubt, but the jostling and pushing were not helping his headache. Someone shouldered him by accident, and he stumbled to the stone exterior wall, and he had to just stop and close his eyes against the morning light.

Was it still morning? It felt like that had taken hours to do.

Through narrowed eyes, he saw a cleric enter a room and Arno quickly hurried after him. Privacy and isolation, away from the crowds to stop his raging headache, seemed ideal.

"Now what—" the cleric turned, furious as Arno entered and shut the door behind himself. Clearly on guard, the cleric stood stiffly, clearly waiting for abuse or something similar to the crowds from outside. And given his bleeding nose and blackened eye, he had a right to be suspicious. Then Arno's mind kicked into gear.

He touched the faintest of country to his voice and offered the keyring. "I thought I'd return these, Monsieur."

The cleric's face instantly softened. He took the keys and hid them into the folds of his robes. "You have my thanks, my son. It looks like it took more work for you to get them back. Your eyes are bloodshot."

Arno held back a curse. Mirabeau had explained that bloodshot eyes and a migraine were signs of using the eagle too much. He was going to have to be careful as he left. He nodded to the cleric, intent on leaving quietly now that his "good deed" had been done. But the cleric bustled about him insistently, guiding Arno in, sitting him down, and leaning him back, putting a cold damp cloth produced from somewhere over Arno's eyes.

This wasn't right, Arno had to leave. He wasn't supposed to be seen. But wasn't this hiding in plain sight? The cleric thought he'd been in a fight, not that he'd killed anyone. Perhaps this was still within the tenants that Mirabeau spoke of.

Arno sighed, unable to reason it out given his headache. He let the cool compress ease both his eyes and his head and just waited.

The crowds outside were still going strong when the cleric brought in a small lunch for Arno, mostly stew and no bread. Arno offered a wry grin at the irony. Even the church didn't have bread.

"My thanks, Henri," Arno sipped the last of his stew.

The cleric, Henri, was a pricklish sort, and only nodded. "Oui, oui, the Church has provided and none will see it. Be off, you vagabond, before the crowds outside realize you're here and do more harm unto you."

Arno nodded as well. "Be well."

"Hrmph."

Well, the Church remained uppity, even when doing nice things. Perhaps it was just in their nature. Still, Arno took his leave. A quick glance around showed that none of Sivert's guards remained, and that the police really were just doing crowd control. The anger was still loud, but it seemed that
the police were convincing people to at least protest *outside* the cathedral in order to be heard by more people and the crowd, still angry, was slowly leaving. Arno merged with the crowd and headed back to the Café, which was indeed a quick walk. His head still *ached*, but he could see straight and didn't need to squint to do so.

Arno came in through the servant's entrance, letting something ease off his shoulders now that he was back on familiar ground.

He was rubbing at his face when he heard a gasp and looked up to Célestine in the main entryway, having been in the middle of cleaning the floors. And properly no less. The worn and cracked tiles were shining.

"Good work," Arno said tiredly. "I'm heading up to my room. Could you send *Madame* Gouze up when she's free?"

Célestine squeaked before nodded and rushing off to the café. Arno yawned. Four hours sleep wasn't enough. He slowly climbed the grand staircase that had seen better days. Plaster needed repairs. Walls needed a good cleaning. More lists to think of, how to prioritize, but Arno couldn't think of any of that now. He was sleep-deprived, aching, and cold. He found his room as he left it.

A mess.

With a heavy sigh, Arno set a bucket of water to the cold fire. He needed a bath to relax, and he wouldn't light a fire until he had gotten all flammable scraps of paper *away* from the hearth. He dumped them in a disorganized mess in the corner, thinking again that he'd need a proper desk at some point. Then came building a fire and setting water aside to boil for a bath. He heard someone at his door as he was doing this, but when he turned all he saw was a swish of fabric. Shrugging, he went back to building the fire.

Then there was a polite knock and he looked over to see both Mme Gouze and M. Grizier at his door with buckets of steaming water. He smiled gratefully. Mme Gouze disappeared and Grizier didn't say a thing as he helped Arno peel back his clothes and tug off boots to settle into the tub. Mme Gouze arrived with a privacy screen that she kept between herself and Arno and sat down at the washboard. Despite being in a fine dress, she started scrubbing Arno's gloves and the wrists of his coat, where Sivert's blood had splattered.

Grizier helped him scrub down. Dimly, Arno was aware that this was odd, but he was so tired he didn't dwell on it too much. There were quiet words between Mme Gouze and Grizier, but Arno just sank into the tub and let the hot water soak into his bones.

It was fitting in a way.

He'd had blood on his hands for over a decade now. From when he wandered away from his *père*, resulting in his father's death. Arno doubted he'd ever be able to clean those stains away. They were like stain-glass, permanent and unchanging. He'd had no clues on his father's killer, and had never considered going after the perpetrator. M. de la Serre had taken him in and raised him. He was at peace with leaving those stains on his hands. It was his way of remembering. Remembering prices and costs.

Except those stains hadn't been enough to prevent new stains. Instead, he had rushed around for himself, and delayed a responsibility. *Safe and sound. Only slightly delayed.* The stains of M. de la Serre were still fresh, even a year later. But today...

Today instead of two hands coated in M. de la Serre's blood, only one was. One of the two killers
had been sent to the grave. One half of a mistake had been erased. Arno looked at his hands, both clean to see, but to his eyes still stained. But now, some of those stains were gone. He could get redemption. He could erase old mistakes.

He could erase old mistakes.

And suddenly his eyes were watering again and it had nothing to do with his fading headache. He bent forward, sobs racking his frame as the enormity of what he accomplished settled around him.

He had killed Sivert.

He had erased half of a mistake.

The catharsis of it.

Redemption.

He could get redemption.

He sobbed and wailed. Both at M. de la Serre's death and the grief that still brought up, the grief of losing Élise, grief over his father. But also the hope. He could be redeemed. He could erase those mistakes, even if he could never bring them back. He cried and cried.

And when he was exhausted, he realized that he was in a clean chemise, and in clean sheets. He spared the briefest of thoughts on how he got there, and then he fell asleep.

It was evening when he awoke. Hungry, he stumbled into enough clothes to be decent and was halfway down the stairs before realizing he was at a public café and that he had a job to do. With a sigh he retreated back to his room to look more presentable, pulled his hair back properly, and steadfastly ignored the bags under his eyes. He felt better for the sleep, but he clearly hadn't gotten enough. He'd deal with that later.

He stepped back downstairs, and quietly entered the café proper. Madame Gouze saw him and bustled over, pulling him back out to the main hall and then back to the empty intendent's office.

"Madame?" he asked.

"Arno," she said softly. "Don't worry about reading the news tonight. Augustin will handle it. The people are mostly regulars, they'd understand you not being available every night."

"Ahh, but—"

She looked at him, her head tilted so that he could see behind the feathers to the burn scar. "You must worry about your other job first."

Right. Time to make a report. He grimaced. He didn't want to go through it all. It was still too fresh. But Mme Gouze gestured to the intendent's desk. "Take your time, write your notes, make a report to submit. Let that order your thoughts and sort through things more clinically. I'll have Célestine bring you a café-au-lait. She'll think you're doing paperwork, which you are. She also can't read, to our benefit."

Arno nodded. "Right."

Then she reached up and put a hand to his cheek. "You're a sweet boy, Arno. Ours is a hard life. Don't let it quench your good heart."
He offered a soft, sad smile. He had already lost Élise. He wasn't sure he could lose anything else. His mistakes had led to both the death of his father and M. de la Serre. He wasn't good, not by any stretch of the imagination. He tried to be.

Mme Gouze smiled in understanding and nodded. "To work then, Monsieur Dorian. Célestine will be by shortly."

"Very well," he replied. He sat heavily at the intendent's desk and pulled out sheets to start both his notes and to write his report.

It was... both easy and not easy. Easy in that with everything fresh in his mind, it didn't take much to write down what had happened. He treated it like one of his many letters to his father, a chance to retell the events and his thoughts on it. The sentences came easily from that, but... as a letter to his father, that meant there was a lot of feeling that poured out of him as well. How he felt about M. de la Serre, his murder, Arno's own stained hands as a result, everything that had been clattering around in his head while he had bathed.

The initial draft, the letter to his father, took almost two hours to get everything down. Even all that wasn't enough, there were more nuances to explore, more facets to examine. His feelings were a complicated mess that needed unraveling, but that would have to come later. He had the meat of what was needed now. Thus, he went through the letter noting what he needed for his report and what order it should be, before pulling out a new sheet to start drafting the report.

Reports weren't anything new to Arno, after all. Bellec usually left reports to him whenever they'd had a mission together. "Practice, merdeux." He only needed to redraft twice before feeling that he had a good report.

He was just writing up the last pages when Bellec arrived.

"See you're still in one piece, boy."

"Lovely to see you as well," Arno replied testily. He'd just messed up a line, and now had to redo the page from scratch.

"You ever going down below?"

Arno looked up through half-lidded eyes. "Perhaps if I could finish the report I was just interrupted doing?"

Bellec gave a wry grin before returning to his usual scowl and stalked over to read over Arno's shoulder.

Just to piss him off, no doubt. With a sigh, Arno went back to his last page, carefully writing each line of his report, ignoring Bellec breathing down his neck. Once done, he set the page aside to let the ink dry. He turned to his teacher and mentor and put his chin in his hand. "So, you've been sent to fetch me?" he asked dryly.

"Well, you didn't exactly send word, merdeux."

"You never sent word either," Arno pointed out, raising a brow, not feeling particularly up to banter at the moment. "As I recall, after a mission you tended to get piss-drunk, telling me write the report. Then we'd both go to the Council when you were sober."

Bellec scowled heavily. "Your memory seems to be faulty," he grunted. "Did you hit your head today?"
"Depends," Arno replied. "How drunk are you?"

"Stone sober, boy."

"Then no, I wasn't hit on the head."

"Tch."

Arno stretched. Even though he hadn't been awake long, all he wanted to do was go back to sleep. He rubbed his eyes and stood. The ink was dry and it was time to report. Bellec only nodded and they both headed out, around the grand staircase, to the smaller, modest stairs that lead to the sewers under Paris. Since it was well after dark now, no one saw them. Traffic for the café wasn't enough to stay open this late. Someday, perhaps. For now, he went back the way he had gone earlier, only this time, underground.

As usual, novices were bustling about. Some were being taught now that masters didn't have their day-job to worry about, some were studying, some were catching a late dinner. Arno nodded to familiar faces who hadn't graduated yet, as he had, and headed to the double stairs up to the Sanctuary.

Up in the Observatory, particularly the three steps to the library with the giant globe, the map of Paris, and rolls upon rolls of documents, reports, information, and trivia, was most of the Council, leaning over a table covered in papers. Quemar was sitting, no surprise given his bad legs, with Trenet and Beylier studying a large map of Paris intently. Beylier turned to the scrolls and started sifting through them.

Mirabeau turned, the wryest of grins flitting across his face before turning back to the mountain of paperwork on the table. "Parishioners found a body in Notre Dame today," he commented lightly. He raised a brow. "The rags are already calling him the Penitent. I take it justice has been done?"

Bellec settled against a wall behind Arno, clearly letting Arno take the lead in this.

Arno nodded. "It has begun. Sivert no longer troubles anyone and has paid for his part in the death of Monsieur de la Serre. As you know, there was another who was there." He took a breath, handing over his report. Quemar took it and added it to the various piles. Arno paused, reminding himself that he had already sorted through all of this and took another breath. "Before Sivert found 'peace', I had a chance to question him. I believe the second person there that night was a man called le Roi des Thunes."

Beylier turned in an instant, face intent, stepping away from all the scrolls and documents, eyes narrowing. "The King of Beggars? Are you sure?"

"Of him," Beylier replied, grimness about his face. "The beggars pay him tribute, the man himself is a ghost." The dark man glanced back at the rest of the Council. "We've sent three Assassins after him. The first two found no trace. 'The third... never returned."

Brasseur. The man Cosette had been looking for.

Arno grimaced. That couldn't be good. Cosette was very worried, and it seemed the disappearance was weighing heavily on Beylier as well.

But Arno had something they didn't before. La Touche.
"I can find him," he offered, stepping forward with confidence. "Sivert met with one of his lieutenants. I have a starting point."

He would search for the King of Beggars.

But not just for Cosette or Beylier.

But to undo that last half of a mistake. To remove the one person left who had partaken in killing M. de la Serre. To erase that mistake which lay so heavily upon himself.

"I owe it to the memory of Monsieur de la Serre to uncover the truth."

And kill the bastard.

Mirabeau looked to Arno, eyes vaguely hooded. There was an assessing look, and Arno suddenly felt very small, dim memories of his father rising, or M. de la Serre. He straightened his back and faced the assessment head on.

A lip quirked. "Perhaps you can, at that," Mirabeau said softly. He glanced to Bellec. Arno's teacher peeled off the wall and pulled out a hidden blade that Arno hadn't seen him carrying. He took Arno's wrist and started to remove the original blade.

"You've proved yourself a true Assassin today," Mirabeau said, stepping around the desk and standing in front of Arno. "And a true Assassin must have the proper tools."

Arno's lips quirked. "So, the concealed blade and the smoke bombs were just... what you had on hand, then," he offered dryly.

Mirabeau's smile was wide and unrepentant. He continued as if Arno hadn't offered cheap commentary.

"The phantom blade," he said reverently. "A modest little update from the traditional Assassin's blade."

Arno looked to it, noted the almost crossbow-like addition. The blade was slightly bulkier now. The larger cuffs of coats would still fit around, but he couldn't get too tailored, or the bulge would be more evident.

"The power decreases with further and further range, but getting any range is always an advantage for an Assassin. It allows for easier escapes and lower chances of being noticed. You'll want to practice with that for a few days to understand the feel of it."

Arno nodded, flicking the finger ring to see how much space was needed for the mini-crossbow to expand, how that affected his sleeves and coat, how much noise it made when it snapped into place.

"Where you're going," Mirabeau continued, reaching a hand to Arno's shoulder, "you may not wish to get too close to anyone, let alone your enemies. Now then."

Mirabeau stepped back, once more the heavy weight of being Mentor enshrouding him as it did when he gave missions. "Assassin," he said formally, "this Council charges you to go to la Cour des Miracles. Find there the Templar agent le Roi des Thunes. Learn his secrets, and bring him peace."

Arno bowed, accepting the assignment. He did not puff up with pride.
He had a lot of work to do. First, practice.

Honoré watched Arno leave, Bellec following after him to provide advice on how to use the phantom blade.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Sophie asked stiffly.

Mirabeau chuckled. "Not at all. But all novices must face the demons that brought them here."

"Usually not so swiftly," Hervé grunted, squinting even more closely at the sheets in front of him.

"True," Honoré acknowledged. "But then, it usually takes longer to find the demons. We had great fortune that Sivert appeared at all, given how secretive he can be."

Guillaume nodded before grimacing and going to a crystal decanter to fill a tiny glass. "I hope we aren't about to lose another promising Assassin."

"Promising?" Sophie frowned. "Competent, yes, but he's barely been here long enough to determine if he's promising or not."

Honoré actually laughed. "Sophie, my dear, we can't all hold your exceedingly high standards. Look at it this way: young Arno, with very little experience, has done everything asked of him with exemplary skill. He just killed a highly ranked Templar with no one knowing what happened. Most novices take years to get that good."

Sophie shrugged. "There is always room for improvement."

They all chuckled.

Hervé was squinting at a paper again and Guillaume took pity on him to come over and read it to him. Sophie went back to the maps, using a slate to take notes. Honoré took a moment to set, letting his ankles rest. He wasn't getting any younger, it seemed.

Yes, there was great promise with Arno. The boy had an unequaled gift as an Assassin. With that much talent, when he learned the Creed, he would be one of the greats, no doubt. For now, Arno needed to heal his eyes, the bloodshot wasn't making him look intimidating in the slightest. He needed to keep performing well. He needed to have experience to start seeing how the Creed worked in every facet. Truly, only experience could really teach that Nothing was True and Everything was Permitted.

Honoré looked forward to seeing how Arno grew over the next few years. Especially if they could get a constitutional monarchy to work, how things would change. There were many lists and items that always claimed his attention. But Honoré had to admit, if privately, that he was proud of how far Arno had come compared to when he arrived.

Perhaps Arno could be his successor, in another ten years when Honoré planned on stepping down as Mentor? But that was too far away to think of.

For now, he was reviewing the latest bills from the Assembly, the maneuvers of the King and Queen, and how the Assembly was attempting to counter.

"Hervé," Honoré turned back to the table. "What do you think of our latest proposal?"
Lunch was little more than another café au lait, Arno was going through the broadsheets again - not in preparation to read to the patrons but rather looking for information on the Cour de Miracle. So much of the city lived off of begging, and in the slums daily "miracles" happened where the lame could walk, and the blind could see - but the dead didn't talk, if Brasseur was any indication. Arno didn't know much about the slums, even in Café Théâtre Arno didn't have a lot of exposure to the beggars aside from occasionally shooing them away - he'd only been steward for a month. He read through the articles, but politics was the dominant thought of the day, the dominant thought of every day, really, and Arno couldn't find what he was looking for. When he looked up it was midafternoon - the sun had already set with the short winter days, and it was time for him to read the papers to the dinner crowd. He rubbed his eyes, they burned after so much reading, but stood and straightened himself out.

Célestine was carrying a tray, hands shaking with the weight of all the orders, and Arno took pity on her and took the tray himself. It was only half a dozen cups of filled café, that was nothing compared to what Olivier put him through. Mme Gouze discreetly let him know which cups went where, and Arno talked and interacted with the small crowd briefly before moving over to the bar. Jacques had another cup of café au lait, for him, already knowing his favorite. Arno sipped it once, twice, feeling the hot liquid burn down his throat and waking him up. Once the main room was at its biggest crowd - barely a dozen, he moved up to the stage with his stack of papers and began to read them as the patrons enjoyed their meals.

After that was sword practice with Grizier, and a small bit of leftovers before it was back to his room - this time with a few books from the library in the hopes of doing more research. He'd never been to a slum before, he didn't know what he was getting into or how he was going to be stabbed in the back. He looked down at his new hidden blade, the phantom blade… Removed from the pomp of the Sanctuary the weapon made more sense now. He would have to train with it at some point - preferably before he went to the slums.

He read once more into the wee hours until his body collapsed to bed.

He woke at dawn with his stomach filled with anticipation and his mind full of what he could do in order to better prepare; Arno got up and washed and changed. His eyes had stopped burning but he could see how bloodshot they still were in the mirror. How long did it take for that to go away? He shook his head.

Downstairs was Jacques attempting to do some kind of repair on the plaster. The man made wonderful café, but was a terrible repairman.

He made it maybe three steps into the unoccupied intendent's office when he heard the door to the servant's quarters open. A hunched figure in rags and a missing shoe limped in on a crutch, hair askew and streaked in grime. A beggar? Here? What…? Then he saw the color of the hair under the mess and the shape of the jaw.

"Fabre?"

The unassigned assassin straightened, revealing his crutch wasn't a crutch but his massive axe he carried when they first met. He gave a toothy grin. "Salut!" he said brightly. "Comment çava?"

Arno's response was a little slow, a little confused. "Çava... merci."

Fabre laughed at his response. "I heard you got another 'assignment' less than a day after the first finished - that's rare! Good for you. But rumor is you'll be close to home for me, and I wanted to let you know what to expect from the relatives."
Arno blinked, wondering if he needed more sleep. Then it all clicked in his head. "Wait, you're from."

Fabre nodded. "I'll meet you on the roof. Fewer eyes up there." He backed out of the servants' entrance, and Arno was already leaving the study, hooking a sharp right and up the grand staircase and to the dance room, boots echoing off the wood floor and all but bursting out to the rooftop garden. Fabre was there, sitting under the portico - his shoe was back on, a bit of canvas hung from two of the beams with a crude bullseye sketched onto it. Axe leaning against the rail, Fabre stood and he stepped forward. "Well, then, let's get started, shall we?"

Arno blinked. "Started with what, exactly?"

Fabre reached over and tapped Arno's elbow, making him look down at his hidden blade. His new phantom blade. "Did they tell you range affects effectiveness?"

"Oui."

"Do you know what it even does?"

"Non."

Fabre sighed, shaking his head. "Sorry about that, the Council loves to look mysterious, even when they don't have to. But then, we all do after a fashion, so I guess it's a family trait. Small things first, there's a release here, see how it snaps out? The string of the bow goes through here - never destring the bow, you always want to be battle ready - and then pull it back until you feel it snap into place. Practice releasing and drawing for a little."

Unlike Bellec, Fabre was a patient teacher - he demonstrated small pieces of the use of the phantom blade and then let Arno practice it several times before moving on to the next. The release was sticky, and Fabre said that was common and showed him how to do small maintenance in the field, explaining that they had a blacksmith just south of where the Bastille used to be to do more thorough cleaning. "Don't assume he's always free, though," Fabre said. "Learn the feel of your own blade, there may be a time when you're underground and have to fix it yourself." Arno learned how to insert a dart, where they were stored in the blade, how to detect a jam, how to angle his middle finger to make it fire.

Aiming, exactly like the Council said, was dependent on distance. Darts did not have long range to begin with, and the hit zones were very small on the human body. Fabre poked Arno's body to indicate the best places to hit - most especially at the base of the skull and right above the collar bone. Firing at the canvas bullseye was easy enough at ten paces, but harder from the other side of the rooftop garden and impossible from the roof of the Café.

"If you have an eagle that will help," Fabre said from where they sat on the roof. It was noon now, Arno could see the lunch patrons trickle across the bridge to come to the Café. "Bellec said you have the sight, n'est-ce pas?"

"Every time I use it my head threatens to split open," Arno said. His eyes burned at the very thought, and he gestured vaguely at the bloodshot.

Fabre studied him for a while, for a moment the affable smile gone. He reached up, silently asking to touch Arno, and then moved his chin around, checking his eyes. "Does it sound like an eagle?"

Arno blinked, surprised at the question. "... No," he said very carefully, remembering Bellec and the Bastille and all the fights over sound.
"What do they sound like?"

"... fireworks…"

"... and afterwards, we'll see the fireworks."

Arno shuddered, surely from the cold.

"Thought so," Fabre said. "The eagle is passed by blood - if the blood is thin then the eagle shriek sounds like something else. Your father was an Assassin, right? He would have had the sight, did your mother?"

"I don't know. She left when I was four."

Fabre nodded again. "Training will make it a little better, but it will never be natural like it is with someone of stronger blood. My eagle is always in my ear, I can look around for hours. Others can barely ask for its help for a few minutes."

Arno blinked slowly. "Bellec… he always made it sound like it should have been easy."

Fabre shrugged. "And for him is probably was. Strong eagles can emerge even when we're children. Others come later - that's another sign of thinner blood. When did yours first show?"

Arno pursed his lips. "The Bastille…"

Fabre whistled. "That is late, but then you didn't have people around you with the sight."

"Is it an Assassin… gift… then?"

Fabre shook his head. "Non. But people with the sight usually see passed the illusion a lot quicker."

"... See passed the illusion?"

"They start learning the Creed."

Arno groaned. Not this again.

His stomach growled, though, and he realized he hadn't eaten anything for two days. Mme Gouze, almost right on cue, came up with a tray of onion soup and cassoulet with ratatouille. Southern recipes, they were still trying to find a unique flavor. He thanked the madame quietly - Fabre loudly - and they moved into the dance hall to eat at a small table.

"You said you were from the Cour des Miracles?" Arno asked carefully.

"The question is which one?" Fabre asked, his usual smile more nuanced than usual. "There used to be quite a few before all the outreach programs. If it wasn't for my eagle I'd be dead in a ditch several times over."

"Is it really that bad?"

"Worse," Fabre said brightly. "Beggars are what the cour is known for, of course, but there's more than that: women of the night, thieves, murderers, cutthroats. They're all invisible there, and they keep it that way in whatever way they can. They have their own slang to identify outsiders, they have alleys and bolt holes and tents and sewers. The most prized are the kids and the injured - they rake in coin, and everyone tries to emulate them. I don't look it now but when I was fourteen I could still pass for eight. Jean found me when I picked his pocket and brought me to the
Sanctuary. I left and I never looked back."

"What do I need to know?" Arno asked, swallowing his myriad questions that Fabre's last three sentences had elicited.

"The slang - I'll spend a few days there before we get you in and catch up on the most recent changes. Never sleep where someone can find you. Never eat where people can see you unless you want to be beaten over whatever scraps you have. Eat up now, you won't when you're up there. Also, don't sleep two days before you go - you want to look as down on your luck as you can. We can't hide the muscle, but if you're a recent member of the fallen we can work with that. Talk as little as possible. Drink enough that it's always on your breath…"

Fabre stayed with Arno for two days, getting him used to his hidden blade and comfortable with practice and giving him rough outlines on what to expect from the slums - all of which sounded utterly horrible. In the café he continued to read the papers, after a month there had been virtually no change in numbers, it was the same dozen or so every evening, even with Mirabeau flooding them with the Assemblmen. He and Mme Gouze had made a list of priorities on how to repair the establishment but money above all else was needed. He pursed his lips as he went over the accounts. The floors had been swept, all curtains, rugs, towels and scrap of fabric had been washed or thrown away. For the next week Arno focused on the wood floors, pulling out splinters and replacing nails, sanding down the stain in preparation for eventually redoing them. His hands were blistered messes by the end of the third day, Grizier had to pull him aside after practice with a basin of hot water and tweezers to pull out the worst of the damage.

"You need to take better care of yourself," the sword master said. "Charlotte and I see how late you stay up in order to get work done, and it's not uncommon for people like us to burn the candle at both ends."

"I have to be ready," Arno said, shaking his head. He winced as a splinter was pulled out of his palm. "I'm going to-"

"To the Cour des Miracles, I know," Grizier said. "You've said that before. But there's a difference between preparation and degradation, you know."

Arno yes'ed his way through the conversation before going to his room and taking apart his new phantom blade, trying to understand the weapon as best he could before going northwest. He could disassemble it well enough, but reassembling needed a lot of small instruments and in dim candlelight the work was daunting.

Eventually, however, time was up. Fabre came in through the servants' entrance in his beggar's outfit. Arno waited for him in his work culottes and an old training shirt. He hadn't shaved in three days, hadn't slept or eaten in two, per his friend's request. The bloodshot in his eyes had reduced but not yet disappeared - between that and the dark sleep-bruisers under his eyes and the shadow of his chin he looked a mess, exactly what Fabre wanted. He nodded in approval and the left the café.

The pair took a slow, meandering pace. Fabre offered a tattered excuse of a cloak against the winter chill and Arno shrugged it on, the thief taking manure off the ground and rubbing it into Arno's person to hide his clean scent, quizzing him on slang as they went. Fabre slowly began to limp and leaned on his disguised axe as a crutch, Arno "helping" him along as they made their way along the river before slowly turning north and moving deeper into the city. Rich housing and clean facades slowly faded to peeling exteriors. Ornamentation was replaced with lamentation, people wailing and sitting anywhere there was a dry bit of muck - the paving had long since evaporated to dirt, frozen puddles, and more manure - hands out and heads down. This was Porte-Saint-Denis,
named after an old battlement that protected the right bank of the city centuries ago. Long since worn and torn down, it was little more than shingles and shambles, exposed wood, rot, and destitution.

Fabre found them a place and sat them down. "Here's our spot," he said. "Been sitting here for four days, they know it's mine. Do like I said, and say as little as possible."

Arno shifted his weight, the chill of the ground seeping into him, but he held out his hands and put his head down, moaning once in a while, knowing that people could do this for days and still receive nothing.

He was exhausted after only fifteen minutes.

"New friend, Fauchelevent?" a voice above Arno's head asked after an hour.

"Old one," Fabre said. Gone was his smile, his affable nature. Now he sounded destitute, worn down, bitter. "I told you about him, remember? This here is Gervais. Say 'bonjour,' Gervais."

Arno looked up, eyes taking in a rumbled man in a coat, hat ripped but with two feathers, and a pointed chin. "Bonjour," he said slowly.

"Bonjour, Gervais," the rumbled man said. "This your first time in the Cour des Miracles?"

Arno glanced at Fabre. The thief didn't look at him. "Oui," he said finally.

The rumbled man offered something that might have passed for a smile. "Cheer up," he said, "it's not the worst place. Some here have been in the Colonies a few years ago - I hear that was ugly. Just keep one hand on your purse…" the man looked surreptitiously at Arno's hips, but per Fabre's instructions he had no purse on his person. The man's smile turned smug. "You'll be fine."

"Don't worry, monsieur," Fabre said. "I've been teaching him about the pecking order."

"Good," the rumbled man said. "You know the rules. Three days and then he can come to the tents to pay tribute."

"Oui, monsieur," Fabre said.

The man left, finally, and Arno glanced at Fabre. "Friend of yours?"

Fabre spat. "No one's friends with a worm, a ver. That's La Touche."

"What?"

"Stop," Fabre said, hand darting out and grabbing Arno's wrist, half standing as he was to go after his lead. "Look."

Arno, seething, looked again and saw two burly men - not the rake thin form of beggars - follow La Touche discreetly. "The ver is well protected outside his tents. He knows his value to the Roi des Thunes and protects himself accordingly. You saw how snide he was when he saw you - he expects you to get mad, he wants you to attack him so his guards can make an example of you. Best place to get him is the tents, like he said."

"But he's right -"

"Patience, Gervais," Fabre said. "Waiting is the most important part, and it's also the hardest."
For the next three days, Arno and Fabre begged, sitting in their spot, hands out, sometimes moaning, sometimes saying something. Once or twice they would try a new spot. Fabre of course got more coins for his obvious limp and missing shoes. Arno felt like he was little more than bones, he ate so little, but he barely made six francs for all the time he wasted waiting for the day of tribute. At night they slept by “chimneys,” grates that lead down to the sewers were fire pits burned invisible to the world. The sweet smell of wood smoke and warmth kept them comfortable for a few hours before they disappeared for someone else to take it. Food was a lengthy journey through narrow allies to a mud-covered street with ancient stone façade in desperate need of repair, a small wood balcony above them rotting and dangerously tilted to one side. There Arno met Yvette, a woman even darker than Cosette, in her forties and pear shaped, working over a fire. Whatever she was cooking smelled delicious, and the taste was nothing like he’d had before.

"Madame," he said slowly. "What is this?"

"Chicken fricassee," the black woman said.

Arno frowned. "Where does that come from?"

"Haiti," Yvette said.

"The Caribbean?" Arno asked. "How did you come to be here?"

"The same way everyone comes to be here: bad luck."

"Your pardon, Madame," Fabre said quickly. "He's still new to his misfortune, privacy wasn't a privilege where he was from."

Yvette looked at Arno, but said nothing, her eyes flat and somehow judging. Arno saw thick, pursed lips that frowned and he saw an echo of Olivier, incongruent to see on a black woman, but he minded his words almost automatically as they left.

Soon enough it was the third day. Arno barely had a dozen livres while Fabre and his lame leg had garnered him almost forty; and they moved to "the tents." Near the center of the district, it was in the dilapidated husk of some kind of church - there were old corners of walls of what looked like a bell tower. There was once an old gate, the walls all but disappeared, and above the load-bearing was a filthy rag of cloth, letters written in what looked suspiciously like blood: Ici les guex sont roi. Entre à vos risques. Here the beggars are king. Enter at your risk.

"How welcoming," Arno said, voice dull.

"We're a cheerful lot here," Fabre said, a hint of his usual brightness ghosting over his voice. They moved under the arch and Fabre immediately stopped limping, one of the many "miracles." A cart of manure was immediately in front of them, and beyond was a maze of hastily nailed wood and tarp. "Remember how I said the King had all these outreach programs? This is one of them - they want to redevelop this area and actually give us housing - how thoughtful! You can see the money is being well spent here…"

Past what could only charitably be called a wall was more solid stonework, the signs of urban renewal Fabre was mentioning, but inside was a wisp of a man crouched by a weak excuse of a fire, rocking back and forth instead of using the toppled over chair - that was missing a leg, Arno realized. Fabre moved through the room and hooked left, Arno following the thief and suddenly they were outside again. A rickety cart in the middle of the path lay there, Arno and Fabre moving around it to see a massive, massive wooden cross half buried in the earth - the husk of the church little more than a rotted corpse. Candles were on it as the afternoon light quickly faded, someone
was holding a book and saying something in Latin, but he wasn't in religious robes. Several women of the night - recognizable with their bare arms and low corsets, were pressed against the walls as men leaned into their personal space, whispering who knew what. Alcohol and feces filled Arno's nostrils - even after three days of begging the stench made his nose crinkle. Most people were dressed in rags, little more than plain wool and cotton - no color other than shades of grey and brown, sweat stains were everywhere, no one had hose for their culottes, hairy legs on display for all to see. Everyone was hunched forward as if the weight of the world lay on their shoulders.

Fabre moved through the crowds, leaving a faint path for Arno to follow as they tried to get back inside. Arno's eyes were rested, they kept roving through the faces, looking for the pointed chin and feathered hat and broken glasses. La Touche would be here to collect tributes, Arno needed to find him to learn where le Roi des Thunes was. Every night here he had relived the mistake, the death of M. de la Serre, and he pursed his lips, looking everywhere.

"Please, no! I've done all I can, it's the times! No one wants to-

"Sa Grâce doesn't care about excuses. He cares about results. If you can't make your quotas, he makes… adjustments."

Arno recognized the voice, stiffening and touching Fabre's back. The thief nodded imperceptibly, and they moved deeper into the tents. There he was: Le Roi des Thunes' lieutenant. La Touche. The lead was hunched over a beggar screaming blue murder: "Non! Non, s'il vous plaît! Nom de dieu, non!"

"Doctor, cut of his foot."

And a man took a rusty saw and started - *Nom de dieu! Diable! Merde!*

Arno moved forward but was held back by Fabre. "I wouldn't do that," the thief hissed, his voice suddenly intense. "Remember what I said? Paris gives more money to crippled beggars than whole ones. Le Roi des Thunes sees in that bit of trivia an opportunity to motivate his less successful employees."

Arno watched in horror as the "doctor" did his work, the beggar had long since passed out, blood was spurting out from the work. How could he stand by and watch such suffering? He turned to Fabre. "That man-!"

"Has lost a foot," Fabre said, completely serious. "You could charge in there, cause a great disturbance and break the Creed and send all these rats scurrying back to their holes. Or you could hide in plain sight, disappear into the swarm, and follow the rats back to their king. Either way, 'that man' has lost a foot."

Then came the sickening *thud* of meat hitting the ground, Arno nearly threw up but his head inevitably swung back around to see the butcher look to La Touche. "It's done."

"Take him to the clinic for a proper cauterization, then send him back to the street."

Two brawly men lifted the unconscious beggar and just… *tossed* him onto a cart. "Come on," one said, "Up you get."

The… the *casualness* of it all struck Arno right to the core. Mutilation, *butchery*, had just occurred and no one bothered to stop it or stand up for it or… or… how did anyone stand it? How did *Fabre*? Just what had the older thief gone through that he just made Arno watch this, that he *let this happen? Horror, rage, bubbled up in him and he turned again to Fabre, but his eyes were hard and
set, darker than he had ever seen them. "You're not the only one with a vested interest in seeing the
King of Rats caught in a trap, Arno," he said, voice low but intense. "We wait. Then we follow the
blood."

Arno was horrified, energy was pulsing through him like it had the day he had begged to kill Sivert
- was that only a week ago? Arno grunted and moved back and forth, his eyes never straying from
the pool of blood the amputation had left, nostrils flaring as his blood slowly started to boil.

He about jumped when Fabre finally moved, body loose and casual, leaving the site of the
mutilation and following the trail up the stairs. Arno powered after him, happy to take the lead on
this, but Fabre yanked his elbow and kept a firm grip on him. "Bite it down," he growled. "You'll
give the game away and we can't afford that. La Touche is a ver remember, he knows it and will
jump at the slightest provocation. Stay back, stay calm. Hide in plain sight."

The Creed? Now? Arno chaffed at such a useless adage being thrown at him and he twisted out of
the grip. He wasn't a novice, he knew how to tail a suspect, thank you, Bellec had seen to that. He
moved up the stone steps and down another, eyes following the blood trail but going to the other
side of the clearing. Wood and stone and cloth made a maze, but Arno always kept the blood in
sight. He ducked into a wood opening - perhaps a hall - and moved down it to see the blood
leading deeper inside. It would be harder to maneuver there, and Arno wasn't so stupid as to realize
his bloodthirst would get him in trouble. He saw a ladder and moved to climb it. The tarps always
covered something secure, but from above footing was uncertain. That made Arno concentrate as
he stepped - he didn't want to stick his foot through the fabric and give himself away, and now that
he was above he could breathe easier.

Slightly.

"Double time, lads. Sa Grâce isn't fond of tardiness."

"Ah, Monsieur La Touche. Still bringing medical care to the disenfranchised?"

Arno peaked over an edge and saw Fabre engaging La Touch in conversation. What?

"Your day will come, libertine," La Touche replied, dismissing the thief.

Fabre waited until the ver was turned, looking up and giving Arno a smirk and a wink. "Rather
sooner than you think, I'm sure!" he called after La Touche.

Arno forced himself to breathe, he saw the blood trail again, and couldn't believe that Fabre had
been right there and didn't question the spineless ver right then and there. Arno would have to do
this himself, he supposed.

Le Cour des Miracles was a maze even from above; half-made houses pressed up against each
other covered in worn red or sun bleached white. Beggars crouched here and there, above the
stench and depravity, but just as lost as the people down below. Everywhere were the sounds of
moaning, coughing, sickness and tears. There wasn't even money in the entire court for drink to
dull the senses - something Arno sorely needed. La Touche moved from one shack to the next,
checking and collecting contributions to Sa Grâce, he was flanked with no less than three guards,
alternating between holding the take, administering retribution, or glaring at anyone who even
glanced at La Touche funny.

"Is it true what he did to Thierry?" a guard asked, Arno barely hearing the question.

"I remember the man's screams and how long they lasted," La Touche replied, "And that was for
"an accounting error."

"... You're joking. I thought he'd skinned off the take or some such."

"No. He misplaced a one in a ledger. I found the error."

The guard gulped. "Double-time it is…"

Arno tried to follow further, but they had reached the edge of the maze, and the only place Arno could go was up an old rotten tower of the hollowed-out church. It was after sunset now, sight was difficult with the bright dots of fires and Arno struggled to climb the tower for a better view. He'd just reached a flat platform when he heard a chunk of stone crumble off and tumble down to the ground.

La Touche whipped around, face looking around unscrupulously. It was starting to rain.

"... Get him inside," La Touche said, gesturing to the man he had ordered mutilation on.

"Something doesn't feel right."

"Uh… He's dead, monsieur."

What?

"Then toss him in the gutter and get yourselves inside," La Touch ordered.

*That sick unfeeling depraved worm of a-* a hand touched his shoulder and he came up swinging.

Fabre caught it and held fast, waiting for Arno to see past the blood haze. Growling, he pulled out of the thief's grip. "Are you happy now? He's dead."

Fabre sighed. "Non," he said. "I'm not happy. But this is the job we do."

"It's not good enough."

"Of course it isn't. We wouldn't be doing it if it were."

Arno growled, ignoring the thief and scanning the building… the "clinic." Clearly more heavily guarded, this must be La Touche's center of operations. Well, Arno was going to do what he could to set it *afire. No one* deserved what that poor beggar had endured, *no one* deserved to be this destitute. Arno remembered what it was like right after the escape of the Bastille, the hunger and the rain as he tried to go home to Versailles, only to realize his home was shattered because of his mistakes. He had never been lower in his life, and he had only suffered that a few months before he turned to the Assassins - he had nothing without them, and he knew that kind of kindness could be withdrawn with one word. These people… they had spent *years* living like this, forced to turn to begging and brothels and *amputation* to earn enough money to live one more day. La Touche didn't understand that kind of desperation, neither did le Roi des Thunes - or maybe they did, and the preyed upon it.

Arno was shaking, so much energy in his body and nowhere to put it.

"There," Fabre said. "Got a cherry bomb?"

Arno reached inside his *culottes*, finding his hidden pocket and pulling out the cherry bomb. He had hardly used these under Bellec, what was Fabre planning?

"Use your phantom blade," Fabre instructed. "Two guards are about to be distracted."
He leaned back, winding up his arm before throwing the bomb. It fell at the corner of the building, the small hiss of noise - almost fireworks but not quite ("... and we'll see the fireworks...") - made the two heads guarding the main entrance turn. The sun had set, Arno wasn't sure he could make the shot as he triggered his phantom blade and loaded it. Fabre already had his own with a smirk, looking down his arm. Arno did the same, seeing little more than silhouettes until they passed under a lantern. Arno fired, as did Fabre, and both went down without a sound. Fabre loaded another dart in three seconds, Arno took a lot longer.

And they waited.

Nothing happened.

That was enough for Arno. "You take one said, I'll take the other."

"Arno, you've only been an Assassin for a week."

"I've done things like this every time Bellec took me above ground," Arno said, cutting off the thief. "I can handle it." He didn't wait for a reply, moving across the rotten tower and moving out over a moldy wooden beam, taking a reckless leap and landing on the roof across the street. He climbed up the slick wooden shingles, the sound of the rain dampening his steps as he moved carefully across. He had to mind his footing, making him concentrate again, forcing his brain to process something other than the horror he'd been forced to witness. Guards were nowhere to be seen - somewhere warm and dry no doubt. Arno growled at the incompetence but continued to ghost over the wet roofs, slowly working to the back of the clinic and finding an open window, one man standing just inside a rickety balcony. Arno triggered his phantom blade again, taking his time to aim, forcing himself to breath. He was on a roof, above the noise, above the problems... there!

The man fell without even a grunt, and Arno jumped, falling fifteen feet and landing roughly on the balcony, it rocked with his weight and for a split second he thought he was going to fall. The surge of adrenaline jolted him, and he took almost a full minute to breathe and force his heart to go back to normal.

He stepped inside lightly, but no one was in the upstairs, everyone guarding the lower levels where they expected trouble - exactly as Bellec had taught him. There was no one to see, and Arno started to creep down a set of stairs he found.

"What's the order for the unfortunate in bed six?" someone asked.

La Touche: "Horribly burned in a fire that killed his family and drove him mad."

"A burn job? Do you know how hard those are to get right without burning half the district to ash?"

"Use a few drops of the strong acid. Laymen can't tell the difference."

And then there were screams.

Dieu putain d'excuse misérable d'un fou dépravé! Arno straightened from his crouch, a low growl in his throat, and saw someone who dared claim themselves as a doctor dripping something on the face of another beggar. He extended his hidden blade, intent on the kill, before a hand covered his mouth and he was pulled back to the stairs. Fabre was there, Arno knew it, and he was stopping him again from saving someone. Arno struggled against the older thief but the lock he had on him was complete and he was starting to lose air. Fabre held him even longer, until his vision started to spot, before finally letting go. Arno struggled to breathe silently, and Fabre still had a death-grip on
his arm, silently demanding that he wait and clear his head.

"La Touche," he mouthed, forcing Arno to focus.

The name cut through Arno's righteous fury, his objective sending a jolt through his overstimulated brain, and eventually he could nod understanding. Arno fell back in a crouch, sneaking alone a ruined table and around another butcher. Fabre faded from his mind, Arno sneaking around the edge of the room, one eye on that godforsaken butcher before turning a corner and seeing a closed door.

Perfect.

He kicked the door open, the violence releasing some of the pressure and he stormed into the room. La Touche hadn't expected such a forward assault, jumped perhaps a foot in the air before he scrambled for something, a rusty kitchen knife. He was, indeed, a worm, a ver, however, and had no skills whatsoever in combat. His swing was wild and easily projected - Arno caught the assault at the wrist and twisted, making the implement fall harmlessly. Arno shoved the ver against the wall, knocking the wind out of him and giving him a better grip on the worm's shirt. A glance at the room found cuffs on the wall for more torture. Perfect. He started dragging the spineless ver, the pitiful thing already shrieking. "Non! S'il vous plaît, NON!"

Arno ignored him, spinning him slightly for disorientation and slamming him against the wall, holding one wrist to the cuff and locking it in place. La Touche was still struggling, Arno punched him in the jaw - the shock of the blow stilling him enough that M. de la Serre's avenger could lock his other arm in place. "Give me le Roi des Thunes," he growled, "and I'll spare your life."

He wished the man a spine, he wanted to let the little ver know a fraction of the pain he caused.

Alas:

"The catacombs! He's in the catacombs beneath the old church!"

"Oh, La Touche," said a new voice: Fabre. His easy grin was back after so many days. "I expected a stronger spine than that. What will your maître say?"

Arno and Fabre turned as the ver realized what he had just done, horror blooming on his face and trapped. He screamed, and for once the noise made Arno smile.

They left the clinic.

Chapter End Notes

.... and almost made it in one chapter again! This chapter has a lot of little things to talk about, especially at the beginning. Firstly: during the French Revolution everyone kind of had a massive hate-boner fro the Church. As expressed in earlier chapters, there's the ten percent tithe, the fact that their ultimate authority is in Rome and not France, there's the fact that the church owns a huge percentage of land, and when they pay taxes the amount is self-determined rather than dictated by the state. This early in the Revolution the only real things being done (among others, there's only so much we can fit in here) is that all clergy has to take an oath to France, and essentially reestablish themselves as serving the state instead of the papacy. This kind of flies in
the face of the entire church hierarchy, and very few priests actually take that oath. Cue the predictable riots that Arno uses to sneak into Notre Dame.

The assassination itself is kept pretty lock-step to the game, the only embellishments are to show that Arno doesn't always take care of himself. If you look at his game model it always looks like he has bags under his eyes, and we're leaning into the idea he's a bit of an insomniac. We also see how we're treating the whole "conversation" stuff that Arno does. Game developers said that Arno, not being from Desmond's line, doesn't have a strong eagle sense, so instead of going into the soul room and having a conversation he "sees" their last thoughts which... let's just say it's bad. It's literally a plot contrivance to figure out who to look for next rather than a philosophical conversation. We're okay with no philosophy, Arno's character and arc is a little bit different, but we did what we always do: we treat it like a conversation. That makes some of the later memories a little tricky but this one for now is pretty straight forward.

This leads into Eagle Vision. In keeping with the thought that Arno's eagle is weak, his can't be active for hours on end like Altaïr or Ezio, and the stream of information gives him a headache. Fabre explains it best in what eagles are like in people who don't have
Death of a Beggar

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was, perhaps, less than ten seconds after they were secure that they had escaped before Fabre grabbed Arno by his collar. "What was that, back there?" he demanded. "You giving me orders? I have fifteen years on you."

"This is my mission," Arno said. "I'm responsible for killing le Roi des Thunes."

"Merde, and what, you thought my only assignment was to get you here to do the job?"

Arno blinked. Yes, that was exactly what he had thought.

Fabre realized that, let go in shock. "Nom de dieu," he cursed. "Do you even think?"

Arno immediately soured at hearing the echo of Bellec come from someone he thought a friend.

"Dorian," Fabre said. "Why do you think I've been unassigned for so long, living in the Sanctuary?" Arno didn't answer, because he didn't know. Fabre's eyes widened, nostrils flaring. "Did you ever think to ask?"

"No," Arno said. Asking questions was asking for trouble - Olivier loved lording knowledge over Arno's head, M. de la Serre always seemed so disappointed when he asked something that was supposed to be obvious, and Bellec had him hanging by his fingertips for hours if he asked a question. No, questions were problems, and Arno knew answers were meant to be a gift granted him. He could only work with what he'd been told.

"Merde. Merde!" Fabre said, stepping back and pinching his brow. "No wonder… How many things have you been told that you didn't understand? Did you just go through the motions of training? Merde! I need a minute…"

Fabre pressed his hands to his forehead, trying to process… whatever overwhelming thing he had just realized of Arno. Arno himself didn't ask what the problem was - he'd already upset the thief and didn't want to upset him more. Besides, his larger concern was his mission: he had a location now. The catacombs. That meant the smaller church north of where the tents were, back near where they had done their begging - where the "chimneys" were. He knew the area after three days, and he knew where they could go to scout the church. He silently left Fabre to his thoughts, moving back out to the streets, passed the building Yvette cooked her Caribbean food and up a different half-collapsed pile of stone that once passed for a tower. It was full dark now, he needed more light than he had, but he didn't have a lot of time: La Touche would eventually be found and set free, and Arno needed to move. The rain by now had soaked him through, his thin clothes making him shiver, but he would do whatever it took to avenge M. de la Serre and redeem the worst mistake of his life.

Élise…

He sat on a thin line of stone, eyes closed, breathing deeply. The sounds of the beggars and rats below fell away, the problems of the world disappearing as he turned inward and focused. He was above his problems now, he was above the petty concerns of people. Above, there was only focus; above, there was only the mission.
Above, there was only the eagle.

Dull pops of sound, less like fireworks and more like eagle chirps caught his ears and he opened his eyes and Saw. There were three different chimneys that he knew of, but also two others, their smoke lazily climbing up above the rooftops, their grey color caught in whatever fire and lantern light the night rain afforded. Also, too, there was a crowd of beggars by the entrance of the church, pressing against a line of burly men that could only be guards - a distraction. Yes, he could use a distraction to sneak in.

The attention bled away as soon as it appeared, and his head split open like it did at Notre Dame. He sucked air between his teeth, grunting, blind in the rain and only his sense of balance kept him from falling to his death. He moaned, hands rubbing his head, but he couldn't stay here, he needed to move. Fabre could rally the beggars, turn it into a full revolt. No, Fabre wasn't his friend, he thought Arno couldn't think, he would have to do this himself… Oh, it was so hard to think…

He somehow made it back down to street level. Chimneys first, he knew where they were without hurting his brain too much. He rubbed at his week-old beard and staggered through the narrow streets and alleys. The first chimney he blocked with a simple wood platform, the second with a sack of something that smelled of manure. He had trouble finding the third but managed. Time was spinning away, the rain had stopped, and Arno was having trouble thinking through the migraine. The fourth had two burly men leaning by it, talking.

"Quotas are up again. I don't know who Sa Grâce's new friends are, but they're squeezing us drier than stones."

"Hope I've got enough…"

"Wonder what they'll take this week?"

"More 'tribute' to Sa Grâce, no doubt. I'm going to use what coin I have to have 'fun.' They have a new girl around the corner, was thinking I could 'educate' her."

"Better than the king's 'modifications.'"

Arno was nearly sick to hear the end of the conversation as the two burly men walked away, but he forced himself to ignore the nausea and overturned a table to place over the grate. Once he was done, he was back to the church. His head was no longer splitting, but it still hurt like hell. The crowd had grown in size - he wasn't sure why - until he saw Fabre at the edge, talking to another beggar and then the beggar joining the press against the burly guards.

"Piss off, you lot," one of them growled.

"But i-it's time for Mass."

"Your souls will keep. No one enters without Sa Grâce's permission."

"But…"

"Get out of my sight, chien!"

"But we have to pray!"

Arno didn't have a good view on street level, he moved along the wall away from the crowds and to an alley to scramble up a building to a roof. It was near midnight now, he shivered with his cold, wet clothes. From above he had a better lay of the land - there were people aplenty, courtesy of
Fabre, but the guards were bigger, better fed and better built, the poor devils were completely outmatched and would be cut to ribbons without help. He pulled out a smoke bomb, turning it over. Would it light after all the rain? The cherry bomb had earlier… one of the brutes lifted a baton and the decision was made for Arno. He lit and threw the bomb, praying it would do the job as he backtracked and leapt to the gate wall - he nearly broke his neck for the slippery landing but managed to stay upright. He heard the explosion and smelled the smoke, and he took a leap. He landed on someone big - exactly what he was hoping for, and dug his hidden blade in the soft tissue of the neck. He sensed more than heard someone next to him, the lack of noise made him wonder, but he instead followed the curses of one of the brutes, stabbing him in the back. An arm grabbed him - "Dorian, hide!" - and he was pulled back and away from the two bodies as the smoke started to dissipate.

There were six bodies, not two. He turned, surprised Fabre had done so much. The older thief held a hand to his lips, gesturing to watch. Arno did, seeing the beggars looking around bewildered to see six bodies suddenly on the ground.

"God struck them down!" Fabre shouted, elation in his voice. "God struck them down!"

The crowd erupted, energy and resentment and bloodlust pushing them forward, into the church with their good omen. "Let's see the connards push us around now!"

"Go," Fabre said in Arno's ear. "Do your assignment. I'll work up here."

Arno blinked, confused, but not about to let this opportunity pass. If Fabre decided he liked him again he wasn't going to question it, and now was the perfect chance: the smoke would drive le Roi des Thunes' people above ground and into Fabre's riot, leaving his target vulnerable. Perfect. Parfait.

He followed the rebels to the edge of the church, watched them fight to gain access to their faith, and quietly leapt over the fence, sticking to the myriad shadows. Catacombs were usually kept behind the church - he saw the entrance and two guards there, listening to the cries from the other side of the haloed building.

"Can't blame them. More of Sa Grâce's 'special projects' on the streets these days. I've scarcely made a livre all week - how do I compete with triple amputees and 'wounded veterans'?"

"Miss another tribute and you'll be remembering your own brave service at Grünberg."

Then they heard gunfire.

"Merde, one of them found a gun. Let's take care of this."

The two guards left. Arno couldn't believe his luck. He moved silently through the night and to the entrance, giving one last look around before he ducked into the entrance, moving down a winding series of stone steps. The catacombs themselves had low ceilings and even less light than above, but that actually helped Arno's headache. He kept his ears open, staying well away from the occasional candle and sound of someone moving around. His filthy clothes were dark, he was virtually invisible.

A noise caught Arno's attention, and he froze at the heavy shuffle and heavy scrape and pounding of feet. "What's happened?"

"The beggars, they're rioting all throughout the district. Come on!"

Arno crouched down, listening to the feet and watching as three, four, eight, twelve men moved
out of the catacombs - and leaving their entrance wide open and inviting Arno to enter. Arno moved to what amounted to little more than a hole in the floor, and a light jump brought him to the familiar circular shape of the sewers. Arno had lived in sewers for a year during his "death," he might not have been in these specific sewers but he knew how to read them, how to orient himself, how to tell where he was. He kept an eye out for grates that gave light, stayed out of the stench-filled liquid of the water and kept his feet light. There were occasionally candles or storage crates - acting practically like a proverbial X on a treasure map to tell him he was going in the right direction.

The guards were not all turned out, but even so far removed from the signs of the riot Arno could tell that the numbers were less than the norm - men moved one by one instead of in pairs, their movements were jittery, unused to being alone, and there were long stretches where there was just... no one. The silence descended on Arno, and he started to realize this was really happening - that he was about to kill the final man responsible for the murder of M. de la Serre. He would reach catharsis, he would erase his final mistake. Confidence started to build in him, his conflict with Fabre fading from his mind as his migraine dulled to a headache. He was about to undo his mistake. He was about to redeem himself.

He passed over the heads of three guards milling in a lower pit of the sewers, uncertain what to do, and passed them Arno saw a chamber much larger and much better lit. This would be a major pool for spring runoff to prevent the streets from flooding, and in the dead of winter it was the perfect place for a throne room, it seemed. There were tables and chairs, one raised above others – the throne, supposedly, with red carpets to keep the space warm. Arno kept looking around, determining his best route in with all those guards-

"Votre Grâce! Votre Grâce!"

La Touche?

"Votre Grâce!" the worm, the ver said, scrambling over to a pale man in a top had, sitting in a chair. "I've heard, uh, reliable reports that... that an Assassin is nearby, and that... that you are his intended target!"

Well. The ver has grown a spine, then, now the worm was a snake: a serpent.

"Bon sang," le Roi des Thunes cursed. "It was only a matter of time, I knew that much."

La Touche continued to save face, quickly agreeing: "Oui, votre Grâce ... the Assassins are... ah... well connected."

That seemed to spark le Roi des Thunes. "But we have the advantage, now, don't we? They don't know these catacombs nearly as well as we, and they are not nearly as desperate as us. They dare assault our home? We'll show them just how dangerous we are. Muster the guard and lead the hunt for this Assassin. Bring me his head."

"But votre Grâce, half our men are out dealing with uprising among the beggars!"

"So?" le Roi des Thunes asked.

"... Y-you men, with me! Spread out, keep a watchful eye, stay on your guard! Don't let him pass!"

Ugh. The serpent still thought he could turn this around.

Arno let the others leave the pit, Arno was drinking in the details of le Roi des Thunes. He recognized the voice, the "Sivert, come away!" having the same hissing quality. This man had
helped the smuggler Sivert kill M. de la Serre. Why? Why did these two work together to kill such a good-hearted, gentle man?

… he would soon find out.

Arno turned from the light, letting his burning eyes adjust to the dark again, and as he did he realized he was standing by a body. Frowning, he crouched down to examine it better - and he recognized the size, the color of the skin, and most especially the scarf. Brasseur… his body was ruined by the rats and the elements, the stench lost with the rest of the sewer - he had made it this far before being caught. Cosette… Arno reached forward and put a hand on the man's forehead. "Je suis désolé," he apologized. "He will pay for your death, as well."

Arno backed up from the body, retreating to different sewer and started tracing his way around the runoff pit. He could hear more shuffling of the guards, they had an objective now, but the smoke was also starting to fill the circular corridors, the chimneys doing their job. Arno's eyes watered as much as theirs, more than a few were cursing - and thereby announcing their location for Arno to avoid. He kept above where he could, hid behind crates where he couldn't. He could still hear La Touche, musing if the Assassin had given up or calling him a coward. Arno ignored the serpent, lightly falling down a level and slinking behind two guards and down another corridor, finally finding a ladder that took him to the right level.

The runoff pit was right in front of him now, he could see le Roi des Thunes sitting in this throne, alone and waiting to be killed. He was right there. Bellec had hit him over the head for that instinct more than once, and his headache throbbed in memory. Arno held still, held his breath, waited.

Then, the silence carrying it further than intended: "Hold your positions, men."

Bellec was right. This was a trap.

Arno crouched low again, taking a slow, deep breath and considering his options. He could see into the pit because the pit apparently had a corridor around it, probably to channel the runoff, but it was crumbled and had great, yawning openings like the one right in front of him. With that knowledge, le Roi des Thunes most likely positioned his men on that outer corridor - but in corners where they would be hidden and facing towards the throne. If Arno kept even outside of that, assuming he could be silent, then he would literally walk right by them. But where would he come out? Arno lifted his eyes up, seeing the other sewer corridors that would fill the pit, all above the eyes of everyone on the ground. Yes, that would work perfectly. Nodding to himself, Arno hugged the far wall, moving right and sliding under a grate. He stayed still a moment, heard a guard on the other side of the grate, and moved silently away, moving around the circumference of the pit and keeping an eye on the platforms he had seen earlier.

There, a ladder. Arno held his breath as a flood of excitement burned through him. His heart was in his throat now, he had to force himself to move slowly, silently, as he climbed and made it to the upper platforms.

And there, right across from him, was the real Roi des Thunes, rifle in hand, waiting for Arno to come across the body double below and shoot him. Was that how Brasseur was killed. Arno pursed his lips - he was directly across and if he stepped into the light he would be visible. What to do… what to do… He pulled out a cherry bomb, trying to gauge the best place to throw it. Think, Arno, think, merdeux, or the target gets away and you don't get another chance like this. Arno focused on his spot and tossed the cherry bomb, letting it bump and clatter along the walls, echoing in the acoustics of the pit and then giving it's garbled noise.

"There! Perhaps not as clever as you think, Assassin? What trophy shall I take from you? I hope it's
better than that silly pistol from the last one!" Le Roi des Thunes moved from his position, swinging around to the side with his rifle to the sound of the cherry bomb. Arno ran out into the light and jumped in the opposite direction, grabbing a support beam and swinging out to a hastily constructed watch platform. Water from the sewer above was pouring down, Arno was soaked with who knew what, but he ignored the chill that rattled his spine and instead scrambled to the next beam and the next platform - racing across the circumference of the runoff pit and finally getting above le Roi des Thunes. He didn't even stop to breathe, he leapt.

He landed on the murderer and rammed his hidden blade into the shoulder, not the neck. This death had to linger, to get answers. Le Roi des Thunes grunted and crumpled to the floor, softening Arno's landing. "This is for Brasseur," Arno growled. "And for Monsieur de la Serre. Why did you kill him?" Why a beggar and a smuggler? Why assassinate such an upright man like M. de la Serre?

Le Roi des Thunes looked at Arno as if he had a second head. "I offered that pompous fool my kingdom," he growled. "My subjects have eyes everywhere; their knowledge would have been invaluable. And that fool said he had no interest in the 'intrigues of rats!'"

"All this over a petty insult?" Arno demanded, incredulous.

Le Roi des Thunes smiled. "Is that what you think, Assassin?" His other hand whipped out but Arno was too fast, catching the offending hand and stabbing a second time, this time in the neck.

"The… Grandmaitre… will…"


But there was only a sick, self-satisfied smile. Merde. Merde! Diable!

Arno stood, mind in shock. The two didn't act alone…? Someone had ordered the murder…? His mistake… Away. He needed to get away. Merde! He backtracked to his small entrance and saw the sewers were now covered in thick smoke. Nobody could see anything, guards ordering to put out torches and douse fires, trying to air out the smoke - it all was little more than noise to Arno as he let his instincts and training guide him through the noises on silent feet. Someone ordered the murder! His work wasn't done, his mistake was not erased, his redemption had not been achieved. He had not killed everyone responsible for the death of M. de la Serre… the blood was still on his hands…! Arno could see the monsieur's stagger, the accusatory glare of his father when he was a boy, all his mistakes bubbling up and reminding him how small and pathetic he was, how unworthy he was of someone like Élise or even the Assassins since he kept messing up. He kept making bad decisions. He kept letting people down. Merde. Diable!

Arno looked up and saw that he was back on street level, near… he had no idea where he was, but he saw a winery and marched right in, taking the pitiful livres his begging had garnered him and buying a bottle. He needed to be numb, he needed to stop feeling. He popped the cork and guzzled until he needed air. Nom de dieu it was terrible but he didn't care, taking in a breath and taking another long, air suffocating draw. Half the bottle was gone in two gulps, and the wine flooded his blood quickly - only now instead of feeling numb he felt like crying, the aborted catharsis felt like pulling a rug out from under him, Olivier and the other servants laughing at his misfortune. He was trying to do right by the man who raised him! He was trying to make up for the mistake! Why wasn't it enough…?

He finished the bottle and bought another, determined to get numb all the way to his core, but
someone snatched the will from his hands.

"Celebrating a little early, there, Arno."

… Fabre?

"There's nothing to celebrate," Arno said, words hard to form.

"Sure there is. You're looking at the new Roi des Thunes."

Arno blinked, the wine making it hard to think. … He could never think on demand…

Fabre smiled, soft and almost understanding. "As long as there's a Cour des Miracles we must have a Roi des Thunes. There's a vacancy now, and I finally get to step in." He paused. "It is done, right? You're drinking because you finally avenged the dead?"

Arno shook his head, swaying slightly. "Rot," he said, unsure if he said the word right. "I always thought it was just the two, Sivert and le Roi des Thunes, but there's someone else, someone who ordered the hit…" He reached for the bottle again, understanding now why Bellec always got drunk. Getting drunk sounded very appealing right now.

"Easy there, Dorian," Fabre said, holding the bottle away. "There'll be time for that later. You need to tell me where the body is."

"It's with Brasseur, in the runoff pit."

"Brasseur? You've found him?"

"... after the rats…"

Fabre made a face, and it was a little hard to follow, all Arno wanted to do was cry into a bottle and remind himself why he was such a failure.

His next clear memory was wondering why the sun was rising, and that he was walking with someone. He looked over, but it wasn't Brass-it wasn't Fabre. He'd seen the face once or twice in the Sanctuary, so it was an Assassin, but he didn't really want to think more than utterly necessary. He slowly recognized the street he was on - near Café Théâtre. He was going home.

The Assassin left him in the foyer to wake someone, and Arno blearily looked at the blue and white tile, the ornate banister. The familiar lines seemed foreign after so much time away, he tried to figure out how long he was gone but lost count of the days. He felt sick, he wanted to purge himself but couldn't muster the energy.

Mme Gouze took one look at him and said, "I'll take it from here."

After that was warm water and soap - a bath. Someone had drawn him a bath.

And then… warm bed sheets. Comfort. Safety.

January 19, 1791

Arno woke sometime in the afternoon, head biting at him for downing an entire bottle of wine on an empty stomach and a stomach that was revolting for having been so neglected for so long. He was sick in the nearest bucket he could find. Shivering in the winter air, he grabbed a clean bucket
An hour later he was sinking into the hot water that threatened to boil him, letting himself feel warm for the first time in a week. He reveled longer than he should, but eventually he pulled himself out and dressed in warm hose and culottes, shaving off his scraggly beard and brushing his hair back. His eyes were bloodshot again, they burned and had dark circles under them – he nearly considered another glass of wine to stave off the headache, but he had a report to write. Maybe if he had a desk of his own...

Shaking his head, he went down to the intendent's study and started breaking down what happened: the training in the phantom blade with Fabre, the journey into la Cour des Miracles, the begging, La Touche. His hand started to shake when he tried to explain the mutilation, the state of the patients in the "clinic". Grunting he did get a glass of wine, if only to firm up his hand. The report took several hours to break down and redraft. The sun had set long ago, and he could faintly hear the tiny collection of regulars they had to read to—read to! Arno straightened, jolting to his feet and stumbling out the office. He made it as far as the foyer before he recognized Grizier's rich voice, reading a Marat article, if the fire of the words were any indication. Arno stilled, listening, before silently thanking the sword master and going back to the intendent's study.

He'd never had someone who covered for him before, he wasn't used to it, and he promised himself he would do something for Grizier after his report. He wrote quickly of the runoff pit, tried to break down the sequence of logic and took several deep breaths before he wrote of the grandmaitre, a mysterious figure who had ordered the death of M. de la Serre and sent his life into such a tailspin.

When he finished, he looked up and saw Mme Gouze there, feathered hat off, meaning the café had closed for the evening.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't realize I'd missed the dinner crowd."

"It's quite all right," the madame said. "You forget, we used to have an intendent as well as a steward to balance out the duties. Augustin will do the reading when you aren't here until we can find an intendent. Besides, you were in a right state when you finally came to us. Do you remember?"

"... Not much."

The madame nodded. "You were very drunk, saying something about it not being over. Should I ask?"

Arno blinked owlishly. "I... It wasn't just Sivert and le Roi des Thunes. Someone gave an order."

"Oh, Arno," Mme Gouze said. "I'm so sorry. That must be devastating."

Arno didn't have words.

"Bellec came by earlier, while you were bathing. Said the Council wanted to see you – just not in those precise words."

"Of course," Arno said, getting his blue overcoat and shrugging it on his shoulders.

Honoré studied the pin. It was silver, and clearly had been cast, but there was a delicacy to it. Work after the casting to enhance what was there. The Templar cross was obvious, the pin designed to be on a breast pocket or something. But the details of the actual pin, the tiniest of hallows to hold a
single dose of poison. Silver may be a softer metal, but the craftsmanship needed to do this without damaging the pin or making a separate puncture to leak the poison... A very skilled silversmith indeed. Honoré looked to Urbain Fabre, who was making his report. "You say this was in the target's fist?"

"Yes," Urbain said.

"Dorian mentioned it in his report," Guillaume said, looking over Honoré's shoulder. "Tried to use it as a weapon. Do we know who made it?"

"No," Urbain said. "I can find out, but it will take some time. We only just got me in as the new Roi des Thunes. I have to solidify my power base and start either purging dissenters or recruiting new beggars. Trust is a luxury in the slums – the thing I need most is time."

"You'll have it," Honoré promised, nodding his head.

He sat back in thought. Urbain had been very useful around the Sanctuary. Always on hand if needed, one of the few still waiting for an assignment to open. Granted, having Urbain as the new King of Rats, there was no doubt that things would improve. More eyes and ears about the streets, a chance to pull at least some of the streets for a better life if so found. The great Ezio Auditore had used thieves and harlots as eyes and ears, but the guild system of Italie had changed over the centuries, and had never had such a tight bond in France. France's thieves and cutthroats were isolated, and what gangs there were didn't always react well to outsiders, let alone a steady leadership.

Urbain needed to stay as King of Rats. For some time. Before he could be utilized more fully as an Assassin.

"This will be our last meeting for some time," he offered. "Say, a year? Before we start calling you for active work? Will that be sufficient to solidify your 'rule'?"

Urbain actually laughed. "More than enough. I'll be established within a few months if I'm harsh enough. It's the larger changes I need to make that will take time. I have to start small. My predecessor was all about begging and taking and thievery. I need to set up that I'm more of a blackmailer. That's a different revenue source and I will need to train some of my new 'subjects'."

"Take all the time you need," Guillaume said, looking up from the reports. "Come back to us when you feel it safe."

Urbain nodded. The meeting was over, but Honoré felt... He looked carefully to Urbain. While Honoré may not have an eagle the way many Assassins tended to, he did have several decades of experience working with people. There was a hesitance to leave, and Honoré set aside the report he had been looking through. "What is it?" he asked softly.

Urbain hesitated, very unlike the boisterous man.

Honoré offered a soft smile. "Yes?" he prodded gently.

"I... I noticed something that struck me as... wrong."

Guillaume leaned forward. "What did?"

Urbain struggled with the words. Then he took a breath. "Arno Dorian is incredibly skilled in our work. He created a plan within moments, carried it out with acuity and precision, worked entirely around what I was doing, and left with no one knowing what had happened. I checked once I took
over. No one knows how my predecessor died, other than he has a pair of stabs to the throat. No one was aware that he was there or what he did. And with the rats who always need an eye and ear open, *c'est incroyable."

"But?" Honoré asked.

There was even more hesitation. He sat there, staring at them, face twisting as he tried to find words for what had bothered him. "He doesn't have any knowledge of the Creed. Not even on the most basic of levels."

Honoré frowned. Heavily.

Guillaume was also frowning. "Explain."

"He doesn't ask questions."

Guillaume blinked and Honoré could feel a headache starting.

By far, the most important facet of being an Assassin was the ability to think critically about anything. Of looking at any given information and being able to discern why it was said that way, who it was being said to and by whom, of looking at the larger context of the information given. It was how one pierced the illusion of reality to see that Nothing was True and that All was Permitted. Honoré had noticed that Arno was clearly lagging in learning the Creed, but he didn't realize it was this bad. Altaïr had asked questions and seen his Al Mualim for the traitor he was. Ezio Auditore had asked questions and learned from any teacher he could find. Connor asked the most difficult of questions, on how to rule, how to forgive, and how to deal. The greatest of Assassins always asked questions.

To have an Assassin that didn't...

What the *hell* had Bellec taught him?

Guillaume was asking more questions, but Honoré sat back and let everything wash over him.

He saw so much potential in Arno. But that potential needed to be tapped, to be gently pulled out and shaped. How was that just *not* done?

"Dorian didn't know I had an assignment there. He never even asked what it was. He was so focused on La Touche and the king, he ignored all else."

*What* had Bellec *done*? How had he *not* fostered curiosity and questions?

"When he learned that there were more who were responsible for de la Serre, he got blind drunk. I had to have Étienne take him home."

Honoré lifted a hand.

"Enough," he said softly, feeling so much weight on his shoulders. "We understand. We thank you, for all your hard work." Honoré sat back heavily. "You have much work to do with *la Court des Miracles*. You mustn't tarry here too long."

Urbain nodded. "I will send word as I can."

"Above all," Honoré said heavily, "be safe."

Urbain smiled, looking far more like his usual self. "I'll get Dorian, shall I?"
"Please."

Guillaume looked Honoré and his face was severe. "An Assassin who doesn't ask questions?"

"Yes," Honoré replied, trying to rub away the growing migraine. "Makes you wonder what Pierre was doing, doesn't it?"

Guillaume scoffed. "Bellec has trained four novices to competent and successful Assassins. He likely could have trained more were he not throwing himself in every jail he could find looking for the codes."

"Not every teacher matches the student."

"You can't get more diverse students than those Bellec has trained."

Honoré shook his head. Just because a teacher could get many didn't mean they could reach all. They could discuss it later.

Between this and the Assembly and the king, everything hung heavily and Honoré suddenly felt just so... *tired.*

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Arno submitted his report and sat down for the wait to be called. His head was still throbbing, and he knew that wasn't going to go away for a while. He waited a long time, longer than usual, but eventually Fabre came out. "I'm surprised I was first," he said brightly. "I thought for sure you'd have come and gone. You pass out from the swill?"

Arno pursed his lips, not wanting to admit the man was correct.

Fabre laughed, good-natured again. "I'll be busy for a while," he said. "I finally got my assignment – thanks for the help, by the way."

Arno blinked. "... What?"

Fabre paused for half a breath before clapping Arno on the back. "*Merde,* Dorian, for killing le Roi des Thunes! I can take his place now – been waiting for that for the better part of a decade! I have plans for that – first of which will be this." He tossed something, Arno fumbling through his hangover to catch it – it was the pin the old beggar tried to attack him with what even was it?

"How did you get this?" he asked.

"Went there," Fabre said, "With my new kingdom. Needed to confirm the kill so everyone could breathe easier, you know? There was also Brasseur's body to retrieve so we can give him last rites."

Arno winced. He had completely forgotten about Brasseur.

"*Désolé,*" Arno said slowly. "I never realized why you were in the slums with me."

Fabre nodded, as if expecting it, and place a firm hand on Arno's shoulder. "Where would any of us be if we didn't ask questions?" he asked, gently. "If everything we could ever want to know were simply handed to us?"

"... accomplish a great deal more, unburdened by ignorance," Arno muttered.

"Perhaps," Fabre said, shrugging his shoulders. "But over time we might not even think to *ask* questions when we need to. The greatest feats, Dorian, come from asking questions. The Mentor..."
understands that. It's our job to teach it to our brothers and sisters."

There was a current there, something Fabre was trying to say but Arno didn't quite follow the thought through his headache.

It was time to report, anyway.

Arno took a deep breath, stood and straightened his shoulders. Mirabeau, the father of the little cult, probably wouldn't care much for such ceremony, but the rest of the Council tended to be more... stiff. So straightened, Arno climbed the stairs up to the Sanctuary and politely up the steps to one of the libraries, filled with scrolls and books. Beylier was glaring at papers, a vein twitching by his brow, but what caught Arno's eye the most was Mirabeau. The old Mentor was sitting by a table, face in a hand, looking worn, tired, and... old. The few times Arno saw Mirabeau, the man was lively and animated. The contrast struck Arno deeply.

The Mentor shouldn't be so... fatigued.

"You look terrible," he said bluntly. Then cursed himself. A little too blunt, Arno...

Mirabeau didn't even smile. With effort he took a breath, eyes still in his hand, and said, "For months, I have been wrangling the Brotherhood, the National Assembly, and the King." He looked to Arno and raised a brow. "Taken all together, they have the political acumen of an especially stupid village council." There was a flicker there, in his eyes. Of both reproach and the barest hints of amusement. A flick of the eyes to Beylier who was now looking hard at Arno. "I believe that excuses my appearance, young man," he sighed.

Right. Don't be so familiar. Especially in front of other Council members who liked all the damn ceremony.

Arno immediately bowed his head. "I meant no disrespect, Mentor. I am only... concerned."

His father gone. M. de la Serre gone. To see Mirabeau so old reminded Arno that important people tended not to live very long.

Mirabeau let out a heavy sigh, leaning back in his chair. "Forget me, Arno." He gestured to the newssheets on the table. "Weep for France."

Arno pursed his lips. Mirabeau was too important to forget. He ran the Assembly. But more personally, he was one of the few in the brotherhood who... accepted Arno, as he was. Arno bowed his head again. This man, more than any currently alive, deserved respect.

Mirabeau nodded, shifted the chair. "But enough politics," he waved it away. "I hope you have happier news. What of Monsieur de la Serre's murderers?"

"Le Roi des Thunes is dead," Arno replied formally. "Brassuer has been avenged."

"We don't really believe in vengeance," Beylier said softly. His face wasn't so hard and he was staring at a pistol on the table. Nickle handles, clear quality. "I read your report. You were able to recognize both Brassuer and the trap. Well done." There was an almost begrudged quality to it, but finally Beylier's shoulders sank and grief seemed to settle around him before military formality straightened him again.

Beylier gently lifted the pistol, emotions flickering across his face too fast for Arno to understand. "Repose en paix," he said softly. Then he walked over and carefully offered the pistol. "You should keep it. It'll do no one any good moldering in a forgotten crypt. Carry it with honor."
Arno worked to not show his surprise. He was certain that everyone in the Council who wasn't Mirabeau didn't care for him. To be offered something so... personal...

"Merci beaucoup," he said softly and with gravitas, dipping his head. "I will."

Mirabeau's eyes were sparkling, if tired. "The mission?" he prompted.

Arno nodded and sighed. He looked away, feeling some shame over getting so drunk before reporting because of the unending frustration, but still longing for a drink to numb him from the turbulent emotions. He lived through it once. He lived it again to write the report. Now he was to live it a third time and explain. He bit down on the feeling.

With a deep breath, he started. "The King of Beggars and Sivert were only pawns in a larger game, it seems. Someone sent them after Monsieur de la Serre." He detailed his brief conversation with the Beggar King, and what he'd pieced together after interrogating Sivert as well.

Mirabeau dryly offered, "Templars do nothing simply, do they? Division in the ranks it seems. A new Grandmaitre, so busy in their own camps. No wonder I haven't been facing their opposition in the Assembly."

By then they were all sitting at the table, going over papers and histories, anything that might bear out a connection between the Roi des Thunes and Sivert. And with no luck at all.

Mirabeau gave a sarcastic sigh. "Do you have anything solid on this mysterious chess player?"

"The only lead I have is the instrument that killed Monsieur de la Serre. A pin fashioned by a smith of some kind. How that smith is involved, I can't yet say."

"A silversmith of talent," Beylier said, looking over the pin.

"Great talent," Mirabeau agreed. "That at least narrows the field." He looked to Arno. "We'll whittle the field down a little further. Arno, you've had a hard blow. You thought yourself done and have learned there are more, as many Assassins before you have. We will focus on that. You should focus on the Café. Settle your mind."

Arno bristled. He wasn't a piece of glass that would shatter at a touch.

"Arno," Mirabeau said gently, "trust an old man. Take some time for yourself. A month or two. We'll have a name by then. Take all that frustration and anger and use it to build."

Arno nodded reluctantly.

Getting blind drunk still sounded better.

It was early evening when Arno returned to the Café, and he came in through the kitchens. He paused, looking at the wall of liquors, still mostly barren and considered. He might be able to have some before having to read to the evening bunch. He wouldn't be completely unconscious, and he could still do his job. He shook his head and sighed. So close. So close to cleaning his hands... only to realize that he hadn't cleaned as much as he had thought. His mistake hadn't been redeemed. He wasn't done. It was warring within him. This was why getting drunk sounded ideal.

A hand on his shoulder had him whipping around, hidden blade extended.

"Grizier!" he gasped, shifting his strike as Grizier easily batted it away.
"Monsieur Dorian," he greeted, as he and Charlotte always did when either the staff or customers might here.

"Désolé."

"It's fine," Grizier replied, eyes measuring. "The customers have missed you. They don't care to hear one such as myself speaking."

Arno grimaced. "I know," he said sadly. "I'll be along in a minute."

"Be swift," Grizier nodded. "I'd like you with my class tonight as well."

Right. Drinking would have to wait. If he was sparring with anyone that evening, he needed his wits about him. With a heavy sigh, he straightened, pulled down his hood, and headed to the café proper.

The evening would have been better with a drink or three. He read to the crowd, small as it was, answered a few questions based on what he knew from what he'd read (which weren't good answers since he hadn't been up to date for the past week...) and was surprised when one old couple asked if he was well since he hadn't been around.

After giving his goodbyes and Jacques coming over to give him a small meal of bland broth, Arno headed up to the dance hall where other Assassins were gathering for sparring and fencing lessons. Grizier clearly intended to keep him busy as person after person sparred with Arno, never longer than a minute, and then Arno was used to go through several stances and demonstrate proper technique, and then Grizier got the absolutely delightful idea of sparing with Arno to show them how it worked between masters.

Arno's coat and vest were discarded and sweaty and he was wiping his face on his sleeve by the time everyone left, despite the cold January weather. It was almost midnight and Arno finished helping Grizier clean up, put away dummies and mats, padded swords, and fencing gear and dragging it back up to the cold attic.

"You have my thanks, as always," Grizier said. "You make things much easier by simply having another fencing master."

Arno blinked, thoughts skittering out of the dark place they'd been circulating in. "Master? Please, I'm no master of swordsmanship."

"You are," Grizier said seriously, walking with Arno back to Arno's room. "Clearly, Monsieur de la Serre cared enough to make sure you know more than the basics."

Arno shook his head in doubt. "I'll admit to being good, but I'm not a master. I've yet to beat you after all."

Grizier actually chuckled. "That's merely experience," he said softly. "I've been at this easily ten years longer than you. I've seen it all and faced it all. You'll probably best me in a few years as you get more experience."

Arno shrugged.

"Now I believe Charlotte has a meal ready for us. Let's get down to the café."

"Meal?" Arno asked, surprised. "Jacques had a plate for me earlier."
"A plate is not a meal."

Shrugging, Arno tiredly made his way downstairs. He grabbed his waistcoat and coat, though he was still sweating.

The café was indeed closed, Jacques and Célestine had left for the night, almost all the candles had been extinguished except for under a half-dozen that lead to a booth where Madame Gouze sat, three plates in front of her with a bowl of delicious smelling stew, a few pieces of bread, and a bottle of wine.

Grizier lead Arno over, then leaned over and kissed Mme Gouze gently on the cheek, right above her burn scar. "Ma chere," he said softly.

Arno blinked. He knew that Grizier and Mme Gouze were close, but... A black man and a white woman? Was that possi... Arno shook his head. Cosette had been quite blunt with him that there were no differences other than skin color, and he reminded himself firmly of that.

"Arno," Mme Gouze greeted softly, then leaned easily into Grizier.

Arno looked to his food. Then shook himself again. "Madame," he greeted. "I thank you for the meal."

She smiled gently. "I will admit, I had a secondary reason beyond feeding you after so long as a beggar."

Arno raised a wary brow. "Oh?"

Mme Gouze made a face, turned and lightly slapped Grizier on the shoulder. "You didn't say anything?"

Grizier offered a deep chuckled, wrapping his arms around Gouze's waist. "We were rather busy with students and cleaning up after them, ma chere."

Mme Gouze pulled away, arched an eyebrow, and said sweetly, "Mon plus cher, you will be elsewhere tonight."

Grizier actually winced.

Arno felt very left out between a very private conversation of lovers.

Mme Gouze turned to Arno again, out of Grizier's arms. "Arno, since someone didn't inform you, the Assassins have offered a boon. We will be getting repairs done to the kitchen."

Arno blinked. "What?"

Grizier cleared his throat. "When Assassins are able to free up funds, they often offer a little bit to help out the various fronts we set up. It isn't often. The Templars wallow in wealth and prestige, but one of the old masters was also a banker, and Assassins have done decently since then. We still scrape by as we can, but we aren't in squalor. Much of what we have is often from people who are grateful for some aide we've provided. It's said that the Sanctuary was built almost five hundred years ago, from a mason family that was saved by and joined the Brotherhood. I may have never dug into the records, but that makes sense. Many of us come from so many backgrounds, we also bring our expertise. All the statuary down there came during the Renaissance, when everyone was
doing art and such. An artist insisted on carving for every master that died. It was a way for him to deal with grief."

"And the point, mon plus cher?" Mme Gouze asked sweetly.

Grizier winced and nodded. "Le Mentor, while you were away, came by discreetly again, with his entourage, and he left a message. We were getting the kitchen repaired. It doesn't need much to begin with. The chimney, more than anything else, needs a good sweeping, one of the walls seems to be weak. We'll have to close for the repairs to be done. Three days at most, as that chimney really hasn't been cleaned in at least twenty years."

"Thirty," Mme Gouze corrected sweetly.

Grizier winced again.

Arno couldn't quite stop a chuckle.

"A better kitchen is one of the priorities we've discussed," Arno interceded on Grizier's behalf. "With good food, we can cater to more customers than just the illiterate. People will start coming to eat not just information."

"And once they hear the news and talk, perhaps some discussion will invite more," Mme Gouze nodded. "Of course, we'll need a proper cook for that."

Arno blinked. "But your cooking, Madame, is delicious."

"It's basic, Arno," she replied softly. "I know where my strengths and weaknesses are. I'll make a good wife for someone and can make a hearty meal for a few. I could entertain if necessary. But I can't handle cooking for large amounts of people. Asking me to double a recipe, I can do. Asking me to serve over a hundred is beyond what I'm capable of."

"So we need to find a good cook."

"A great cook would be better," Grizier said. "Something unique, a flavor Paris isn't used to, something to get people to talk. Still French food, but with something different to dazzle the tongues."

The pâté that Arno had tasted immediately came to mind. Hmmm... "I might have met someone..." he ventured.

Both leaned forward. "Really?" Mme Gouze had pure hope in her eyes and Grizier's lips were twitching into a smile.

Arno leaned back. "Maybe. I met her maybe once. I'd need to see if she'd be willing. I'd have to check with Fabre, since she was at la Court des Miracles, but... her cooking isn't purely French."

"Parfait," Grizier smiled. He turned to Mme Gouze. "It would seem our steward has once again come through for us, ma chère."

Gouze turned with a smile. "Of course, he has," she said softly, her eyes alight. "Now, about how to schedule all this..."

They discussed things until sometime after two in the morning.

The next morning, bright and early, Arno headed down to the Sanctuary. He'd need to send word to
Fabre, but he didn't dare. He was freshly shaven, clean, and wouldn't be able to pass muster to be even let in to the Beggar's Court, let alone find and speak with Fabre. He needed a different way to send a message, and he didn't know what to do other than ask someone in the Sanctuary.

He didn't like asking for help.

Thankfully, he saw Cosette coming out of the dining hall.

"Cosette," he greeted cheerfully.

"Arno!" she smiled. "I haven't seen you for some time."

Arno shrugged. "Once above ground, one ends up very busy."

"No doubt," she replied dryly. Her face sobered. "I understand you were able to avenge Brassuer. Merci beaucoup."

Arno shook his head. "I did my assignment," he said softly. To clean his hands for M. de la Serre. It hadn't been for Brassuer.

Cosette looked meaningfully at the nickel-plated gun hidden just under his coat. "I think you did enough."

What could Arno do other than shrug? "I have a question," he diverted the conversation.

"Yes?"

"How do you get messages to other Assassins?"

Cosette's eyes widened. "You don't know?"

This was why he never asked questions. "Non," he groused.

Cosette shook her head. "No, it's fine," she said. "I'm surprised. You made Assassin so quickly, I forget that there was no way you could have known everything." She offered a bright smile. "Maître Quemar is our maître of messages as well."

Arno raised his brow as Cosette started to walk with him. "A lawyer is also a postman?"

Cosette giggled. "Why not? Don't lawyers send messages all the time to various people? Summons of the court, research questions of law, all sorts? Another letter in the mail doesn't get noticed like that."

Arno hadn't thought of it that way. They entered the Sanctuary and the library therein, and Arno pulled out a fresh sheet for his letter to Fabre, penning it swiftly. Cosette showed Arno where the usual drop off box was that Quemar would go through. "He always makes sure to come down once a week to collect, or he has an assistant who is one of us come down for it."

"Very useful."

Cosette nodded.

"How is reading coming?"

She frowned at him, an annoyed look on her face. "You make it look so easy," she said. "I am very slow, and I can't help but be aware of how slow I am."
Arno shrugged. "No one taught you till you came here. I've been reading since I was with my father. I have almost twenty years of experience with reading. You have how many? Two or three years?"

Cosette at least looked mollified, if still annoyed. "You're not here to even help me anymore," she grumbled.

To that, Arno really did laugh. "Why not come to the café? Have a copy of the paper with you and follow along as I read it?"

"Arno, I still haven't been assigned. I'm still 'dead'."

"Oh yes. Being 'dead' kept you from Versailles," he said dryly, "kept you from my previous readings, kept you from going out and looking for Brassuer, yes being 'dead' has kept you chained down here."

It was hard to tell with Cosette, her skin was too dark, but she seemed to blush. "How did you—"

"A guess," he replied. And knowing Cosette. She had been very worried. There was no way she wouldn't have gone out as she could in order to search.

"I have always wondered what having an older brother was like," Cosette grumbled. "I think the feeling should have been postponed indefinitely."

Arno offered a grin. "So glad to help."

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That Monday, Arno worked on preparing. Since everyone seemed to think he needed work to do outside of looking for a silversmith, he decided he'd at least prepare to do it properly. Workmen were going to come the following day, there was much to do.

At the morning meeting, he went over all the assignments for the staff that he'd already discussed with Grizier and Mme Gouze, who didn't look anywhere near as close as they did when there was no public around. "Ladies, you'll be polishing while the workmen are here. Flatware, mirrors, brass or metals, anything you can reach and take a cleaning cloth to, you'll be working on. Customers aren't going to see an improved kitchen, so they need to see that being closed for a few days was worth it. Jacques, you Monsieur Grizier and I will be doing a scrub down of what we haven't been able to in the café. Do some repairs that we can handle. I've noticed several paintings covered in the halls upstairs. Why haven't they been hung?"

"The plaster from previous patchwork was weak," Mme Gouze said softly. "We were starting to fail, as I understand it, and the workman was particularly cheap."

Cost over efficiency. Arno could see the dilemma. "Monsieur Grizier, inspect the paintings, make certain that they, at least, are sound. We do have a plasterer coming, we might be able to have him patch a few other areas so we can at least get something in the entry hall hanging. Also, I noticed some silver needs repairs. If anyone knows an accomplished silversmith, let me know, or ask around if you can."

Because Arno was going to find the silversmith. The Council might have more resources, but Arno wasn't going to sit idle and wait for them. He needed to do.

(He needed to drink and get numb...)

So while the café was run Monday, Arno prepared to be closed for the rest of the week. Mme
Gouze was still using the kitchen, but Arno cleared out what she didn't usually use to the dining hall, gathered little-used herbs and spices, unopened bags of flour or salt, cones of sugar, and brought them bit by bit to the dining hall where their morning meetings were. He read the papers at noon, as always, and he noticed the crowd was larger again. Pity they were about to closed for several days.

It went the way Arno planned for the most part. The dirtiest project was cleaning out the chimney, by far. The sweep, while good with the sweeping, didn't do particularly well with cleaning up after himself. Arno and Grizier had to work on cleaning soot and ashes off the walls and any shelves they had, and do that around the plasterer who was reinforcing plaster along the fireplace wall. To everyone's surprise, while working, a wall fell away, revealing a hidden room.

"Why the hell would anyone wall up a good pantry like that!" Jacques said clearly.

Arno understood once he was inside. There was a chest, and one look inside revealed weapons. A hundred years out of date, but weapons nonetheless. "Monsieur Grizier, help me bring this upstairs to my room. I'll look through it later."

"Of course, Monsieur Dorian."

That night, Arno went through the chest, item by item, cataloguing, noting appearances, and estimating their value. Gold inlays either upped the value or could be removed and melted to coins. Did Assassins even have a counterfeiter? The cult was all cloak and dagger, surely, they had forgers and counterfeiters? Or would he have to find Fabre again and check in. Arno made a note to go down to the Sanctuary again when he had time.

With repairs proceeded (mostly) on schedule, Arno found himself outside the servant's entrance on dull afternoon to use whatever light he could, despite the February cold. One of their larger pots was proving difficult for Célestine or Mme Gouze to scrub, so Arno was handling it. He'd done such scullery when he'd been very young at the de la Serre home, and was punished to do so again by Olivier when he felt Arno had been particularly childish.

"Bonjour."

Arno looked up and saw Yvette. He blinked, surprised, then smiled warmly. "Bonjour," he greeted. "How may I help?"

Yvette raised a brow. Her pear-shape was in a different dress than the one he'd seen last time, cleaner and less worn, but it was still clear she was as impoverished as the rest of the Beggar's Court. "I was told there was a job here," she replied. "I am to meet with the steward."

Arno's smile brightened immediately. "Well, you're certainly at the right place. We're in the middle of repairs at the moment. Come on in."

"Oui, Monsieur."

Arno stood and dusted off his pants as best he could, and hefted the heavy pot into the servant's entrance to lay on towels he had laid out for the other pots he'd been scrubbing. Célestine was in the hall, surrounded by flatware. Arno offered a gentle smile and asked her to collect everyone. Then he brought Yvette to the intendent's office.

"I assume I am to wait while you get the steward?" Yvette asked softly, eyes glancing at the cluttered mess.

"Oh," Arno blinked, digging through the papers for the pay schedules he'd laid out before the
repair work had started. "You don't know who I am?"

Her gaze was flat and it was clear she didn't care for any games. "Should I, Monsieur?"

In that moment Arno realized just how useful Hiding in Plain Sight could be. Mirabeau had explained it once, when he'd been learning, and Arno had grasped the concept, but now he saw just what it meant. Fabre's or Bellec's ability to appear as entirely different individuals given the change of a stance or changing hair slightly wasn't just being theatrical. There was a purpose.

"I met you once," he replied quietly. "I was hungry, had almost nothing, and you provided me a small meal. I haven't forgotten."

Yvette was clearly wracking her brain to remember, but couldn't. Finally, she nodded. "I am glad you have done well, Monsieur. This seems a nice place to work."

Arno smiled again. "You're being kind. We're working to improve it, little by little, as we can. We need a proper cook. I immediately thought of you."

That actually made Yvette's eyes widen.

"You can provide a flavor we don't normally see here in France. You can broaden our tastes as we broaden our rights."

"Wait... Are you—"

"Oui, Madame," Arno smiled broadly, dirty shirt and pants, hands scraped from so much cleaning, looking more like a houseboy than anything else. "I am the steward here."

Yvette's serious demeanor finally broke away and a wide smile spread across her face. "I was told the steward here was interesting."

"I hope it wasn't any trouble for you to come."

Yvette gave a dry chuckle. "Jean Valjean is many things, but honest is one of the strangest. When he told me I might find a job of better quality, I didn't know what he meant. Now I do."

There was a polite knock on the door and Célestine poked her head in. "Monsieur, everyone is in the dance hall."

"Merci," he replied. "Come, you'll meet the staff."

Mme Gouze made it very clear that she was glad to have Yvette work there, if she was willing. Without having to cook, she would instead focus on promotion and spreading word of their little café. Jacques stared at Yvette, clearly not used to women of African descent, but offered a fumbled welcome. Célestine was also nervous, but Arno knew that with someone to gossip with, those nerves wouldn't last long.

It was Grizier, however, that made Yvette say yes. Grizier was introduced as a swordsman who instructed classes up in the dance hall, and Yvette could no doubt see that no one on their small staff had a problem with a man that dark working there. Yvette's eyes seemed to glitter and Arno knew they had a cook.

"Would you like to see the kitchen? It's being repaired right now and is rather empty but..."

"I would very much like to see my kitchen."
Yvette was very no-nonsense, and as repairs continued in the kitchen, she very clearly stated what she wanted, expected, and needed. She went through all of their supplies thoroughly. She brought in several small plants in pots that were then put by the window of the kitchen, and she called it her herb garden. She filled the new pantry clearly with what she wanted, organized all the cookware and flatware, and had some very stern orders for Célestine whenever she was to serve food.

The first meal she cooked was the night before the café reopened and everyone agreed that they had a chance to make more money than ever before, simply due to her cooking.

The next day, Mme Gouze's hard work spreading word of their reopening with a new cook brought in a few more people, and many compliments to the cook were handed out.

Finally, more people started to come in. Even if only to sample the food, if nothing else.

Arno visited Pontmercy to see if he had any contacts that would be interested in any of the old weapons that had been unearthed, and soon Arno had more money to invest into the café.

Grizier and Mme Gouze, unsurprisingly, gave Arno some names of silversmiths. So once the café had closed and been settled, usually close to midnight, he went out to start researching the silversmiths. So far, no proper leads. It didn't take much to sneak into a shop, look at the quality of items, and know that most wouldn't be able to do the detail work of the Templar pin Arno had in his possession. He came back frustrated and usually collapsed into bed sometime past three a.m. so that he could get up at dawn and prepare for the day. Pontmercy was able to get good money for the ancient weapons, even though that wasn't his specialty, and what he couldn't, was melted down to scraps and sold to metal workers.

The money Arno immediately gave to Mme Gouze with instructions for linens and rugs. If they were lucky, they could get one good rug for the café proper and enough tablecloths and linens that if they did a massive load of laundry every night, it might start looking like they were making more money than they actually were.

Good things resulted. Instead of a lunch crowd of maybe a dozen, there were almost fifty people crammed in every lunch for Arno to read the papers to. With customers being more educated and interested in the Haitian dishes, fewer listened to Arno reading and instead started discussing the news and events of the day.

Of which, several had happened as the month progressed on. Since the Church's hierarchy didn't care for being told to swear allegiance to the French, constitutional bishops were instead being given positions, replacing many bishops throughout the city and the country. The twenty-eighth of February was swiftly known as the Day of the Daggers, Lafayette and the National Guard had been dispatched to quell a riot at the Château de Vincennes. After all, Paris was rioting more or less daily at this point. No sooner had Lafayette left than somewhere around four-hundred young, hot-headed aristocrats who had gathered at Tuileries Palace to protect the royal family from the Jacobins. With concealed weapons. After the King's aunts had fled to the Pope, rumors abounded that the King and Queen might flee as well. With all the confusion, at least some of the National Guard saw trouble and called Lafayette back. Lafayette had stood firm in front of the nobles and eventually the King himself had to come down to order them to disarm.

It was almost another riot as a result.

Then Arno was called down to the Sanctuary.

Quemar was there, at the circular tale, several candles around him as he squinted at papers.
"Maître," Arno greeted. "You and the rest of the Council are so rarely down here."

"In case you didn't notice, it's rather busy up there," Quemar replied lightly, squinting up to Arno. "One of the best things that has helped to keep Paris and France informed, as you well know, is the printing press."

Arno nodded. "I understand the press also played a role in America's little Revolution."

"Indeed. But as we here in France are learning, there is good and bad associated with the press."

Quemar looked around the papers surrounding him and passed a single sheet to him.

"A one-page paper?" Arno asked dryly.

Then he read it. It was about Mirabeau.

He hissed in a breath and reread it.

Then he crumpled it up viciously.

His words were less than polite.

"That was a small run of just a hundred copies," Quemar explained. "It reeks of Templar wording, and it caters to the love of a good scandal for gossip."

"But Mirabeau would never—"

"Doesn't matter," Quemar replied. "Do you think half of what Marat prints is accurate? Far from it. They print whatever they want. People haven't yet learned to actually think about what's being presented to them. Researching such topics for an average citizen is difficult and requires going to places of study or reading the original documents yourself. People don't have time for that so they trust the newspapers to do that for them."

"What am I to do?"

"Find whoever is writing this and deal with them."

Arno nodded. He didn't ask any clarifying questions, he didn't need to. Someone was writing disgusting lies about Mirabeau, and that needed to stop. "Where do I begin?"

"A client of mine who lives in one of the faubourgs brought it in. I'd start in le Quartier Latin, specifically faubourg Saint-Germain."

Arno nodded grimly.

Mirabeau was the only maître that understood Arno and Arno would be damned if anything befell him.

The next day Arno checked in with Pontmercy. Ostensibly, for any listening, it was to discuss a newssheet Arno had found and did such an esteemed bookseller know where the publisher was. Pontmercy happily smiled at cover and offered to help Arno go looking. Thus, they left early that morning and headed to the faubourg that Quemar had mentioned in the Latin Quarter. Since his cover was that of a bookseller, Pontmercy went to the publishers he knew, asking after who published a more pro-royalist sort since a customer had asked for it.

Several weren't certain, stating that they didn't care to associate with royalists of any ilk and
wouldn't know for certain without any sort of sample.

Pushing on noon, Arno was fed up. He finally pulled out the very crumpled and torn sheet he'd had to read and slammed it down to the bookseller Pontmercy was trying to speak with.

"Here," Arno cried out. "This is what we're dealing with. Who would do this?"

The publisher flattened out the sheet, then started swearing in earnest. "Who's writing this filth?" he demanded.

"I believe that's what we've been asking all day," Pontmercy replied.

The publisher offered some distinctly choice words, most as unpleasant as Arno's had been the previous day. Then he looked to the two Assassins. "Good to see a friend of Mirabeau in these troubling times," he said earnestly.

"So who is publishing this propaganda?" Arno asked again.

"I don't know," the publisher growled, "but I'd love to wring their necks. I can offer one name. Henri. He keeps 'neutral' in all this. Claims to be 'fair and balanced', but read any of his work and you know he's being 'neutral' by offering the side no one agrees with and is 'fair and balanced' by hating the progressives and revolutionaries and showing how just and righteous the royalists and their traditions are that need to be conserved."

Henri turned out to be hard to find. While everyone knew of his work, no one knew where he published from. The people they met finally started mentioning a herald who shouted out whatever news Henri printed and they came to a street corner.

The herald was barely fourteen, standing on a crate, shouting with a cracking voice. "Come! Read what Versailles doesn't want you to hear! Mirabeau and Marie Antoinette caught together in the Royal Bedchamber! Mirabeau's allies shocked to discover that he betrayed the Revolution! Caught colluding with the King!"

People were pausing to listen, some came forward to grab a paper. Arno was studying the area, looking for ways to sneak, ways to investigate. Hide in plain sight. There was a merit to that.

But to his shock, Pontmercy stepped forward. He spoke to several of the people who had been listening, very quietly. Arno listened, as Pontmercy talked to every person, pointing out how ridiculous all these stories were. Then one man stepped forward.

"You make no sense!" he shouted. "The King has returned to Paris, surrounded by his people! The Assembly is doing all the work and the King listens. Of course Mirabeau is talking with the King. And in bed with the Queen? According to who? Sounds like someone doesn't want our revolution to succeed."

And given the general sentiment of Parisians and their love of Mirabeau, more people started shouting down the herald as well.

Pontmercy was once again by Arno's side, gently ushering them to the back of the crowd.

"We could have followed him," Arno hissed. "All we had to do was wait. Either he'd get another batch of papers, or he'd go to pick them up. Instead you've... caused chaos!"

"No," Pontmercy whispered back, none of his usual pompous bluster about him. "I've used a trick that Maître Connor taught us. We are Paris, after all," Pontmercy offered a grim smile. "We're
rioting every day. What's another riot? One that helps us?"

"I fail to see—"

"Dorian," Pontmercy smiled gently. "I'm speeding things along. If we waited more of those papers would get out. Rumors would start to spread. Look at all the rumors around the King as it is."

Arno considered, his eyes widening. "But this way—"

"Yes, we force him to run back to his employer and we can follow him. Less papers get out, we finish up faster."

"Well then," Arno smiled. "Shouldn't we be getting to the roofs?"

"I like the way you think," Pontmercy smiled.

To Arno's surprise, Pontmercy wasn't as good a climber as Arno was, and once on the roofs, Pontmercy very distinctly stayed near the middle.

"I'm not fond of heights," Pontmercy confessed quietly. "I am capable, I've killed from above when I've had to, but... This just isn't my preferred place to be."

Arno had to admit, that was impressive. But first thing was first.

The teenage herald was eventually overcome by the crowds, garbage being thrown at him, etc. So, he ran. That worked for the Assassins. Following from the roofs was infinitely easier. The crowds kept the herald slow while Arno and Pontmercy were unimpeded. The herald eventually stumbled to a small shop.

"Très bien," Pontmercy smiled in satisfaction as he winked at Arno.

"Indeed," Arno replied dryly.

Carefully, they both climbed back down to the streets.

Inside was a man with ink-stained hands, the teenage herald, and two hulking brutes.

The man with the ink stained hands, Henri no doubt, was tinkering with the printing press. "What's the next headline?"

One of the brutes smiled cruelly. "I was thinking, 'Mirabeau's love child with the Queen revealed' or something like that."

Henri looked up with a delighted face. "Hah! Perfect! That will sell especially well! Everyone already knows the old man is a pervert, but a child? I'll make so much money off of that! How many copies do you want?"

The other brute looked sternly at the teenage herald. "I want to wallpaper Paris with them," he said in a soft, horrible tone.

Henri paused from the case of letters he'd been sifting through. He turned, with a flat look. "I think we'll need a bigger machine for that. There's only me. I can print a fair bit, but—"

"When will it be ready?" the cold brute asked.

"I'm moving as fast as I can."
"We'll pay double if it's ready for tonight."

Henri grumbled.

Arno glanced to Pontmercy, but the bookseller was already in position. With his usually pomp and arrogance Pontmercy entered the print shop. "Hello! I've opened a new book shop! I was wondering if you had any publications worth looking at?"

The printer and brutes salivated. Henri was already coming forward. "I have a sample of a recent publication if you'd like to see it?"

With Henri bustling, the two brutes stepped back, watching with keen interest.

Just what Arno needed. He eased into the shop and one hand snaked around a brute's neck, yanking back to snap it, while his hidden blade dove into the other brute's neck. The two fell together with a distinct thud and Pontmercy was already stabbing the printer right in the chest. Three dead in less than three seconds.

The teenager was staring wide-eyed at them, gangly limbs awkwardly trying to be held up in some defense, but Pontmercy easily swept through and hit the boy on the head, knocking him out.

"Is that wise?" Arno asked, already leaning over to loot pockets. Another silver pin, just like the one that had killed M. de la Serre. Templars indeed.

"The child will have hazy memories at best when he awakes," Pontmercy said softly. "The light was behind us through the door and windows, so little chance our faces were even seen. Especially with my ostentatious hat and your hood." The book seller knelt softly over each kill, offering a soft "Repose en paix."

Arno kept looting. "They are Templars," he said, standing and holding up the second silver pin he'd found.

"Not good," Pontmercy shook his head. "We're supposed to be in a truce. But Templars slandering Mirabeau rather indicates that they may not be holding up their end of the bargain."

"I'm more interested in the silversmith who made this," Arno said grimly. "Whoever that is will lead me to the person who ordered the death of Monsieur de la Serre."

"And the person dishonoring the truce," Pontmercy nodded darkly. "We're done here. Let's head out the back and be on our way."

To that, Arno turned with a glitter in his eyes. "Perhaps the roof?"

"Oh no, there's no need to go to the—"

"Come on," Arno chuckled. "Let's clear your head of this fear of heights."

Sweat dripping down his brow, Pontmercy glared unhappily at Arno. "Only if you let me teach you how to properly use that hidden blade. Your form is sloppy."

Arno laughed.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, little things first: Charlotte and Augustin are adorable together, and as Arno's pseudo parents outside of Mirabeau they kind of need to be as sweet as possible if Arno has any hope of coming out of this fic emotionally healthy. More on that later. Yvette also makes her appearance after her soft introduction last chapter. Of all the staff at the Café, listening to her dialogue was the most entertaining. No idea why, but we just loved listening to her "making conversation" to the Intendent. She's another boon to Arno.

We start to see what the Council duties are: Quemar is postman, Beylier is mission-giver and Trenet, though we never got to mention it is treasurer. Notice that Beylier gives Arno a compliment. The game kind of one-dimensions the Council in order to serve plot needs, but for our rewrite they needed to be much more robust. Arno finding/recovering Brassuer is a clear mark in his favor for Beylier, and he points out that Arno is a gifted Assassin in spite of Arno's character.

And let's talk about Arno's character. We've been hinting and gesturing to if for a lot of the fic but this is the moment it becomes patently obvious - Arno might PASS as functioning but he ISN'T a functioning person. He is an abuse victim: Olivier abused him blatantly in the opening memories, and no matter how high Arno holds M. de la Serre in esteem the man was emotionally cut off unless Arno was meeting his needs. Bellec was abusive in his training - and only now are people starting to realize that Arno has some issues to work out.

Arno's character is kinda defined by those abuses. He holds himself responsible for everything - most especially François de la Serre's murder, he pushes himself to be perfect because that's what Olivier and Bellec want from him, he doesn't ask questions because that leads to being yelled at and abused again, he doesn't have a high opinion of himself and assumes other people that aren't named de la Serre - such as the Council - don't like him by default.

The thing with Arno is that he's internalized a lot of the abuse: Bellec is in his head saying he doesn't think, he feels unworthy of Élise because he is Third Estate, and he doesn't expect compliments for a job well done. Charlotte and Augustin confuse him for all the praise they give, and for the first time in his life he wonders if he might actually be good at something, and he doesn't know how to react to it.

Failure, however, he DOES know how to deal with: drinking. They kind of touched on it during the game, but not like they did with Eddie Kenway (yes, we can say nice things about him) as he entered his downwards spiral. Arno is deeply emotional - labeled as a romantic by Bellec and others - he feels things deeply and with all of his heart, and he drinks to numb that feeling even a little so that he can function. But more on that in a certain chapter. :)

Mental health isn't really a thing in this time period - it's only just finding its footing in the last two decades or so - and nobody really knows what to do with Arno as they start to realize how "non functioning" he actually is. This goes back to what Mme de la Serre said all the way back in chapter 1: François, Beylier, Quemar, etc, they don't know the human condition. Mirabeau does. Charlotte and Augustin do. And they end up doing what they can to keep Arno from breaking. Mirabeau may not have Eagle Vision, but he understand "people," the human condition.

Honoré may be doing his best for Arno, but his other unhealthy coping mechanism is
his obsessive tendencies. He's not obsessive, the way Élise is, but the tendencies are there, and for the first time he disobeys orders: he looks for the silver smith on his own. More on that later.

Speaking of silver smiths... Next Chapter: the start of Arno's thirty-six hour NIGHTMARE.
March 2, 1791

The following day the Assembly announced the abolition of all trade guilds, and the day after it was announced that any silver objects owned by churches were to be melted down and sold to fund the government.

The citizens of Paris rioted with churches, eager to plunder the riches to be melted down and sold. It was clear the Assembly was doing what it could to gain finances after the First and Second Estates had bankrupted the country, and the people of Paris responded with popularity and enthusiastically making sure that the Church complied.

Honoré was exhausted. Back when he had been selected for the Estates-General, when he and his counterpart had seen down the road of time and realized what had beset them, he had gloried in the idea of affecting positive change for the country – with no idea how much work it took. He was with the Assembly and the different committees until all hours, explaining and explaining and explaining, dealing with whatever crisis du jour was, trying to make laws and convincing people to vote for them, trading barbs with that damned Robespierre or arguing against an idea of utter idiocy that was proposed. Then he was off to the King to apprise him of what was going on, or writing a letter to the Queen to tell her pinhead of a husband how to act to better accommodate the plan he had in mind – no don't do this, no don't do that for any reason whatever – the man couldn't even blink without someone telling him it was safe to do so. And then, after all that, it was to the Sanctuary and the Council, reminding them yet again that the truce was still in effect and the Assassins, at least, were honorable enough to follow it. He woke at dawn and did not go to bed until three or four in the morning.

He tried to take joy in small things: when a bit of legislation passed, when Louis managed not to do something stupid. Honoré took particular pleasure in the find of Arno Dorian. He had never met Charles Dorian, but the Council and especially Pierre had given him a measure of the man, and finding his son – raised by Templars no less – and taking him in right as the Revolution started always seemed to make him smile.

Right up until it didn't.

It had been bad enough to learn that young Arno's Templar household had fostered distrust and challenges among the other novices, worse to know it had been going on under his very nose until it had been put to a stop. He had had a firm talk with all the Assassins who had been derelict in the responsibilities of their students – including Pierre, to allow such an unwelcoming environment. He had also talked to all of the novices while Arno recuperated – pointedly bringing up backgrounds of several students and demanded if they should be challenged as well given their parentage or the deeds they had done. Most students understood they had made a mistake, and some – Honoré could tell – simply decided to wait; to be subtler. The teachers had fared better – except for Pierre, who had taken the entire conversation and turned it into a dig at Honoré, suggesting Arno was some kind of symbol of a legacy Honoré was securing.

Pierre had always been a maverick with odd ideas – ideas that often led to results. He had found the Bastille Codes as a result of his ideas, and Honoré always loved people who disagreed with him. The debate was often invigorating, but it was now, after learning that Arno didn't ask questions,
didn't understand the Creed, that he looked at this other Assassin in a new light.

Pierre... his most verbal disagreements came when Honoré needed to talk about the Truce or the Templars. Oh, no one liked the Truce, and they all had their problems with it, but they respected Honoré enough to trust he knew what he was doing. And Honoré wasn't stupid, either – not fighting didn't mean not spying – and the idea of avenging François was the perfect back door to get back to killing Templars if – as Honoré suspected – a Templar had been the one to order the kill. Bringing that accomplishment to a new Grandmaitre as a favor to be called upon later... Honoré was a fan of theatre, and that performance would be marvelous. But back to Pierre, his opinion on the Truce did not even consider the advantages of the whole Truce to begin with. Pierre wasn't interested in focusing on the outreach programs they ran, recruiting and training new brothers and sisters without worrying about deploying them too young, accumulating income, even shaping the fate of the country were ignored by Pierre.

Honoré had initially assumed that was to prove a point, but now he wondered if it weren't more genuine, more focused. He had looked up Pierre's other apprentices, the four he had trained before Arno. As Guillaume had said, they were competent warriors, skilled thieves and spies, all critical thinkers.

And all dead within five years of completing their training, sacrificing their lives for an objective of varying degrees of importance. Or, in one case, doing the "Levantine" approach of an open assassination. Only one was still alive, and he summoned the mademoiselle to Paris from Caen.

"Mademoiselle Corday," Honoré said softly.

"Mentor," she said, still in her country dress and giving a polite courtesy. "I was surprised with the summons. Is there a problem with my assignment?"

"Not at all," Honoré said, glancing through the reports she had sent. "You seem to have everything well in hand. You should know at the Assembly they are starting to call your group counter-revolutionary. They think you're all from the department of Gironde. The name might stick."

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders.

"No, I wanted to ask you about your time under Monsieur Bellec and your training."

"Of course. What would you like to know?"

"Just... what was it like?"

Charlotte tilted her head slightly, bonnet shifting to show her eyes more. "In what way?"

"Comparison, more than anything else," Honoré said, adjusting his seat. He'd been sitting for hours. "What kind of teacher was he?"

"Unyielding," Charlotte said immediately. "He told me at the beginning that he would pull no punches, that he would not spare me, because the world would not spare me, and I needed to be ready for it. I remember I would hang by my fingers for what felt like hours. If my form was wrong he would correct me with his practice wand. He used the ugliest language he could think of, to inoculate me to what people would say to me – that was the hardest, but I am stronger for it."

Honoré nodded, and started asking other questions: what did training look like? How often were you brought above ground? Was there drinking? What happened if a mistake was made? Honoré listened, tried to diagnose what had happened, but the tale of her training was remarkably different than one Arno had gone through: Charlotte had been taken above ground before her death, only
twice instead of constantly with Arno. She was given a nickname, "ma petite," nothing as vulgar as merdeux. Mistakes meant hanging by her fingers – much like with Arno. Always she circled back to the language. "I am a country girl, Mentor," she said, "We do not talk like you do in the city, and Monsieur Bellec was determined to make sure I could handle any language someone said and not turn my nose at it. He would tell me lurid stories of... intimacies and prior conquests until I did not blush. He would explain in detail what a Templar would do to my body until I did not shiver. He would not stop, and if I asked for a pause I would hang by my fingers until he said otherwise – sometimes until nightfall. I needed to understand how dark the world was and what risks a woman had in taking part of this life."

"And what do you think now?" Honoré asked. "Is the world as Monsieur Bellec described?"

Charlotte frowned, thinking. "Non," she said finally. "But there are people in the world who would wish it that way. Monsieur Marat and his paper is one. The Jacobins are another."

"Thank you, mademoiselle, you've been most helpful."

Charlotte nodded at the dismissal, and Honoré went through the notes of another of Pierre's students. The hanging by fingertips was a common thread, as was the preface before any training that Pierre would not pull any punches. There were echoes of a pattern: Pierre did not keep the "dead" below ground – not with any of his students, but none of the prior students went out half as much as Pierre pulled out Arno. Drinking popped up several times – a sign of every Assassin once or twice, but with a more focused eye Honoré started to document the numbers and wondered if it weren't more than should be expected. On paper, Pierre was a hard-nosed but competent teacher with only hints of his maverick tendencies in training.

Then why the far uglier presentation with Arno's training? Why announce the boy ready for assassination after only being promoted a few months prior? Honoré remembered the conversation, how Pierre had tried to dig at him over the truce and made a point of speaking to him directly to say the boy was ready – undercurrent of something heavy in the air before Honoré had made his decision.

... Was that it? Did Pierre shake Arno out of his hair early? Why?

That lead to a different string of questions all together: what did Pierre see in Arno that made him wash his hands of him? The Templar sympathies was the obvious connection but there must have been something deeper, these were Assassins after all.

Honoré looked up at the clock – one in the morning. He sighed, finally getting up to limp to his home and get some sleep.

"The son of Charles Dorian returns to us."

The memory jolted through Honoré just as he straightened, and instead of going above ground he hobbled back to records. He had been focusing on the wrong Dorian. He needed to read up on Charles.

It was dawn when he finally finished, forced to put it all on pause with a note to Sophie to get either Pierre or Arno to see him that night when he returned and then it was all about Louis and Maximilien and le Peletier and the Assembly and the latest riot and making the church pay restitution and melting silver to have money to spend on changing the country. He slept through supper, knowing he could eat at the Sanctuary if he got hungry.

Pierre saw him first, as he often did, and Honoré finished writing his latest letter to the king.
"Pierre, sit," he said.

"Prefer to stand, thanks."

"Pierre, you may want to sit."

The maverick leveled a flat look, gauging, judging, before moving in front of the upholstered chair and joining him by the fire. Honoré put his papers aside, focusing on this interview. "I've been reviewing young Arno's reports, you know," he said slowly by way of introduction. "I realized something, none of us would have known he was the son of an Assassin if you didn't bring it up when you returned from the Bastille."

Pierre's face gave nothing away. "So?" he asked.

"Charles was, by all accounts, a good Assassin. I've been reading up on the history – I didn't grow up in the Brotherhood like many of us – and I realized that Charles and you worked together quite often."

"And?"

... stupid village council...

Honoré smiled through his frustration and leaned back in his chair, feeling his lower back stretch. "And I wanted your thoughts. Arno has shown quite a bit of promise, and I thought maybe the son would follow the father's footsteps."

A snort, the flat stare breaking. It was not a verbal response, but it told Honoré volumes. "I remember your report from the Bastille – you obviously hold Charles in high esteem even now. I don't think I've ever seen that respect transferred to young Arno. Is my assessment accurate?"

Pierre scoffed, crossing one leg over the other – not as defensive as crossing one's arms, but Honoré had made him uncomfortable. "Respect is earned," Pierre said, "From person to person. We all know that."

"Of course," Honoré said genially. "It makes me wonder, then, what young Arno has done to earn such ire."

"Don't know what you're talking about."

... stupid village council...!

Honoré let the moment hang, rubbing his pockmarked chin and considering his options. Pierre would dance as well as any of them, but the Mentor thought that dancing was not what Pierre wanted to do. A direct thrust, then, right to the heart of the matter. "Why do you call him merdeux?" he asked.

Pierre finally looked at Honoré directly – not a flat gaze but direct eye contact. "Did he put you up to this?"

"He doesn't even recognize what 'this' is," Honoré said. "He thinks it's perfectly normal to be called a 'little shit,' he thinks going above ground while still 'dead' is normal, he thinks accepting challenges from students who doubt his loyalties normal."

"You're still on about that."
"I am," Honoré countered. "No master should have allowed their students to voice their doubt in the form of violence, but only now do I begin to understand that Arno was never protected from these challenges to begin with – and you are too intelligent to not know that these were going on. This is far beyond 'not pulling punches' to 'prepare someone for the real world,' Pierre. This is a single-minded attempt to set him up for failure, again and again, until he quits, leaves, or dies; I'm not sure which. There's flirting with the rules and there's outright breaking them, and I have to wonder what Arno has done to make you determined to see the son of Charles Dorian suffer."

"He's not Charles' son," Pierre hissed, eyes turning hateful.

_He's not Charles' son._ Four words that spoke volumes. Honoré was beginning to see clearly now, what a bad match this had been. Oh, Arno.

"But Pierre," he said, gently, "he's not Charles, either."

"You're damned right about that. Those damned Templars broke him before he even turned ten – all that potential's been wasted, and nothing I've done has brought it about."

"But it is there, Pierre," Honoré said. "You can't tell me that you haven't seen it."

Pierre said nothing.

"You are right," Honoré said. "He's lost time. He should have been with us. Charles should still be alive. But we can't change any of that, we can only work with what we have."

"And what we have is merdeux."

"You don't truly think that," Honoré countered, shifting his weight again, stretching his legs to be closer to the fire. He gazed into the depths of light for a moment, watching the flickers of light and imagining the likeness of God in them. "If you thought so little of him you wouldn't have pointed out his heritage, or even given him an entry disk. So, then, if we know how Arno is not like Charles, perhaps the better question is how is he like Charles?"

He looked back to Pierre, watched his face, saw the Assassin truly think about the question, saw him turn inward and look at memories. "Same nose," he said softly, voice far away. "Same eyes, same frown when something's wrong. Merde they tie their cravats the same way. And they both see the best in the worst people."

Ah, there it was. Honoré knew enough about the human condition to see the connection. "Does that include you?" he asked softly.

Pierre immediately stiffened and closed himself off. He was back to the flat stare and the guarded tone. "We done here?"

Honoré sighed. "It would seem so," he said sadly.

Pierre could not have left any faster, and Honoré stared into the fire again, wondering if there was any way to clear up this mess.

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Arno pulled at his blue overcoat, nervous that Mirabeau had summoned him to his personal home instead of the Sanctuary. He announced himself as the new steward of the Café Théâtre and was escorted to the majordomo's office where the Assassin Mentor was talking about wine.

"Ah, Monsieur Dorian! I wasn't certain you would come."
"Maître Mirabeau, if the hero of the revolution summons me, who am I to argue?"

Mirabeau smiled brightly, nodding at the compliment and turned back to the head of house. Arno kept his head down, uncertain if the man remembered him from his two-week recovery last year, when the Council had learned about the challenges he had faced from the other novices. "That will be all, Michel," he said to his majordomo. "I know it's a lot."

"Oui, Monsieur."

"Come, monsieur, let's go to my study, and we can talk business."

Mirabeau yawned as they moved upstairs, feet too stiff to navigate steps; his back arched this way and that, Arno could see, as if trying to stretch out a sore muscle. He entered his office and poured two glasses of wine, offering one to Arno before all but falling into his chair and moaned as he got more comfortable, lavishing in the soft upholstery, before finally looking to Arno. Had he even slept? There were puffs under his eyes but no dark circles.

"Are you all right, monsieur?" Arno asked.

"Right as rain, as the saying goes," Mirabeau said. "Every day we learn a bit more, grow a bit more, and get a bit better at our craft. The Revolution is little more than growing pains – we're pulling out of childhood and into adulthood and trying to skip over adolescence in the process. That's why we riot so much, I think. But I didn't call you to talk politics – unless you're interested, of course?"

"Do I have an assignment?" Arno asked carefully. Assignments were given in the Sanctuary, away from prying eyes, and he didn't understand why he was in Mirabeau's home. He hadn't been here since the recovery, and this was... it was a private home. He wasn't sure why he was here.

Mirabeau's friendly affect faded, charm turning slowly to understanding, and the older man leaned forward on his desk, morning light casting shadows on his pockmarks. "Arno, I've been doing a little reading," he said. "I joined our Brotherhood much like yourself, later in life. It was fifteen years ago, now, almost sixteen, and like you, I had a teacher who brought me into the fold, as it were. Almost thirty, twisted foot and no hope of field work, but the Brotherhood saw something in me that even I didn't know."

Arno nodded, not sure what else to do.

"She was a sight to behold, let me tell you. Two years older than me but so dour, abstaining from the finer things in life." He drank his wine. "She was the secondSophie in my life; not my Sophie, of course, and she had the ability to turn me down before I even glanced in her direction. What a woman! I deeply enjoy the pleasures of the flesh and she wanted nothing of pleasure from me and resented that I even offered to please her. Many thought the relationship cantankerous.

"But you know," Mirabeau said, taking another sip. "Even when we were at our most disagreeable, she always made a point of teaching me. She answered every question I ever asked her – no matter how frivolous, how lurid, or how intellectual. She came with me to Great Britain, where I met Messieurs Franklin and Jefferson of the Americas, and the rest, as they say, is history. It was my teacher, my other Sophie, who introduced me to the Genevese revolutionaries and started putting my mouth to better service, as it were. That was my first assignment." He smiled at the memory, sipping his wine. "Maître Trenet has seen me at my worst and at my best, but even now she still sees in me something."

Arno blinked. Wait, Maître Trenet had taught Mira—
The Mentor smiled. "I see your disbelief. She has lived an entire life, you know, and only four people know it in its totality. As bitterly as we sometimes fight there is a respect between us even when we disagree with each other. That kind of respect is perhaps the most important part of any student-teacher relationship in the Brotherhood. So much is shaped by the teacher, so much is influenced by the student, it is a precious bond.

"And that brings us to Pierre Bellec."

Arno sat very still, suddenly very afraid of what his teacher might have said about him.

Mirabeau saw his defense, however, and only sighed. "That," he said, pointing to Arno's rigid back, "Should never have happened."

"Désolé, Monsieur."

"Non, you don't understand, you should never have been put in a position to feel so uncertain when a person's name is mentioned. As I said, I've been doing some reading. I've talked to one of Monsieur Bellec's other students, and I had a conversation of sorts with him. There is a bad match, Arno, and then there is the two of you. Mistakes were made, and all of us on the council are complicit in not seeing it earlier. You've already made Assassin and have your own assignment, that that complicates things, because I'm not sure how we can fix it. But I wanted you to know, here, now, that it will be fixed. It may take another month or two before we can come up with a plan – Paris isn't going to give us much in the way of spare time, you see, but I'm taking you on as a personal project. I want you to see the Brotherhood as I do, not as Bellec does. I want you to see our highs as well as our lows, and I want you to ask questions, to never take things at face value. I want you to ask me everything you can think of, the same way I asked Maître Trenet. Well," he appended with a sly grin. "Maybe not everything."

Arno didn't know what to say. He wasn't entirely sure what Mirabeau was alluding to, what was about to happen to him. He only really understood that he was about to spend time with the only man in Paris, the only man in the entire Brotherhood, who hadn't hurt him, and the very thought made him smile.

March 31, 1791

Arno had just finished his morning meeting with the staff of the Café. It was the last day of March and people were already speculating what sort of grain shortages there would be this year. Winter supplies had dwindled to non-existent, prices were exorbitant, and Arno wondered where they were going to get the money to pay for food. They were at least making more money, but also meant they had to spend more on supplies. He'd spent the last week visiting vendor after vendor for spring vegetables, meats, grains, anything. But without grain to feed cattle or sheep, without grain for bread, things were looking more and more bleak. Yvette had mentioned substituting beans for some of their dishes, both to add more Haitian flair and also to not worry about needing so much bread, but those beans didn't grow naturally in France and were very expensive to import in.

He was sitting in the intendent's office, going over the ledgers. He had been carefully putting money away to hire a carpenter to repair the floors and some of the furniture, when he thought he heard firecrackers and he whirled around. A hooded woman stood at the door, small in frame, but wiry. Arno blinked, before he burst out into a large smile.

"Cosette!" he greeted. "Look at you! You've moved up in the world."

Cosette was beaming as she took off her hood. Underneath was the proper bonnet for a woman and
the hood looked more like a scarf for her shoulders. They hugged and Arno impishly swung her around. "Ah, promoted! You must be so happy!"

"Of course," she said demurely. "My assignment is still waiting, but I have 'graduated'. I had to share."

"With good reason!" Arno grinned. "Come on, I'll get you a plate of something to celebrate. On me!"

"Oh, I couldn't—"

"I insist," Arno replied, dragging her out to the hall and then left toward the kitchen. "Yvette," he greeted with a nod of the head, "may I make a request?"

"For you, monsieur, of course," Yvette replied, already making some stews and soups for the lunch crowd. Her table was covered in all manner of vegetables and legumes that they had scrounged up, some chopped, some diced, all in progress. She looked up from where she was plucking leaves off of her herb garden and her eyes brightened.

"Yvette," Arno presented Cosette, "this is a dear friend of mine from when I was at my worst. She has just been promoted at her job. I think she deserves something to celebrate."

"A cause for celebration indeed," Yvette said softly. "But Monsieur Dorian, I must remind you that nothing is ready yet, nor will it be for an hour."

Arno took the chiding in stride. "That's fine. I don't mind entertaining my friend here at the café while you cook."

Yvette raised a brow. "And what am I cooking?"

"What you feel is best," Arno replied with a soft smile. "You always do, and you always excel."

Yvette's eyes danced. "Very well, Monsieur Dorian."

Cosette elbowed Arno firmly in the stomach. "You needn't go through such bother," she said demurely. "I can't stay that long. I am busy with the promotion after all. In fact," Cosette turned to Arno, all business, "you have been summoned. There's talk of catering something and they heard of the unique flavor of your Café. They want to meet with you and see what you have to offer."

Arno understood the hidden message and hung his head. "It seems business calls, Yvette. We'll have something to celebrate later. After this meeting I'll head to the vendors again. I think I'll try a different part of the city. We might be better off if we pay for further delivery." That also gave him a good excuse to be gone for the rest of the day if the Council had a mission. "Pass word to the others, please?"

"Very well," Yvette said. "When shall we expect you?"

"Late," Arno replied glumly. "I don't think I'll find a good vendor in my first try, do you?"

"Non, monsieur."

"Then very late indeed."

"Merci."
Cosette and Arno walked out of the Café and across the bridge before heading down to the river and into the tunnels, looking to anyone above like it might be a lover's tryst.

"Do you know why I've been called?"

"No," Cosette said softly, her scarf up to a hood, petticoats hitched up. "I was heading to you anyway and they asked that I fetch you."

Arno offered a rueful laugh. "Get used to a lot of fetching. Bellec had me doing that for a long time."

Cosette shrugged. "If that's what it takes to get promoted as fast as you, then so be it."

They continued to chat, Cosette asking many questions about the café and Arno asking about what was next for her and catching up.

Once in the Sanctuary, Arno headed up to meet with the Council.

Quemar and Trenet were there, both looking dour and stern.

Arno offered a polite bow. "How may I be of service?" he asked, his eyes already going to the Templar pins he'd recovered both from the King of Beggars, but also from the printer and others he didn't recognize.

"This pin has been invaluable," Trenet said coldly, as she always did. "We have discovered more Templars by identifying it. We watch them even now."

Arno nodded. The Assassins, at least, were staying true to the truce that Mirabeau and M. de la Serre had come to. The only Templars who died were the ones who started something. Like killing M. de la Serre.

"More importantly for you," Quemar said tiredly, "is that we've found the smith."

"You found him?" Arno's heart leapt to his throat. Finally. A chance to finish what he'd started. A chance to redeem. A chance to erase a mistake.

"Yes," Trenet said, studying the pins. "On la rue Saint Antoine. Go, find François-Thomas Germain. Find out what he knows. Learn more of this new Grandmaître of the Templars. We need to learn what's been going on within the Templar ranks."

"It would be my pleasure," Arno said just as coldly.

He left swiftly, heading across the Pont Notre Dame, the closest bridge, and then to the Hôtel de Ville, where la rue Saint-Antoine began and headed southeast all the way to where the Bastille once stood. Arno had traveled this route several times, not paying it much attention. It was part of the route for La Fête de la Fédération, and parallel to the Seine. Arno looked at it with new eyes and swiftly took to the roofs. He hadn't noticed anything before. He was going to make sure he noticed things now, without the hustle and bustle of the city to distract him.

On the roofs Arno studied the building once he arrived. It was a blocky u-shape, with a grand entrance, front courtyard, and driveway. Very rich. Clearly, before the revolution had begun, Germain's accomplishments as a silversmith had catered to the First and Second Estates. It was subtle, but guards patrolled the small courtyard, and Arno could see a few hidden on the upper balconies with muskets held at the ready.
Well, that's not suspicious at all, was it?

Yet it wasn't clearly visible from the street. No wonder Arno hadn't noticed it before. Commendable. Hiding in plain sight, yet never seen. No wonder it was a tenant of the magical Creed. There was, indeed, some merit to it. On both sides, no less.

Well, Germain was somewhere inside. Now, where was it the best entrance?

Two sides of the building had wide avenues encasing it, which meant eyes were constantly on the streets. The side streets might lead to a servant's entrance, but any entrance on the ground level would be watched.

Well, if Assassins were to be associated with eagles, he might as well try the roof.

Carefully, Arno headed back down to street level and then up across the street to a roof next to Germain's expansive shop and home. With a deep breath he leaped across, barely grabbing on to the roof before sliding down. He slid to a stop and waited, heart pounding. No sounds. No movements. Just the street noise below him.

Bien.

Sticking to the roof, Arno carefully made his way around, eyes alert. He found two musketeers, and had no trouble sneaking down and stabbing into their lungs. Good. No one so high up would have eyes on him. With silent feet Arno entered into the attics through an open window. March wasn't especially warm yet, but many people were opening windows to start cleaning with the improved weather. It seemed this place was no better. Arno carefully slipped down to the second floor.

Nom de dieu, how many guards are needed for this place?

Arno easily spotted five guards in the next hall alone. More were probably further down. Just who the hell was Germain? Why was he so guarded? Sivert had guards, but not to this degree. Le Roi des Thunes had brutes about, but they were poor beggars, meant to intimidate, but not skilled fighters. Even the Assassins didn't have so many guards around their members. Mirabeau only had his personal guard as a comte, which was very small, and Quemar didn't even have any guards as a lawyer. Why the hell were so many concentrated in one area?

Arno took a very quiet breath and called on his eagle. The pulse he asked for was small, enough to get a direction. He didn't need a splitting headache, after all. And with a crackle of a single firework a small burst of color drew his eye to a locked door.

Right. If the guards were all in the halls, that meant that they considered the rooms secured and most rooms had connecting doors. Arno reached for his belt and pulled out his lockpicks, crouching down by the handle. Fabre had told him he was accomplished with a lockpick. Time to prove it. Arno let out a quiet breath and focused on feeling the tumblers, each pin as he gently maneuvered his picks around. He felt the catch, then slowly turned the lock so as not to break his picks.

Parfait.

One by one he went through each empty room.

One appeared to be some sort of meeting room, samples of silverwork on display with sketches of designs, likely for when people came to order work. The next room was more of a grand hall, light pouring in from windows on either side and a staircase coming up. There were two guards.
hovering by a fire, grabbing whatever warmth they could with the windows radiating the chill March weather outside. Arno looked carefully around. One of the guards moved, heading to a window to peak out and watch the streets.

Right by Arno.

Well, Arno appreciated the convenience. His hidden blade buried itself into the guards back and Arno pulled him into the now unlocked room. On silent feet he did the same to the guard who was still holding his hands out over the fire. Both now hidden in the locked room, Arno crossed the hall above the staircase and unlocked the next room. This was some sort of library, tall shelves groaning under the weight of all the books. All the more for muffling sound Arno supposed, as he snuck across and unlocked the next door. The library was a corner room, and Arno now was in the long middle section of the building. The next room was some sort of drawing room, but Arno was starting to notice a pattern. Dust from disuse, both for the meeting room, the library, and now the drawing room. The drawing room even had furniture covered in sheets. Did no one live here?

But then, why all the guards?

Arno groused to himself. Was he going to have to search every room to find whatever documents were hidden here?

Past the drawing room was another open hall with a double door beyond. Three guards stood there, talking quietly.

Arno hid behind his door, considering his options.

"He's still in there?" one of the guards asked in a baritone as Arno went through his supplies.

"I've been here three weeks," another replied, voice a tenor, "and I've never seen him leave that room, let alone come downstairs."

That didn't sound like a high-ranking member of something. Not leaving? Arno loaded his Phantom blade and checked his bomb supply. Even the Council often left the Sanctuary, they had jobs to do. M. de la Serre was the Grandmaitre of the Templars, and Arno remembered how he often left to deal with something or other.

"Dedicated to his work, is he?" the baritone asked.

"Obsessed more like," the tenor replied. "I don't think he even knows we're here."

Arno analyzed what he'd learned. Someone, most likely Germain, was behind those doors, and they were working to the exclusion of all else on something. That didn't sound good. That sounded more like a captive. Or someone so self-absorbed they didn't understand what was going on around them. Arno would have to proceed carefully.

He watched carefully from his crack in the door and waited patiently. One of the guards, the one who hadn't spoken yet, was standing stolidly at the windows, watching the streets, eyes flitting back and forth. The baritone was stretching and yawning, clearly tired. Newly assigned, most likely, wasn't prepared for the endurance that just waiting required. Given how Bellec would often make Arno wait for things by hanging from his fingers, or running, or just sitting there to contact his eagle, Arno did feel a twinge of pity. But he had waited years to get a lead on who killed M. de la Serre. He could handle it better than this sleepy guard. The tenor, meanwhile, was pacing. A good skill to wake up.

Were they ending a shift? Good for Arno, bad for them. With one looking outside, and one falling
asleep, it was easy for Arno to slip out his door and stab the tenor, gently settling him to the floor, before doing the same to the sleepy baritone. The silent guard hadn't heard a thing and Arno's blade slid home and he eased the hulking brute down to the floor. None the wiser.

With one more lock to pick, Arno let out a steady breath.

He opened the door silently and found a tall man working by a window and all its light, lightly hammering away at some silver design.

Arno shut the door with noise, announcing himself.

The man startled, turning with his tool carefully held in his hand...

There was a split second.

And in that tiniest fraction of time something happened.

Arno heard a strong eagle screech. Not the fireworks of his weak vision, but the pure call of an eagle. Arno's eyes automatically catalogued everything he saw. Dark hair, graying. Left eye blue, right eye green. Charcoal gray suit, blue-green waistcoat, lines of surprise. Fist gripping the tool like a knife. **Fear.** Arno felt strange because it *wasn't* his eagle. His eagle was never that strong, and his head wasn't aching from it.

This was something *important.*

But the split second was over, and Arno held up a hand carefully, keeping his head down to hide his face behind the hood. "Monsieur Germain?" he asked softly. "The silversmith?"

The reaction was immediate. An explosive sigh of relief, the tool was put down on the desk, and the man stepped forward, almost as if in prayer of thanks for a miracle.

"Thank God!" he said heartily. "They've been holding me for months! *Please,* get me out of here!"

Arno stayed cautious. He still needed information first and foremost. He held up the Templar pin. "I need to know about this," he replied.

But Germain was looking around nervously. "No time!" he insisted, grabbing his tool again. "I'll tell you all I know once we're *away,* but we must leave, before the guards return!"

"Fine. Let's go."

For a silversmith who was oblivious of guards around him Germain seemed to be terrified of being found again. How long was he being held to have just... stopped paying attention to the guards' comings and goings and plans for escape? Arno headed to another set of double doors, crouching to unlock them and keep taking the type of route he'd snuck in through.

"Non!" Germain hissed. "They'll be watching that way! That leads to the servant's entrance and the back stairs. We'll have to..." Germain hesitated, clearly thinking as fast as he could, "go downstairs and across."

"Follow me, then," Arno replied. "And stay quiet."

The hall led them to another grand staircase, and Arno motioned for Germain to stay hidden behind a desk. "Wait a moment," he said quietly. There were only three guards, all had their backs to the
locked doors, as Arno was counting on. As he had before, he killed each one silently and eased them to the ground, never making a sound. He turned back to Germain, saw the eyes wide, clearly impressed. A cocky smile might have played across Arno's face before he turned serious again. "This way," he hissed.

"A-as you say."

The stairs lead down to a massive dining room. Five guards this time, and less fabrics or books to muffle sound. Arno studied them for a moment, observing patterns. As seemed to be in every room, all the guards didn't bother to look back to locked doors and, in this case, they didn't bother looking upstairs. After all, who would infiltrate from above?

It still struck Arno as strange. Guards should face the exterior, yes, for anyone trying to break in, but they should also face in, in case their prisoner tried to break out. How had Germain been so docile and complacent about this? Even when Arno was in the Bastille, he had done everything he could to escape. With Bellec sparring with him every day, and the invalides all recuperating in a light-security prison, the guards had known to watch Arno and Bellec, just as a precaution.

Were these guards all stupid?

"Stay here," Arno whispered. In one sweeping motion, he hurdled over the stair rail and landed on a guard below him, crashing him into a couch that muffled the sound, even as his hidden blade sunk deep into the neck. Peeking around a screened divider, Arno took another look around. The guards were mostly looking out the windows, so Arno stayed on silent feet, being especially careful of echoes, and stabbed each guard in the back, easing them down. How dedicated were these guards to watch the streets and courtyard? Just who the hell was Arno rescuing?

And just how many more people was Arno going to have to kill for just doing their jobs?

Once the room was clear Arno motioned to Germain and found another locked door.

Arno rolled his eyes under his hood and crouched down to pick another lock. The next room was empty, shelves and furniture dusty and covered in linens, and this time Arno's luck didn't hold. A guard was right there, eyes wide as Arno stepped in. But as this was another corner room, Arno surged forward in two steps and plunged his blade into the heart before the guard could even cry out. He dragged the body back into the corner room, hiding it under one of the cloth-covered couches. The storage room seemed to be part of an office, and Arno counted another pair of guards. One sitting at a desk, the other watching the window.

Captain of the guard here, perhaps?

Either way, Arno's blade first went to the man sitting at the desk, then to the man staring out the window.

He let out a controlled breath. "Best we move on," he said. Diable, how many more was he going to have to kill? His luck wasn't going to hold out forever.

"Oui," Germain said darkly.

Arno unlocked another door to sneak a glance.

Merde. Ten guards in that room. Must be a break area. There was no way Arno could stealth that.

"You sound like hell," one of the guards said, polishing a giant ax.
"Whole damn place *reeks* of boric acid," replied a musketeer, a cloth by his congested nose. "He *says* it's not poisonous but..."

"So open a window and stop complaining."

Arno readied his Phantom blade, then turned to Germain. "Wait," he said softly. Gently, he guided Germain back to the previous door. "Things are about to get very loud. Stay hidden back here."

There was no way Germain would see him aim his Phantom blade this way. Carefully, he took aim to the largest brutes in the room. There. Both of them hit. The poison was fast acting. Five minutes tops for the brutes to start kicking up a fracas. Arno ducked back to Germain, held a finger to his mouth for silence, and listened.

Sure enough, it got noisy indeed. Crazed shouts and clangs of swords, axes, muskets started to sound. One person shouted, "Take them out quiet! We can't disrupt his work!" as the chaos continued. Well, that explained why no one was using a pistol. That wouldn't just alert the whole house, it would probably bring the Marshalcy as well. Germain was clearly disturbed, but Arno held firm. "Stay still and quiet, it will all be over soon."

After twenty minutes, the sounds started to die down. Arno guided Germain to the break room, and glanced inside. All ten were either wounded or dead. Arno went through and finished off the wounded, so that none would know what happened.

*Nom de dieu, this* door is locked too!

Arno crouched again and pulled out his lockpicks.

Germain was by his side, a flicker of hope in his eyes. "Keep an eye to the roofs. They often post sentries there as well."

Arno actually stopped and turned to stare from under his hood at Germain.

"Just how important *are* you as a prisoner?" Just how much information was Arno going to get? Would he get the name of the mysterious *Grandmaître*? How much did Germain know and would he be willing to share it?

All these deaths be *damned*, Germain had better have *good* information.

Arno ducked by a window and looked out. Yes, there were sentries. How had he not spotted them before? Arno frowned. He'd have to rely on his eagle more, but having a splitting migraine was less than optimal for these types of missions. Fabre had said it was possible to train one's eagle for more endurance. Arno wasn't looking forward to the migraines he'd have to endure to do so.

For now, he pulled out a smoke bomb, lit the fuse, and threw it to the street. The explosion startled several, and the snipers were no doubt looking down to the smoke to see the commotion, but it was *smoke*. Arno breezed through it easily, and climbed *behind* the snipers. One was taken out with the hidden blade, the other with the rifle Arno had just liberated. He checked the pockets of one sniper and had climbed across to the other sniper when he heard a cry from below.

"Help! Help me! Please!"

*Germain!*

Arno grabbed the unused rifle and leapt down to the street, pulling out his pistol. The smoke was still dissipating, and Arno took a risk to call on his eagle. His eyes found one guard hiding behind a
desk, and the rifle made a perfect head-shot. Another was behind another desk and Arno's—Brassuer's—pistol took care of him.

The last guard was pushing Germain behind him, sword at the ready for Arno.

Arno worked to stay calm. Germain was his only lead and he'd be damned before anything like a scared guard waving around a sword ruin it. "Now," Arno said with forced calm, "no need to do anything foolish." He kept his hood down as he slowly reached for his belt. Stun grenade? Smoke bomb? Which would be better... "Let the silversmith go."

"Stay back!" the guard screamed in terror.

Behind him, Germain was stiff, still, studying the situation. Arno tried to make eye contact, to assure him that everything was under control, but the shadows of his hood prevented that. Arno saw the moment Germain had committed to whatever crazy plan he'd come up with and quickly stepped forward.

The guard's eyes were on Arno, waving the sword frantically again, but by watching Arno, he was watching the wrong person.

Germain grabbed the guard's arm, spun him around, and buried the tool he'd been clutching the entire time up behind the jaw and through the neck. His unmatched eyes were cold and detached. Then the guard fell to the ground, gurgling. Germain's jaw dropped, he let go of the tool aghast.

"God be good," he whispered, "what have I done?"

Arno stepped forward slowly, both hands visible. "Only what you had to," he said softly. "You're free now. Your life is waiting for you. Come, we must go."

"Y-yes," Germain stuttered weakly. "Yes, of course."

Arno took them down a winding path north. The last thing he needed was to lead any Templars who would follow that carnage back to the Café. He kept the pace swift, ducking down alleys, crossing heavy thoroughfares, blending through thick crowds and skirting riots.

Once he felt they were alone finally pulled Germain into a dark archway.

Germain was clearly out of breath, holding his side from a stitch most likely, hair sweaty and askew.

"Thank you, mon ami," he panted. "You've done me a great service today."

Arno held up the pin. "Perhaps you can return the favor."

"Yes, of course," Germain nodded. He held the pin, fingerling the fine work, studying the craftsmanship. "I made the first of these some years ago, on a private contract for a man called Lafrenière." There was a rueful smile. "It seemed an unusual commission, and I confess curiosity got the better of me." He glanced to Arno, gauging. "Recently, I started looking into Lafrenière's background..." he hesitated. "What I discovered... you wouldn't believe it."

Arno offered with dry bluntness, "He's a Templar. Is that what you found?"

Germain's eyes widened, emotions flitting across so fast Arno wasn't sure what Germain was thinking, but surprise was high up there. "Yes! I... I believe so!" He looked Arno in the eye as best he could with the hood in the way. "I didn't know how to take it. The Templars have been
disbanded for centuries, how could they still exist?" He shook his head. "In any case, I was careless," he said, looking away, "and Lafrenière found out about my schemes." His shoulders slumped. "Kept me under house arrest ever since. I do as he bids. Weapons mostly," he said, holding up the pin.

Arno frowned. Silver was too soft a metal for weapons. Steel was the better option. Even hidden weapons like this pin, weren't truly weapons as one thought of them. Still, to Germain's eyes they probably were weapons. After all, a silversmith didn't make knives or swords.

"Where can I find him?" Arno asked, taking the pin back.

"Well," Germain said, eyes starting to sparkle in hope, "Lafrenière is a very difficult man to pin down. Not long ago, I overheard him," he gestured down the street to the northeast, "talking about protecting the shipments at la Halle aux Blés. It sounded ominous, whatever he meant."

Arno nodded, slipping back into the shadows.

"If I may," Germain called after him, "why are you so interested in him?"

Arno paused. Then he gave a dry, bitter smile. "He killed someone very dear to me. I want to know why."

Victory flashed for the briefest of instants in Germain's eyes, but Arno was certain that was a trick of the light on different colored eyes. "I see," Germain said kindly. "You have my sympathies."

Arno ducked further back into the shadows. "They will come looking for you again," he advised. "Make yourself scarce."

"Yes," Germain nodded emphatically. "I believe I might."

Arno would come to regret that advice.

For one brief instant, Arno considered heading back to the Council. He had found Germain, he had gotten information, he needed to write his report. That was the way it always went. Whether it be something as small as routing out smugglers or as large as taking out le Roi des Thunes, one always reported to the Council. Arno's discovery of Templar pins, after reporting, seemed to have been fruitful as Arno had seen several dozen pins earlier that day. The Council would collaborate, set on a plan, and do it.

But the Council was hardly fast.

Such discussions and deliberations took time. Every Assassin, from novice to master, had made a report and come to find the Council still discussing something or other, at times heated, and rarely coming to any sort of result. Lafrenière could be right there, at La Halle, and Arno might miss him by making such a report. He had let Sivert escape because Bellec had held him back. Arno wouldn't let that happen again.

He would instead report Lafrenière's death to the Council. The Grandmaitre's death. The Council, surely, wouldn't be angry for that.

Having justified this to himself, Arno slid across the roofs to get to la Halle aux Blés. The Corn Exchange.
A large circular building, constructed between 1763 and 1767, la Halle aux Blés et Farines was built over the Hôtel de Soissons. Nothing of the old Hôtel remained, save for the Medici Tower. Originally an open structure around a circular central courtyard, in 1782 a dome of laminated wood was started, construction ending in 1783. Supposedly, some American had been by, Thomas Jefferson or something or other, and had been inspired by the dome so strongly, he was going to have all the public buildings of America under a dome or something. Arno didn't exactly pay attention to that sort of thing. The wooden dome housed twenty-five windows that let in plenty of light, even on the dullest of days.

Arno observed from above, at the corner of one of the six streets that intersected at la Halle. The building was used to store grains and flour, and given all the rioting, it was no surprise that several guards were posted about. Hide in plain sight. It seemed even the Templars had learned that form the Assassins. *All right, Lafrenière. Where are you hiding? And how could Arno get in...*

Well, a scraggly tree was in front of him, and Arno could definitely use that to get over the exterior iron fencing. Granted, with March ending the tree didn't have much bloom to hide in, but one thing Arno was learning was that people didn't look up. He eased to the tree, being very careful of the branches and what would or would not support his weight. A living tree had more spring, after all, compared to structurally sound buildings. He kept his movements light, gauged distances, and was then inside the outer ring of La Halle that encircled the domed courtyard. Arno stayed to the support beams and structures. The guards were indeed plentiful and Arno had rather had enough blood for the day. He didn't care to add more if he could avoid it.

Staying to the rafters, it was only a few moments to circle round and into the courtyard and Arno had to pause and stare.

The stores were *massive*. Germain had said it was gunpowder, but Arno was dubious. He'd been running the Café for four months now. He knew how flour and grain were stored and packed. A lot of that *looked* more like grain and flour than gunpowder. Carefully, Arno slipped from the rafters to one of the higher mountains of the store and cracked open a barrel. Gunpowder indeed! He checked a few more barrels. Some had grain and flour, but most of it *was* indeed powder. *That's a distressingly large amount of gunpowder.* A quick check of various markings showed that it came from Bavaria, one of those German states or duchies or whatever it was at the moment. *Even as unstable as France is at this moment, at least we're more stable than them.*

Arno quickly returned to the rafters and kept investigating.

Below, whispers of the guards drifted up. Some had found a good wine, some were cold with the draft, some just talking about their families. All drifted around Arno as he continued to search. *Come on, there must be paperwork somewhere. If I were files, where would I be?*

With a leap he landed in the vaulted attic of Corn Exchange, and started looking around. High up, hidden in storage, the perfect place to hide. He continued around the circumference and found a small, hidden office behind some bookshelves and more barrels.

No Lafrenière. *Diable.* But an office meant paperwork, which would be a boon no matter what. Arno started at the desk. Locked drawers? Well Arno had been through a *lot* of lockpick practice that morning. A few more locks wouldn't really matter. Invoices, delivery dates, all useful to help find people. Arno stuffed those into his waistcoat. A ledger? Arno opened it and started scanning it.

Then he whistled. "Whatever he's planning, it's big," he murmured. The past year had been about getting massive stores of ammunition. Who was Lafrenière planning to fight? Surely an army...
wasn't this well-equipped? Money to spies, bribes, it looked more like an investigation. Arno shook his head. He wasn't an accountant. All he knew was from handling the Café. It was very likely that there were hidden numbers here for analysis. Arno tucked the ledger into his waistcoat as well.

More scraps of paper, less and less useful. Ah!

A scrap with an address, date and time.

Today, in fact.

Cimetière des Innocents. That night.

Parfait. Now I know where to find you, Grand'maître.

Arno slipped to the rafters again, looking down to all that powder and grain and flour. He smiled. It hardly seemed safe to leave that lying around. He slipped back out the way he came and back down to the street. With a deep breath, he asked his eagle for help. Would it be the strong eagle cry of earlier?

No, showers of colored light sparkled around three people in the crowd, the crackle of fireworks echoing. Arno shrugged. He never did understand how someone's inner eagle worked.

He spoke to the three people one by one, speaking of how hungry he was, how the exchange had stores of flour right there, and rumor had it there was gunpowder as well. How was it fair that powder and grain and flour was there and it was guarded like a treasury? The three he spoke to were soon just as angry as he presented to be. And since Paris was prone to riots at the drop of a hat, Arno happily left as La Halle was being stormed by an angry mob. He'd have to thank Pontmercy for that method. Another way to ruin Lafrenière's day was always a good thing. Let him be distracted when he got to the Cimitière and Arno pounced.

Arno stalked back south east to get to the Cimitère des Innocents.

It was well into the afternoon now, and Arno's stomach decided to remind him that he hadn't eaten much that day.

Fine. Best not to be starving when plunging his blade into Lafrenière's throat for ordering the murder of M. de la Serre.

He had a bowl of stew that tasted more like the slop one would serve to a pig. It was heavy in his stomach but Arno ignored that as he climbed up to a nearby roof and study the Cimitère.

The cemetery had begun over five hundred years ago in the Middle Ages and was the oldest and largest in all of Paris. Between various plagues over the centuries and war with England several times, the cemetery was used primarily for mass graves. A giant pit would be dug and bodies dumped in until the pit was filled with well over a thousand bodies before it was closed and another pit was dug. To alleviate the overcrowding of the cemetery, citizens had voluntarily built charniers, along the walls of the cemetery and exhumed bones to deposit them inside. Of course, the area usually stunk to high heaven with all the rot and decay till a pit was filled in. The King had even made two edicts in regards to the Cimitère, both about moving cemeteries out of the city. Naturally the Church had resisted, since burial fees were so profitable. It cost a lot of money to throw a body into a pit, apparently. Finally, the king had forbade burying corpses in the Cimitère des Innocents or any other cemetery in Paris. Even now, the long process of exhuming bodies was underway to empty out the charniers and the pits so that the cemetery could be rebuilt as something new. Corpse wax was being collected to turn into candles and soap.
And Arno very happily watched the chaos of the cemetery, and grinned darkly at how that would help him.

First, he removed the ledger and papers he’d collected. Tying them together, he left them on the roof next to a chimney. No one else would be here and it would be safe. After all, Arno had no idea if things would go wrong and he didn't want to lose this information.

The church had already been demolished four years prior, and construction of new buildings made it easy for Arno to sneak in to the structure. He had several hours yet before Lafrenière would arrive. He was going to need a place to settle in.

Ducking around another stone wall of a new building, Arno assessed. Very softly, he called on his eagle again. Fireworks went off around alarm bells, one of the entrances where a pack of guards were talking, and—just around the corner. Arno closed his eagle eyes and felt a dull ache forming along the back of his skull. Right, limited usage. He'd have to be careful if he didn't want another migraine or to blow out his eyes.

Arno ducked around the wall he was at and listened to a guard, country accent, speaking to another.

"—you'll be reinforced before the Grandmaître arrives. We'll post snipers on the roofs. The instructions are all here. Get to it. Make sure it's safe. I must return."

"Yessir."

Arno smiled. Yes, using the eagle did make things easier, he couldn't deny that. And the best part of being in a graveyard was all the places to hide a body. Arno lifted the instructions easily and stared at the guard who had been left behind. Finally, with a heavy sigh, he plunged the hidden blade into the guard's back. The body was dragged into one of the charnel houses and with a grunt of effort, Arno hid it with all the bones on the upper shelves.

There. Now no one knew where they needed to be. Easy pickings. Still, Arno would have to keep an eye out for snipers once it got dark. That would be both his cue that Lafrenière was arriving, and that he needed to deal with them first and foremost. He was able to disarm two alarm bells, and he snuck to another entrance to the catacombs below. The number of guards hadn't changed, and they were clearly relaxed and conversing.

"Think we should go with them?" a mountain said, halberd clutched tight.

"The Maître's elite bodyguards?" replied a skinny one. "I think they can handle it."

"I suppose," the mountain replied.

"What's even going on?" asked a swordsman who was cleaning his blade.

The skinny one shuddered. "A few of the exhumers heard more than they should have. They're hiding in the catacombs."

"So the Grandmaître's bodyguards are digging them out," the mountain added.

"Seems excessive," the swordsman said, checking his sword, then using it to shave a forearm to test it.

"Connards are fighting back," the skinny one said. "Dug in like ticks."
The swordsman scoffed. "They're diggers, not fighters. They'll be dead by the time the maître arrives. I don't want him vulnerable."

Arno smiled grimly. Lafrenière was already vulnerable. And it was about to get worse. Lafrenière was going to have the worst of days.

Arno backtracked to one of the charnel houses and used that to sneak down into the catacombs.

The walls were lined with hundreds and hundreds of bones. Skulls in neat rows with all the rest of the bones piled on top. The ends of femurs and arms stuck out occasionally, or had stuck out and broken away. The tunnels weren't the same as the sewers that the Assassins called home, but Arno had been navigating dark tunnels for well over a year now. This was easy.

Sure enough, the exhumers had, indeed, "dug in" and had a pile of bones almost half as tall as the corridor as defense against the shouts of Lafrenière's "elite" guards.

Arno studied the tunnels. He'd have to be as silent as possible. With everyone crammed into such narrow corridors they'd notice just about anything. Instant deaths. Arno checked his hidden blade and realized that his sleeve and coat were stained up beyond the cuff in blood.

Stained in blood.

So much blood.

Arno took a sharp, silent breath and focused. Lafrenière would be here soon and Arno would not let this chance slip away. He needed to do this.

For M. de la Serre.

For Élise.

For redemption.

Deep breath.

It was as he had done that morning when infiltrating Germain's prison. He went to each guard as silently as possible, stabbed them, and gently lay them down. The exhumers saw what was happening and were shouting even more epitaphs at the guards, covering Arno's work. Once there were five bodies at his feet, Arno straightened, suddenly exhausted and once again hungry.

Really needed to eat more in the morning. He never knew when he was going to get days like this. He could really use some of Yvette's pâtés right now...

One of the exhumers stepped forward. "You came along at just the right time," he said softly. "Those brutes... They wanted us to stop our job just so that a bigwig could have a meeting here."

"I know," Arno replied, rubbing his brow. Hungry. Tired. He took a deep breath. "I'm here to handle that big wig and make sure he troubles France no more."

The lead exhumner nodded. "About time we took care of those noble connards."

Arno nodded.

"I'll gather up the others," the leader continued. "We'll hold positions here. Cover your escape, if you need it."
Arno blinked, not expecting that. Someone actively wanted to help that wasn't an Assassin?

Arno didn't know what to do with that.

"The meeting isn't until tonight," he said. "You have families to—"

"We'll guard the catacombs," the leader said firmly. "Can't just stand by for something like this. Nothing I knew was true, we need to stand up."

"What's your name?"

"Gabriel."

Arno smiled. *Strength in God.* Good name. Arno reached into his pouch. "If you ever need help," he said softly, "find a bookseller named Marcel Pontmercy. Hand him this." And Arno flicked a disk over. A very specific disk. A disk that had led him to Saint-Chapelle, and to the Assassins.

"The meeting isn't till tonight. Rest and eat as you can."

Gabriel smiled. "As you say, Monsieur."

Arno shook his head. He slipped back above ground through the charnel houses and found the other two alarm bells. It didn't take much to cut the clapper, and Arno climbed quietly to a roof to survey things once more.

He called on his eagle, received a dull ache along his head, but nothing drew his eye other than a large cot of hay, likely to soak up partially decomposed juices.

Right. Time to rest. Lafrenière would be here in a few hours, Arno would need to watch for snipers and take them out and... He'd have to avoid the catacombs. He didn't want Gabriel to have to face the Templars. He climbed down and nestled into the hay, yawning. *Time to wait for the rest of them to arrive. They couldn't have made this easier if they've tried. Got you now, Lafrenière.*

Arno started to drift asleep. *I love it when the target comes to me.*

"And when I get back, we'll see the fireworks."

Arno snapped awake, sucking in a breath and wondering where he was.

Hay. The Cimitière. Lafrenière. *Merde* what time was it? Arno looked through the hay and saw twilight. *Diable,* he needed to get into position.

Arno pulled himself out of the haystack and crawled under it, eyes scanning his immediate surroundings as he opened up his ears. The streets were thinning out with the supper hour, and the acoustics inside the cimitière were serviceable. Mentally he went through the plan again: snipers on the roofs, plans for positions of the guards, where Lafrenière would be standing for his presumed speech. He took a deep breath and held it, willing his heart rate to go down. This was his third assassination in as many months, always with little to no notice. He could do this. He could *do* this.

He would kill the grandmaître and then kill his mistake, erase the darkest thing he had ever done and redeem his negligence and irresponsibility. The blood would be removed from his hands.

He looked down at the cuff of his sleeve, black in the waning light with the dried blood of the morning.
No, he couldn't let himself be distracted. Focus, focus. Arno took another deep breath, holding it, massaging his temples. Faint vibrations slowly grew to footsteps, and Arno saw shoes approach him. This was the second in command, checking in with the sentries that they were in the right place. Arno silently backed out from under the hay cart, pressing himself against the corner of the bale and holding his breath again. A little closer… a little closer… There!

Arno reached out, hidden blade extended, and drove it into the neck of the lieutenant. There was a gurgled grunt, and Arno shouldered the weight, balancing it over his shoulders and then spinning it around to land on the ground next to him. The scent of death spread - mute to the smell of the rest of the place, and Arno wondered how many he had killed so far. The thought was too depressing, instead he kept his body low and slowly made his way forward, deeper into the cemetery. Mostly he kept to edges - the shadows were deep and his coat a dark blue, he just had to keep his pale face invisible. Arno found the hide spot he had selected earlier, in the shadow of a massive pile of bones and a stone marker that had not yet been removed. He could see over half the cimetières from here, and he knew Lafrenière would be near the center at the start of their ceremony.

As twilight slowly faded to full dark, Arno saw the lanterns begin to light, marking where guards were and where Arno needed to avoid. A swell of people arrived, handkerchiefs covering their noses as the wind started to pick up. Arno was downwind, and sound carried easily.

"This way, Maître," someone said. This was it.

A man, stooped with age, white beard a beacon in the dim light, slowly came to stand on one of the gravestones, lantern line showing he was in thick robes embroidered in finery. He was, indeed, in the center of the cemetery. There was a small crowd with him, also well-dressed if not as obviously ceremonial, they spread out under Lafrenière, looking up to him. Theater, Bellec would say - put a man on a pedestal and people might look up, but he looks down. That made sense for the man who ordered the death of M. de la Serre. He pursed his lips, holding in a growl, and let the wind carry words to him.

"The Truth is in peril, my brothers!" Lafrenière said, voice carrying even without the gusts. "She is beset on all quarters. Jacobins and Girondins lay her on the rack, cruelly breaking her to their populist agenda. Populous! As if the populous knows what it wants! The populous would see the world burn before understanding that the world exists to feed us. It is we, the Knights of Truth, who must lead them, guide them, protect them from the dangers they pose to their very selves! We, who know the value of the world and the nature of reign and the Truth of mankind! We, who know of the Father of Understanding, must shepherd this populous, shield them from the false prophets who would attack Truth. False prophets, promising 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité'!"

"Connards!" someone shouted.

"And these are not the only false prophets, my brothers. Within our own Order, false brothers would see us abandon our beloved Truth and throw in with the very forces we strive against! They would see us take root in the populous, hide in bawdy taverns and hovels instead of being above them as is our destiny! False brothers who would shed our titles and positions and instead rule by other means - depravity I say!

"And always, always the Assassins lurk in their shadows, watching for signs of weakness! We are a persecuted people! Attacked by society, by false prophets, by Assassins! Everyone wants the power we wield not understanding of the burden such power endows. It is our responsibility to look after those who are beneath us - our enemies think they know better!
"Our enemies believe that by taking our weapons, they take our power. I think we Friends of Truth are not so easily dissuaded! Union, Strength, Virtue!"

"Union! Strength! Virtue!"

Lafrenière spread his hands in a grand gesture. "To guide all wayward souls 'til they reach a quiet road. To guide all wayward desire 'til impassioned hearts are cooled. To guide all wayward minds to safe and sober thought. By the Father of Understanding's Light, welcome to the Order, my brothers! May the Father of Understanding guide you!"

The crowd cheered, hands going up into the chill air, some clapping. A line formed, moving up to Lafrenière as he spoke to each member of the group and bestowed upon them a pin - the pins poor Germain had been forced to make in his tenure under house arrest. The wind was getting stronger, gusts starting to swell, and Arno wondered when his chance would arrive. He spied the guards, the lanterns struggling to stay lit in the dark. There, that would be his path, but he couldn't take it until the crowd had dispersed… come on how long did it take to attach a pin?

"Our enemies," Lafrenière said, pulling Arno's attention again, "believe that by taking our weapons, they take our power. I think the Friends of Truth are not so easily dissuaded. Tonight, Truth is on our side! Brothers! Soon we will strike at the very heart of our hated enemies! They have hounded us for years, but no longer! With one stroke, we will save our Order, and rebuild our Nation! The Father of Understanding marches with us tonight! Prepare yourselves!"

"Huzzah!" someone shouted in enthusiasm.

"Prepare yourselves, gentlemen! Tonight, we strike at our enemies and show them the power of Truth!"

There, that was the end of a speech if ever there was one. The crowd broke into smaller groups, clearly having cell leaders, and Arno realized how fortuitous it was that he had skipped the Council to strike. Attack enemies tonight? And with all that gunpower at la Halle aux Blés? The Brotherhood was in danger, Arno needed to kill this target for redemption but also for the sake of the cult. For the sake of Mirabeau. He finally crept out of his hide spot, again skirting the edges and keeping to stone markers and bannisters. The moon was half full, no clouds, slowly rising into the sky.

"Is all in readiness?" Lafrenière asked.

"Oui, monsieur. The men know their duties, the connards won't escape us tonight."

"Good. The enemy has thwarted us for the last time."

"As you say, Maître."

Lafrenière nodded to his lieutenant and started moving to all of the smaller groups. This was the layout Arno had seen from his preparation that afternoon. Of all the groups… that would be the best choice, yes. Lafrenière would have to circle around a stone gazebo, slightly away from the others. Arno changed his direction slightly, passing uncomfortably close to a lantern before getting to position. He pressed himself against the stone column of the gazebo, watching the Templar Grandmaitre move to his third, then fourth group, inching ever closer.

"I trust the payment was received?"

"Of course, my brother," said a man a Germanic accent.
"You've done a great service to both France and the Order. We will not forget."

"The Austrian Rite is always loyal to the true Templar Order. Let us know if you need us to help in quelling this Revolution, we have the support of our own 'populous' to put these petty rats in their place."

Arno grit his teeth. These Templars thought they could kill M. de la Serre, attack the Brotherhood, and wipe out the very Revolution itself? Hubris! His breath was shallow as Lafrenière moved with confident steps closer, anticipation building in him. Closer… closer… closer…!

Arno extended his blade and struck, between ribs and with a twist like Pontmercy had said, felt things rip inside the cavity of Lafrenière's chest. The wind was strong, whipping through Arno and the soon-to-be-cadaver. He pulled back his hood, wanting the **Grandmaître** to see his killer.

"Assassin," Lafrenière groaned. "I knew Mirabeau was nothing more than a self-aggrandizing drunk."

"And yet it is because of him that the death of **Monsieur** de la Serre is avenged," Arno countered, dark satisfaction in his voice. "This is what happens when you break the truce."

Lafrenière's chest gurgled, Arno's hand pressed against it, feeling the life drain. The **Grandmaître** looked up at Arno, eyes wide in surprise - which struck Arno as odd, why would he be surprised?

"Your kind are always so **stupid**," Lafrenière finally mean, head falling back. "I sent Perrault with a note to **Grandmaître** de la Serre that there was a possibility of attack the night of his murder!"

What?

… What? The words of the note, the one he had failed to deliver, the one he never read until Élise threw it in his face, flew across his mind, clear as day:

"**Grandmaître de la Serre**, I have learned through my agents that an individual within our Order plots against you. I beg you to be on your guard at the initiation tonight. Trust no one. Not even those you call friends… **L**."

**L**… Lafrenière… but-he was the **Grandmaître**-he was securing all that gunpowder from Austria…!!

"Oh, François…" Lafrenière coughed. "I've failed you… l'Hôtel de Beauvais will not fall… Él…"

He stopped breathing.

"**Non. Non**, stay with me," Arno hissed, "You haven't explained yourself! If you're not the one who ordered the death of **Monsieur** de la Serre, who did? **Who did?**"

**Merde. MERDE, diable, nom de dieu**… **oh, mon dieu**!

Arno staggered to his feet, realizing the depth of his mistake. He'd killed the wrong man. He'd killed the wrong man…! He covered his mouth quickly before he could make noise, the danger of the lanterns still about him. Keep your head, keep your head, get out of here first…!

Arno backed up, steady howl of the wind hiding his uneven footfalls. Breath shallow from revelation, he somehow managed to get back to the haystack he had hid in, used it to scramble up to the roofs where he saw the snipers mentioned… at some point. **Nom de dieu**… the wrong man…! Arno shook his head, pulling his hood back up, taking to the back allies for the better part of twenty minutes before feeling safe enough to breath - at least breath long enough before he
purged everything he had ever eaten in his entire life. The wrong man! *Diable!* What was he going to do? He hadn't erased the stain - he'd added to it! This wasn't redemption, his hands were not clean - on the contrary they were even bloodier than before! *He'd killed the wrong man!* Arno was sick again, little more than dry heaves, shaking as he tried to figure out what he was supposed to do.

L'Hôtel de Beauvais... there was going to be a meeting there... an attack on enemies... Arno groaned and closed his eyes, trying to think - *why couldn't he think* - reaching back: the gunpowder, the attack, it wasn't a Brotherhood bolt hole, so it had to be something else - l'Hôtel de Beauvais, that's what he said, what building was that? One of the hot-spots for political clubs... Which one...? What was happening there? He needed to find out, he needed to-

*He had killed the wrong man!*

He couldn't run off and keep going after a mistake that big. He needed to report to the Council. He needed to confess his sin, own it, be responsible for it like he hadn't been for M. de la Serre. He needed to let them know what he'd done before investigating the *hôtel particulier* - and he needed to investigate - he needed answers, clarification, details, the things Lafrenière could no longer give him (that he'd *prevented* Lafrenière from being able to give him). He needed to salvage this mess, to do something to erase the *catastrophic* mistake he had just made...

... the Council could likely throw him out for this... he had nowhere else to go...

Courage. He needed courage to make this report.

He bought a bottle of wine, burgundy, on his way back to Île de la Cité, taking several draws of it before the numbness tickled the back of his mind. He could think now, a little, and mentally started to prepare for the worst.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Arno... You have no idea...

Astute readers might have noticed the name of Bellec's prior student, but we'll put that on pause for later in the fic. Mirabeau shows off yet again that he has a better understanding of the human condition - one or two pointed questions and/or statements and he understands just how badly Arno's training must have gone for the last year. And like a decent human being, he wants to correct it in some way. I'm sure it will go well. (whistles innocently)

Also, we don't really get into it until later but it's worth pointing out now that Bellec is wrong in thinking Arno doesn't think - and this is the best chapter that demonstrates that. Arno is thinking PLENTY while he's breaking the silversmith out and making decent conclusions to a point, but a: his broken education didn't prepare him for something like this and b: he's just missing some life experience to put this all together.

And Arno makes mistakes. Like, a lot of them in this chapter. Arno knows the big one but there are others, too, that will come up next chapter.

Also, EAGLE VISION. Something important happened but we want to hold that particular card until later.
Next chapter: Arno's 36-hour NIGHTMARE continues, windstorms aren't metaphors, name drops, no sleep, and someone comes back into Arno's life...
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a heated meeting and Honoré was tired of heated meetings. He had enough of them with the Assembly. He, Hervé, Guillaume, and Sophie were all standing and passing back and forth the sharp words and arguments. Bellec was sitting at the table, and Honoré didn't like the gleam in his eye, but the Council in front of him needed more attention.

"Four-hundred armed nobleman, Honoré!" Sophie growled. "if it weren't for General Lafayette—"

"But, Lafayette was there, and the King confirmed his authority. If you cannot see that for the victory that it is, then I cannot help you."

"Lafayette has long been a friend of the Brotherhood, yes," Hervé said reassuringly, "but even he cannot be everywhere. Sooner or later, word of your negotiations with the King will come out, and then everything will fall apart."

"And that was just last month!" Guillaume said forcefully. "The Revolution is getting worse, not making things better!"

Honoré took a sharp breath. "And have any of you looked to those American states? They had a government for nine years before making a new one. They just leveled their first tax on a domestic product and their own people are already protesting. The Americans fought a war for what they've become. Their first constitution took four years to ratify and now they have a new one. If you think two years is enough for us to make changes, you're sorely mistaken."

"But the people are suffering," Sophie hissed. "The Americans protested, but they didn't riot daily like Paris does. The Americans are so spread out that they can't cause the amount of trouble that Paris does, and they didn't have the trouble that we do."

Honoré sucked in a breath then swallowed his first response. That was a very narrow-minded view of things. People suffered. There was no way to compare suffering because what one person could find hellish might not bother another.

"Do you want France to fall into war?" Hervé asked intensely, his eyes narrowed in intensity even as his years as a lawyer kept his tone more measured then the rest of them. "Most of those Americans never saw the effect of the war. All of France will feel it if we go to war."

"By God," Honoré growled, "have none of you read Maître Connor's letters of what that Revolutionary War was like?" Honoré certainly had. He went back to them whenever he came down to the Sanctuary, to remind himself that political bluster and wherewithal were needed and that he couldn't back down. Between the papers of the States, several of which Connor had forwarded, the letters, France's own records when it had sent its military over as support, Honoré tried to have as good an idea as possible of how a revolution worked since this had started.

He had hoped that François would be around to help him sort this out. They'd debate just as badly, no doubt, over ideals and direction, but the two of them might have been able to unite their two sides to at least keep this revolution less bloody than the American one.

"We have," Guillaume replied heatedly. "That's why we are speaking so strongly. None of us want France to devolve into a war like the Americans did. But with this much violence, we might as well
be at war."

His ire already up, Honoré exploded. "Enough, enough! This room is fogged with your bluster! All hot air and no action!" Dammit, he was working on the Assembly and with the King, which were already diametrically opposed to each other. It was a tightrope he was threading, keeping both sides appeased and still working together, pushing, but never too much, making progress towards the ideals of all Assassins, but holding back enough that the conservative Royalists would at least see reason. But the further pushed, the more backed into a corner the Royalists were, the more they fought back.

Did no one believe in a middle ground anymore?

Bellec sat there, contempt hidden in his eyes, and Honoré filed that away. This whole blustering muck up had started because Bellec had made a report on his most recent mission, and Honoré, now that he saw the pattern, and more questions than he usually did. Bellec wasn't just a maverick. There was something deeper, and Honoré wasn't sure it was good for the Brotherhood or not.

He was going to have more words with Bellec later, no doubt.

Then, without waiting or submitting a written report, Arno came in.

Sleeves bloodied.

Very bloodied. More than his other missions required. Eyes downcast instead of facing everything, shoulders slumped.

Exhaustion.

Arno had clearly worked hard that day.

Honoré blinked. Day? Arno was back already? Hope! What did Arno discover?

"Ah, here's a man with good news, I think." Draw all eyes to Arno's tired form as he straightened. And still didn't look them in the eyes.

Honoré frowned. "Arno, what did you learn from the silversmith?"

Arno paused.

Oh, not good.

Then he placed the pin on the table.

Bellec automatically reached out and grabbed it, studying it like the Council already had. One sniff had the grizzled Assassin curling his nose. "Poison," he grunted. "They're catching up."

Arno took a deep breath, straightening his spine again, but still not looking them in the eyes. "Germain made that pin, and others like it, for a man named Lafrenière."

Honoré leaned forward, mind racing. François had always spoken highly of Lafrenière. This was very troubling.

"Are you sure?"

"Certain," Arno said grimly.
He sat himself down and waved for the rest of the Council to do so. "Start at the beginning."

Arno's lips grimaced and he began to speak.

Arno had, indeed, had a busy day. But the most troubling part was that he had gone alone.

"You didn't take anyone with you?" Sophie asked. "What if you needed to follow two people?"

Arno had no answer for that, and Honoré glanced at Bellec. Deficient teaching indeed. It was a scouting and interrogation mission. Those were usually done in pairs. How did Arno not know that?

The veritable army of guards he'd gone through was also troubling.

"How important is Germain?" Hervé asked. "He's a silversmith. He is commissioned to make these fancy, deadly pins. Why a contingent around him?"

And Arno explained what Germain had told him. About being a prisoner to Lafrenière for asking too many questions.

Something didn't feel right for Honoré. A viable tactic, yes, but... There had to be more to it.

"So Lafrenière was forcing Germain to make to make his pins because of his high skill as a silversmith," Honoré summarized. "This Germain must have more information."

"I assume you took him to one of our safehouses," Hervé said, taking notes with a quill. "I think one of my old students might be able to get more out of him."

"Ah, non, monsieur."

Silence.

"What?" Bellec shouted. "Merdeux, I taught you better than that! You get all the information you can!"

"And take a prisoner to another prison?" Arno muttered, and for a brief moment, his eyes flashed.

Dear God, he did have the spirit of an Assassin in him, Honoré sat back. But untapped, unrefined, and raw. And Bellec hadn't been able to mold any of that?

"Not another prison, Arno," Honoré explained quietly. "A place to make sure he was no longer followed, safely forge papers for him, ask a few questions while doing so, and then sent to another part of France. A week at most. Whatever new place we relocated him to, an Assassin would be around, unknown to Germain, to keep an eye out and make sure he was safe."

Surprise flashed across Arno's face, and Honoré was sure that Sophie saw it as well.

"Regardless," Guillaume redirected the conversation, "it seems that Lafrenière has some involvement in de la Serre's death."

Honoré nodded his head, leaning back, tired. "Grandmaître de la Serre spoke highly of his loyalty," he said sadly. To be stabbed in the back by someone so trusted. That had to be the ultimate tragedy. "Hmmm. I suppose the course is clear, Arno. Get some rest, then find Monsieur Lafrenière—"

"I have done so already, Mentor," Arno said quietly, eyes firmly at the table. Then his shoulders
squared and he looked Honoré directly in the eye, with eyes of great guilt and sadness. "He is no threat."

Bellec stood, eyes narrowed. "What are you saying, merdeux?"

Arno kept looking straight ahead to Honoré. "I had a lead on Lafrenière. I followed it, and I killed him."

And for the briefest of moments, Honoré saw a flash of pride in Bellec's eyes.

But it was too late because everyone was shouting.

"Unthinkable!" Hervé stood.

"What the hell were you thinking," Bellec raised a fist angrily.

"I've never heard of such phenomenal hubris," Sophie growled.

"How dare you defy the Creed," Guillaume roared over everyone else.

"The arrogance of it is just astounding," Sophie continued.

"Bloody-handed murder," Hervé hissed.

"What gives you the right?" Guillaume demanded, pounding his fist on the table.

But Bellec drowned them all out, "The next time you circumvent the Council, I'll rip you a new arsehole!"

Honoré sat back tiredly, letting it all wash over him. Arno was going to have to be retrained. From scratch. With a different teacher. He'd need to draft something about this, discuss it with the Council without Bellec present. Just more things on his horrendously long list. But Arno deserved better than whatever Bellec had done to him.

The anger flowed and he'd had enough. It was time to refocus. He slammed his hand on the desk several times, calling for order.

"The report," he said quietly. "Explain how all this came to be."

Arno did so, eyes fixed forward, not really looking at anything. Germain had mentioned La Halle aux Blès, so of course Arno had headed there immediately with the threat of Lafrenière in front of him. Good investigation work at La Halle, grabbed a ledger and a lot of paperwork. That would give the Assassins names and places to start watching. Excellent!

"The ledger, please," Hervé asked for.

Arno's bloodied hands went to his waistcoat and surprise flickered across his face. He patted down himself down, before grimacing. "They are tied together by a chimney overlooking the Cimitière des Innocents."

"You left them behind?" Hervé asked, incredulously.

Arno's eyes fell to the table.

"What on earth—"
"Patience," Honoré lifted a hand. He was looking at Arno with fresh eyes. He had looked exhausted when he came in and Honoré had wrongly attributed that to having been busy investigating Germain. But that wasn’t the case. Arno was wallowing in guilt. Something had gone wrong, and they hadn’t even gotten to what that could possibly be. Dread circled Honoré's belly. "The report isn't over yet. Please," he said to Arno as gently as possible. "Continue."

Under the hood, Honoré was certain he saw a flinch. And all Honoré could wonder was... how bad?

Arno explained going to the cemetery, the unprecedented luck of finding guard placements and plans, and using that to his advantage. He explained what he had observed and heard as people gathered and Lafrenière arrived and spoke.

"An induction ceremony?" Hervé's eyes alighted at possibilities. "How many where there? Did you recognize anyone? You should have had another person there, one of our artists, to sketch as many as possible... Do you think you could recognize any of them? The Austrians were there?"

"Later," Honoré said quietly. "We can go over the details after he finishes his report."

Arno continued, though his face started to look green. The exhumer Gabriel was interesting, and Honoré wondered if Arno had inadvertently just recruited a new novice. Heaven knew they needed more support as this revolution continued.

And at last, Arno stated, "—that was when I plunged my hidden blade into his back."

Bellec's eyes flashed in pride.

Honoré let out a heavy sigh. Everything was by-the-book other than seeking approval. The potential in Arno was staggering, but he needed a better teacher. "While this Council admires your zeal," he said softly, "it is not your place to choose your own targets. You should have reported your findings to us. We make take longer than you running off on your own, but we always double check. I believe we discussed once that we always need to be sure..."

Honoré trailed off as he saw anguish flash across Arno's face.

Oh non...

"Forgive me, Mentor," Arno said softly, eyes red, face green. "I believed I had found the man who had ordered Monsieur de la Serre's murder. When I discovered further evidence at the induction ceremony that suggested he was about to strike at, I presumed, the Brotherhood in force, I took action."

Nom de dieu, Honoré sat back. This was Arno's path. He was going to learn the Creed the hard way...

Hervé, being the lawyer, naturally picked up on Arno's wording. "Believed? Suggested? Presumed?"

"I am..." Arno straightened again. "I am no longer certain of Lafrenière's motivations." And he explained Lafrenière's last words.

Honoré shook his head sadly. He could discern a great deal from Arno's report, and he knew that if he did, Sophie certainly would. There was a war within the Templars going on, the Austrians were getting involved, which means the Austrians wouldn't take much longer getting involved in French politics, there were many, many large implications in this one day of investigating that would affect
France and how the Assassins proceeded.

But Honoré looked to the slump of Arno's shoulders and sympathized with the personal cost of all this. Arno had joined the Brotherhood for redemption. A chance to undo the mistakes he'd made with François, a chance to undo a mistake he'd made as a child wandering away from where his father had expected him. Arno was layered in guilt over honest mistakes, and it pushed his frame down even now. And after today, a new layer of guilt would be added, and this time not through thoughtless inaction, but through purposeful action. A layer that would likely be twice as heavy.

Oh yes, Arno needed to be retaught. With someone far gentler and more understanding than Bellec's maverick tendencies. Someone who would encourage Arno to ask questions and think critically, someone who could guide the guilt to being productive and not rushing off headlong into things.

"A club in the Marais," Guillaume pulled out a map of Paris.

"Not one of our safehouses," Sophie agreed.

Honoré scratched an ear. This was a heavy meeting indeed, but his mind was starting to look ahead with all this new information. The ledger would be retrieved, Arno would need to sit down with an artist to sketch out who was at the induction ceremony, and a political club to watch.

Despite Arno's guilt, a very productive day.

Now if only Arno would see it that way.

"What do you make of it?" he asked Arno softly.

Arno looked away, the guilt too heavy. "I cannot say." Then he looked squarely at the Council as he did with his previous reports. "I would like to investigate further."

A chance to undo this most recent mistake, no doubt. With a fresh lesson in mind, Honoré was inclined to agree. Arno wouldn't make this level of a mistake twice, of that he was certain.

"No," Guillaume said firmly, turning to the rest of them. "The boy is a gifted Assassin, but I fear he is obsessed with a private vendetta. Let another follow this lead."

Arno stepped forward, eyes alight in desperation. "We don't have time! Whatever Lafrenière was planning, it happens tonight! We need to see what Lafrenière was going after, how that fits in to everything, what—" his voice cracked. "What the purpose of all this was."

Too much emotion. Such desperation.

No, he would never make the same mistake again.

Honoré turned to Guillaume. "He did ask permission this time."

Hope gleamed in Arno's eyes.

Guillaume growled and stormed to a corner, quietly fuming.

Honoré turned to Arno and smiled gently. "Go then. See what you can learn. But no more rash action, hmm?"

Arno's lips twitched ever so briefly to a smile. "Oui, Mentor."
Honoré nodded. "Pierre, do make sure Arno gets some food in him before he heads out."

Bellec nodded. "Come on, merdeux. Can't have you gallivanting about on an empty stomach."

Bien. Now that it was just him and the Council, he had more heated, unhappy business to discuss.

"Arno needs to be retaught and we can't ever let Pierre take an apprentice again."

"What?"

Oh yes, a very productive meeting ahead.

Long passed sunset, Arno left the sewers in a rush. Granted, his stomach was very happy with him to have proper food instead of the slop he'd managed to swallow earlier in the day, but he needed to move. Bellec had tried to talk to him at the dining hall, but Arno didn't bother listening. He had to undo this. He had to find out what had caught Lafrenière's eye about the Hôtel de Beauvais and had Lafrenière stockpiling gunpowder. Maybe if he did this right, he could undo his latest mistake.

He also, very pointedly, avoided looking at his hands and the blood on his cuffs.

Arno shuddered. He'd likely have to trash the coat and his shirt. The stains would never come off.

He steadfastly ignored how the stains on his hands might never come off. He also ignored how heavy his eyes were. He was tired. It was nearing nine at night, and there was still so much work to do. Had he really been celebrating Cosette's promotion that morning? It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Focus, Arno, don't let your mind wander.

Once he arrived at Hôtel de Beauvais, he climbed up to the roofs to observe. Off to the north was the Temple, the imposing structure blocking out the stars as the wind whipped around him. He stood by a chimney as another gust of wind threatened to push him over, and he grabbed hold of the round clay piping to steady himself.

Somehow, he doubted roofs would be much of an option for the evening.

Focus!

Arno took a deep breath and called for his eagle again. Showers of colored sparks drew his eyes to a worn and torn feathered hat, the slumped form that was very familiar, as a weathered face turned to look around through cracked glasses.

La Touche, old friend. You do get around, don't you...

That was enough for Arno. La Touche had been the hand of le Roi des Thunes. With Fabre now in charge and having kicked out the rat, no doubt the ver had gone to the Beggar King's Boss. The wind drowned everything out, but body language said a great deal: La Touche was cautious. No surprise given his tendency to save his own skin. He motioned and some burly men dragged a limp form along, one with greasy red hair. Red? Who in France had red hair? Focus.

La Touche was delivering a prisoner? To whom? What did whoever it was need that person for?

No wonder Lafrenière wanted to be here. Something was clearly going to happen.

Arno took a deep breath, letting the wind fill him and encircle him, and let it out. He could do this.
He wouldn't mess up this time.

He wouldn't.

He climbed back down and started to circle the Hôtel. Oh yes, a political club. All the affluent merchants were heading inside, and where clear compatriots. That meant Arno wouldn't be able to go in through the front door, not unless someone introduced him and let him in. That wouldn't work either as he'd need to take off his hood.

And he was stained in blood.

He shook his head. Front entrance was out. So was the servant's entrance, same reasoning. Hmmm. He carefully asked his eagle for help, and tiny sparks of color pulled him around the corner of a building, where some guards were blocking another entrance.

"Why in God's name are there patrols in the catacombs? Have the corpses suddenly become worth more than gold?"

His partner scoffed. "It's the renovations. Until they've finished, the tunnels open right up into the basement. We can't very well have thieves coming up through the floor and robbing the place blind, can we?"

Arno thanked whatever inner eagle he had and kept walking down the street, like a man in a rush to get home from work. He rubbed his head. The headache was trying to form and he just wasn't going to let it. It didn't take long to find a sewer and make his way down.

True to the guards above, the signs of construction were obvious: pallets of wood and stone, tarps draped haphazardly over them announcing where the renovations started. Beyond were the catacombs, skeletons packed and stacked and long passed rotting. Lanterns hung in the dark, unlit, acting as a silent guide on where to go, and soon a wall to the catacombs disappeared to a more structured basement.

Arno crept carefully into the basement. Renovations indeed. It was clear the workmen were required to keep their tools down here and were not to leave things up above while the political club was meeting. Arno listened carefully. He had been reading the papers since his "death" kept him underground, but once he was above, he'd been so busy that aside from the papers and what he read at Café Théâtre, he was out of touch with many things. He kept his ears open for La Touche, but that led him to keep pausing as he listened to the debates above.

Political clubs were certainly on the rise throughout Paris. People would join together and debate, sharing ideas and arguments, to try and come up with their own consensus on what the best course for France should be. Most of the National Assembly were part of a political club, even Mirabeau was looking at them and thinking of joining. He was already a member of the Jacobin Club. It looked like the people above were one of the smaller political clubs in Paris, though Arno never overheard enough to know for certain which one.

He found a service staircase, littered with small toolboxes of whatever workmen did the renovations during the day, so Arno carefully snuck up the steps, knowing that this would be more hidden from the crowds. He immediately ascended another flight up to the second floor. He carefully looked out, but the second floor overlooked the first, where the speakers were, and was packed with even more people than before.

Right.
With silent feet, Arno slipped up to the third floor. Here was where much of the renovation appeared to be happening, as well as the basement. It seemed that whomever was in charge of the hôtel particulier, was expanding the basement and also repairing leaks from the roof. It was still a wealthy hôtel, but not to the grand scale of other hôtel of note. Arno carefully walked along empty halls, only the minimal candles to guide him. That worked for Arno as there were plenty of shadows to duck through.

As he walked along the darkened halls, he found one large balcony overlooking the main floor below. He could see the packed second floor and the massive crowd on the first, all gathered and listening to the podium where whomever had the floor spoke.

Arno would have just continued along, but he paused when he'd glanced down.

*I know that, man.*

Green-tinted glasses, latest fashions, perfectly styled hair. That man had come into the Café... with... Mirabeau, just when they'd started reading the papers to the customers. He was at the podium and building momentum.

"It was a crime worthy of death under Tiberius to praise Brutus. Caligula condemned to death those who were so sacrilegious as to undress before the image of the emperor. Once tyranny invented the crime of injured majesty - which were actions either indifferent or heroic - who could have dared to think that it merited a punishment more gentle than death without rendering himself guilty of the same crime? When fanaticism, borne of the monstrous union between ignorance and despotism, invented in its turn the crime of sacrilege, when it conceived in its delirium the project of avenging God himself, was it not necessary that it offer him blood, and bring him down to their level of the monsters who said they were his image? The death penalty is necessary, say the partisans of ancient and barbarous routine. Without it, there is no brake strong enough for crime."

Was he really arguing the death penalty? Arno frowned. There were always people who needed to die: Sivert. Le Roi des Thunes. The *Grandmaître*, whomever he was. They needed to die. Whoever had killed Arno's father, needed to die. There were people who were so terrible that letting them live would be a worse crime.

The fashionable man continued, "Who told you this? Have you calculated all the gears by which penal laws can act on human sensibility? Alas, before death, how much physical and moral pain can man endure? The desire to live cedes before pride, the most imperious of all the passions that master the heart of man. The most terrible of all punishments for social man is opprobrium, is the overwhelming sight of public execration."

Arno frowned. Really? Scorn was the best motivator? There were many people who just didn't give a damn what others thought. There needed to be consequences for actions. Consequences that mattered.

"When the legislator can strike the citizen in so many sensitive places and in so many ways, why would he reduce himself to employing the death penalty? Punishments are not imposed to torment the guilty, but in order to prevent crime by the fear of incurring. It has been observed that in free countries, crime was more rare and penal laws more gentle. All ideas hold together. Free countries are those where the rights of man are respected and where, consequently, the laws are just. Where they offend humanity by an excess of rigor, this is proof that the dignity of man is not known there, that that of the citizen doesn't exist. It is proof that the legislator is nothing but a master who commands slaves and who pitilessly punishes them according to his whim. I thus conclude that the death penalty should be abrogated. *Merci. Merci. Merci beaucoup.*"
Cheers were all around and Arno scoffed. Abolishing the death penalty? No.

"Lovely speech, Monsieur Robespierre!"

"Quite," another said. "That man's a visionary!"

Someone else was clearly thinking more along Arno's line. "Abolish the death penalty? Next, he'll be saying we should do away with branding!"

"Perhaps we should start sending criminals off to the tropics, like the British."

"Hah! That will turn some heads at the Assembly."

"If Mirabeau actually yields the floor..."

"True enough."

Letting out a sigh, Arno checked the clock on the floor below.

Right, time to get moving. He'd dallied too long.

Back to the darkened halls, Arno slipped further along the building, until he heard a conversation ahead of him.

"What's going on in the back room?" asked a gruff voice. Guard most likely. Arno ducked behind a couch and listened.

"Don't know," another replied.

Definitely guards. Arno crept closer. A back room sounded interesting.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked the gruff one.

"Just that some folk don't like other people prying into their affairs, savvy? Especially these types."

Oh yes, Arno really wanted to listen in now.

"How late do you think they'll go?" asked the gruff guard.

"Lord knows," the senior replied. "Get those politicians downstairs talking and they never shut up."

"Perhaps I should put on some coffee."

"Once we get relieved."

Arno slipped in a door to an empty room that had no candles burning. Arno only had the moonlight to see by. He glanced around carefully, then decided to strike a match. The rattling of the windows from the wind would drown out the sound, and he covered the match carefully. Looking around, he found a fireplace and blew out his match to head towards it. Yes, as he suspected. Whatever leaks had happened that required renovations, there was clearly water damage along the exposed brickwork, leaving a crack to listen through. Silently, Arno leaned against the wall and waited.

For a time, there was nothing but silence. Just the shifting of people as they moved about a room, or turned pages in a book. Arno just stayed still. He would stay still as long as possible to learn what he could after his mistake.
More rustles. There were cheers downstairs at whatever speech had just concluded.

"How long must we wait?" a woman in that room asked. "I do have other business to attend to."

"Just a little longer," La Touche replied.

_Got you_, Arno smiled coldly.

"—The _Grandmaître_ wants the politicians thinned out before we begin. Less chance of being recognized."

A new voice scoffed. "Indeed. No one wants to recognize a politician in that sea of politicians down there. Is that why I've been ensconced up here as well, to wait?"

"Because we're being cautious," La Touche replied soothingly. "Can never be too careful, with Assassins out there."

The new voice scoffed again. "Then I _trust_ we'll _finally_ learn the meaning behind our recent activities?" he asked.

"All will be made clear," La Touche reassured.

"I don't like it," the woman said, her alto voice smooth and sultry. "The plan is still too vulnerable. And let's not forget Lafrenière is still out there, somewhere, waiting to burn us all at the stake."

Arno stiffened.

"So, you haven't heard yet, then?" La Touche asked, all arrogance and slime.

"Heard what?" the woman asked with annoyance.

"Lafrenière is dead." Cold stabbed through Arno. "Hours ago, in fact. Assassins."

The man in the room seemed unconvinced. "That seems... convenient."

"Ah," La Touche said grandly, "that's the thing about Assassins." Arno could hear the superiority dripping and the ironic smile broadening, even as the words stabbed even deeper into him. "Point them at a Templar conspiracy and they ask no questions. They go right for the killing. Predictable that way."

Arno grit his teeth as they all laughed. Emotions were roiling and surging within him.

He had been tricked.

_Tricked!_

They used him as a blade and aimed him _right_ at Lafrenière, the only Templar trying to avenge M. de la Serre outside of Élise. How could Arno have been so stupid!

_They ask no questions._

Arno sucked in a breath and held it, trying to get everything under control.

_Think, merdeux! Use your goddamned brain!_

Arno bit a finger, swallowing all that wanted to come exploding out of him. Guilt, grief, anger,
sorrow, and he needed to stay silent.

"Come," he vaguely heard La Touche say. "We'll fetch the Captain and get started."

Captain. New person. Learn the faces. Focus, Arno, you idiot!

Glancing around, he silently went to the doorway. He crouched down by the wall and listened and watched. The guards held up candlesticks, guiding the people from the room. La Touche was in the front, Arno could tell the silhouette of that dingy feathered hat with incredible ease. The woman was indistinguishable from any other in a layered gown. Rich, certainly. Noble, possibly, darker skin, so maybe Italian or Spanish of heritage? Bastard, perhaps? But to be dressed so well. The man was unremarkable. Tall, young, but too young. Thirty at most.

Diable, are none of you noticeable aside from La Touche?

Still, he fixed what he saw to memory. The man mentioned something about being a politician? Arno would keep a close eye on the papers, but there were so many politicians. He trailed after them on silent feet. The rear guard was the gruff one, the more senior to the front if the graying-hair was any indication. He followed them down the second floor and noted that the hall below had thinned indeed. The second floor that had been so packed before was empty, and below were no speakers, merely stragglers still discussing and arguing. Arno happened to see the clock below and noted that it was after midnight.

No wonder he was so tired.

Still, he stayed focused. He was learning, piecing things together. The Templars had another enemy, it seemed, one La Touche served faithfully enough to lord it over others. And for M. de la Serre... for Lafrenière, Arno would do everything he could to take them down. If this was a meeting of all the higher ups, maybe he could storm it—

No. He needed to get information and return to the Council. It was his acting without reporting that had led to his mistake. He couldn't afford to do something like that again.

He followed along the halls of the second floor, constantly ducking behind furniture and tables as the second floor had far more candles lit than the third floor did. He quickly realized that the destination was going to be on the other side of the hôtel, so he slipped ahead, using the rattling windows to hide the sounds of his lockpicking as he ducked through rooms instead of taking the hall. The rooms were mostly offices and libraries of some sort or other, and eventually, Arno came to another locked door. But this time, he used the keyhole to spy.

The redhead he'd seen earlier was inside, hands and knuckles bloodied. The prisoner was slumped in a chair, tied to it, and clearly bleeding. The redhead was shouting.

"Come on, speak up! I need an answer friend." The redhead paced in front of the prisoner angrily. "It's a simple question. Just tell me what I want to know." A knife was produced and there was swift movement that Arno couldn't see in the keyhole. "Tick tock, monsieur. No need to make this any harder, n'est-ce pas?"

There was a polite knock on the door and the redhead turned, slapped the prisoner, then stalked out of Arno's vision. He heard a door open, and then La Touche's voice.

"Have you finished?"

"Near enough," the redhead replied lightly. He turned to the prisoner. "Now here's the thing," he said cruelly, leaning in and grabbing a fistful of hair. "I can go on like this all day. But you...
You've got an hour left in you. Two at most. *Half* that if I bring out more sharp bits."

Arno shuddered.

"So why not skip the endgame and go directly to mate? Tell me where it is and all this," he gestured grandly around, "can be over."

The prisoner mumbled something and Arno strained to hear.

"What was that?" the redhead asked again, leaning in closer.

Arno trained but hear nothing.

The redhead leaned back, satisfaction in every line of his body. "You are a smart man," he said with utmost gentleness.

"Rouille?" La Touche interjected. "Clean up your mess. It's time. We're due in the kitchens."


A person he now knew.

"Be right there," Rouille smiled genially. La Touche nodded and turned, heading to the voices that Arno had been listening to earlier. The redhead turned to the prisoner. "You heard the weasel," he said darkly.

Arno was turning. Time to get down to the basement and quickly. He saw just the spot that was underneath the kitchen—

He turned when he heard a *window* open. He squinted through the keyhole and bit down a gasp as he watched Rouille heft the prisoner and *throw him out the window* and listen to the *screams* before the distant impact of the body on the ground below.

*Merde!*

He stayed still, even as every fiber of his being needed to *move*, see if that prisoner was alive, get help, *kill the bastards*, ANYTHING!

"Did you really just throw him out the window?" La Touche asked despairingly.

"Trash belongs in the gutter," Rouille replied with a smile.

"Sloppy," La Touche replied. "Someone might have seen."

*Arno* certainly had as he struggled to stay still and silent.

"Who?" Rouille countered. "My boys are watching the whole place. They'll deal with any good Samaritans."

"They'd *better*," La Touche growled back. "*Le Grandmaître* won't be happy if the whole plan comes unraveled because of one dead peon."

The woman scoffed and they were already down the hall and heading towards the stairs. Arno took a moment to just *be*, to wrangle his flying feelings into a tiny box to bury. *Later, deal later! FOCUS!*
Arno took a deep breath. He knew the layout of the hôtel now. He could get down to the basement faster by a servant’s set of stairs. He backtracked and went down the stairs he’d initially used, being careful of the workman's tools that were scattered about so as not to trip and alarm anyone. Once in the cellar he slipped past the renovations, wine barrels, forgotten furniture, and started looking up until... There.

Light from the kitchens spilled down, highlighting an area of the dark confines, and Arno sat down just outside that edge of light. He didn't need to see anything, nor risk anyone seeing him. With such a wide opening of a hole, he'd have no trouble listening in. Knowing that this was a meeting, he pulled out a pencil, and some scraps that he still had in his coat from La Halle earlier.

Had that really been earlier that day?

Had finding Germain really been that morning?

*Focus.*

He listened to the steps above him. The last of the kitchen staff was being shooed out, told to go home and get some sleep, which the staff was grateful for. Arno sighed. Easy tactics to clear a room without suspicions.

He heard the light steps of a woman, heard the swirl of petticoats, and knew that La Touche and his collection had arrived. He counted. La Touche, the woman, Rouille, the man, and one other. Five in the meeting. Four he had already heard and memorized. Who was the last?

Rouille was the first to speak. "You were right. King Louis has been talking to all sorts he shouldn't have. Plotting against the Revolution out of one side of his mouth while he promises to support the Constitution out the other."

That rocked through Arno, but he buried it. He *had to focus.*

"Good," the new person said, deep voice. It was familiar, but Arno couldn't place it. "Exactly as I predicted. Does this please you, *Monsieur* le Peletier?"

Rouille scoffed arrogantly. "Told you I could make him talk."

"You've done well, Captain," the *grandmaître* soothed. "Marie?"

The woman. Marie. Arno filed that with everything else he'd been memorizing. *Diable,* he was tired. And drained. And exhausted.

"The new recruits are flooding in. They await your command."

"Good. Teach them the true value of the Father of Understanding, the lessons we've forgotten."

"What you're asking will take at least a year, *Grandmaître.* If not two."

*Bien.* *Where* had Arno heard that voice before? "The Great Work requires patience, *mes amis.* If Paris must suffer a while longer so the world might be remade, then so be it."

Rouille seemed unsatisfied with the answer. "Why not just kill him and be done with it? One of my boys, a knife, a dark hallway. Easy."

Arno kept frowning. Who were they plotting about killing? Surely not the King? *Surely.*

"We want a *condemned* man, Captain," the mysterious voice replied sharply, "not a *martyr.* Have
patience."

Peletier interjected. "Respectfully, Grandmaitre, patience is all well and fine, but the longer we wait, the greater the chance of discovery."

Too late for that, Arno thought with grim determination.

La Touche was quick to agree. "The Assassins already found Sivert and le Roi des Thunes."

The mystery man seemed unimpressed. "Sivert and le Roi already served their purpose. Their destruction, while inconvenient is no obstacle." There was an ironic smile to the voice. "And the Assassins have already proved useful... when properly led."

That was a knife through Arno's soul, but he once again bit back everything he wanted to scream.

"What about the de la Serre brat?" Rouille asked. "She could be dangerous if she manages to rally the old guard."

The mystery man actually laughed. "The old guard is dead. They just don't know it yet. I'm certain this revolution will see to that. Foreseen, perhaps. The girl won't be of any consequence. And even if she was, it won't matter. That situation will be resolved."

"How so?" the Marie woman asked.

"At dawn Mademoiselle de la Serre will be on her way to l'Hôtel Voysin, eager to speak with Monsieur Lafrenière. Sadly," the voice smiled, "Monsieur Lafrenière has nothing left to say."

Ice spilled down Arno's spine.

Scraps of paper fell to the floor.

Eyes widened.

Mind stilled.

Élise!

Rouille was still talking. "Very clever, Grandmaitre. But you've had your brush with the Assassins as well. Respectfully, you won't always be so lucky."

Élise! Arno had to move, he had to get to Élise!

"Quite right," the mystery man replied as Arno hurriedly picked up his scraps of paper. "I shall leave the execution of our work to you good ladies and gentlemen. For my part I retire to the Sanctuary and await the final phase. Will that satisfy you, Captain?"

Élise!

"I'll see the watch tripled," Rouille acknowledged.

"Very well. May the Father of Understanding guide you."

"May the Father of Understanding guide you," they all replied.

But Arno was already out the basement and into the sewers.
April 1, 1791

Between the political club meeting taking so long to finish, and then the dark meeting of M. de la Serre's murderers, it was 2 a.m. when Arno finally made his way street side – he had gotten up at dawn thinking he would be working in Café Théâtre, not breaking out an imprisoned silver smith and assassinating the wrong man and starting a riot at a grain exchange and... and... it all hit him at the same time a gust of wind sought to shove him off his feet. The early spring air was frigid with the wind and Arno struggled to feel his extremities as he ran to the nearest ladder to ascend to the roof. Too many things were firing in his mind, the picture of Lafrenière dying in his arms and Germain's dual-colored eyes and the slouch of Mirabeau's shoulders when the Council shouted at him for killing a man without their permission and he couldn't think straight, all he could do was get to Élise and tell her people were trying to kill her.

He had been tricked into killing Lafrenière – he had been the ally to Élise all along – he had done M. de la Serre's enemy's work – he'd done Élise's enemy's work – he would be damned if he let the love of his life suffer for his mistakes. She would survive this – she would survive this even if it killed him!

The windstorm was even stronger on the roofs, there were no walls to block or channel the gusts and it all bit through him. He rubbed his hands as he ran, he needed to feel his fingers to climb and grip, and the roofs were the fastest way to get to Élise's estate.

L'Hôtel de Beauvais was on the southern end of the Marais, Marais being one of the most fashionable districts in Paris, home to all sorts of nobility in its history and flooded with hôtel particulier. Élise's own estate as a minor noblewoman was much further north, near the Temple were the Templars once held their power. Arno had only ever been there twice, once as a child and again when Élise had rejected him in totality. He ran north over the blue shingles, against the wind, until he ran out of roof and turned left, heading to a corner where the next building he wanted was closer and took a thoughtless leap, realizing at the last minute that the wind being against him affected the size of his jump. He scrambled to adjust but couldn't in midair, instead flailing wildly before his hand found a rainspout. His body slammed against the wall and the shock of impact made his lightheaded with the sudden fire of nearly dying.

No, he couldn't afford to die until he knew Élise was safe, he had to stop, stop and think.

Élise was in danger.

... He couldn't get passed that thought and scrambled back up to the roofs, running and taking (slightly) more thoughtful jumps, moving through chimneys and their waning smoke before finally giving up and going back to ground. He was safer there in this wind – except no sooner had he had the thought that a tile came loose and threatened to land on him. Was Nature herself determined to prevent him from undoing his most recent mistake? Merde!

It was a twenty-minute run, and as good as Arno was he breathing heavily through his nose, taking the occasional gulp through his mouth. There, that was the de la Serre estate – had it really been almost two years since he had last been here? He pounded on the door, heedless of the late hour. "Élise!" he shouted. "Élise!" He stepped back, picking a pebble up off the driveway for carriages and threw one up to the window of Élise's room, hoping to wake her. The wind was too strong, however, and carried the sound away.

Growling, Arno pulled out his lockpicks. His fingers were numb, he barely had the touch necessary and was forced to stuff his hands under his arms and wait for them to get warm so he could pick the lock without breaking it. He snapped two picks regardless, but he finally managed to get in.
The estate was in shambles, windows boarded up, the floors littered with cloth, furniture overturned or outright broken — the Revolution had been cruel to the Marais, and Élise's estate had been no exception. The house was cold, no fires were going, and Arno powered up the stairs to the bed chambers.

Élise was nowhere to be found.

No one had been here for a long, long time.

_Merde. Bon sang!_

Arno paced about, too much energy in his body and no idea what to do next. If Élise wasn't here, then where was she? How could he warn her? Think, _think, merdeux_, this was why Bellec always yelled at you! Where was it...? l'Hôtel Voysin? _Merde_ where even was that? Which estate? It was 2:30 in the morning — no one was up and he didn't dare wake anyone for fear of letting the enemy know he was going to stop their attempted _coup d'état_. He had to wait for at least three hours before kitchen staff rose to start preparing breakfasts and he could ask which estate — no, he could do better. Lamp-lighters. They would be up in the predawn to start putting out the lights, they would know Paris like the back of their hands, they would know where Hôtel Voysin was. Ah, but that was still two hours away...

Arno righted an overturned chair, sitting in it and pulling out the watch. His eyes were fully dilated in the dark, he could just make out the worn embossed symbol of the brotherhood. He ran his fingers over the grooves, spun the timer even thought it was forever broken, the symbol of his mistakes and the last vestige of his father in one item, reminding him how careful he had to be, how long the road to redemption would take.

_Slow down. Breathe. You have a plan, you know what to do, you know the stakes. Focus. Focus. Stay focused and Élise will stay alive..._

Élise will stay alive...

Stay alive...

He snapped to attention, having drifted off, everything snapping back to him in an instant. He looked out the window, could see the moon setting — so late already? _Merde..._

Arno made his way back outside, hoping the windstorm had blown itself out. Out in the streets he saw the lanterns still on, another gust whipping through him and reminding him how cold it still was, but that was perhaps for the best — in the shelter of a building he had fallen asleep and he couldn't afford to drift off this close to sunrise. He paced back and forth behind the privacy wall of the estate, mostly buffered against the wind. He stamped his feet blew into his hands to keep warm, decidedly not looking at all the blood on his cuffs. He could do this, he could find l'Hôtel Voysin and stop Élise from dying, save her and the memory of M. de la Serre and himself from his own thrice-damned _stupidity_. So much was riding on this and he _would not be ten minutes late again._

There, a lamp lighter. Arno took a deep breath, scrounged out one of his papers and folded it like a missive.

"Monsieur!" he called out. "Monsieur!"

Half up a ladder, the worker watched Arno jog up. "S'il-vous plaît, monsieur, I'm looking for l'Hôtel Voysin, I have an urgent missive I need to deliver for the _maître_ and I've never been to the city before!"
"Ah," the lamp lighter said, frowning. "Those damned ancien régime still have their way with people like us." He stepped down from his ladder. "Ça ira, mon ami, I'll help you out. Do you have a map?"

In ten minutes, Arno was running pell-mell down the street, down the middle of the wide boulevard before finding a construction lift and cutting the counterweight, shooting up to the roofs. The wind was still gusty, but nowhere near as strong at earlier that night. This high up he looked east, seeing the sun just peeking over the horizon. He didn't have a lot of time.

Hôtel Voysin was east, Arno ran towards the sun and hoped he wouldn't be too blinded by the light. He had better control of his jumps now, without the storm, and hopped from roof to tree back to roof to cross the especially wide roads or using narrow alleys as easy jumps before he found what he was looking for. The courtyard was immaculate: perfectly trimmed shrubs and trees, hedges twelve feet high and green even this early in the year. No one was there yet, and Arno released a breath he had been holding for hours.

Not late.

Arno crouched down at his perch, watching the shadows slowly shrink, waiting.

Much later, perhaps an hour, a man in ceremonial robes, Lafrenière's double, ambled into the courtyard and flanked with the presumed inductees of the previous night, and as soon as he was visible Élise appeared from one of the window-doors surrounding the courtyard. This was it!

Arno jumped to a balcony, Élise having enough time to recognize the imposter before demanding, "Who are you?"

Arno leapt from his height, hidden bade extended. It was his first air assassination, he plunged the blade deep but at the wrong angle, he could feel it strike bone and the body didn't break his fall completely. With effort he wrenched it out of the corpse and straightened, looking at Élise. Was she alright?

Red curls, wide, smoky eyes, pale features, she was as lovely as she had always been. His heart soared.

Then, "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

...Now? She had to ask that now?

"Later!" he hissed drawing his sword as the false inductee took charge. Élise pulled out a pistol and shot the first of the three, Arno giving her a wide berth and entering a duel with a brute with a sword. The fight was brutally one-sided – as Grizier had often said, sword work was slowly becoming a thing of the past, and Arno's expertise gave him an overwhelming advantage. Both remaining targets were down in less than five breaths.

"What's going on?" Élise demanded, marching up to Arno. "Where is Chrétien—Monsieur Lafrenière?"

Arno blinked, realizing just how much he had wronged her, could only manage a dark, "He's dead."

Her face said everything. "What?"

But there was the sound of a rifle and the explosion of stone behind Élise's head. Snipers – the enemy certainly wasn't taking any chances! They both instinctively ducked, Arno looked up and
saw the smoke of the rifle in the brightening sky. They couldn't stay here – "Go! I'll explain later!"

"Get her! Cut them off!"

Élise, much better apprised of the Marais, ran full tilt through an archway, jumping over a rail and landing on a street at a lower level. Right in front of a group of four.

"She's here!" one of them shouted – before Élise brutally ran him through, Arno advancing aggressively, a savage downward thrust into the shoulder, then pushing the cadaver down and kicking it off his sword and using the motion to move into the next stance, taking exactly one blow from the hooligan before cutting him down, Élise taking her sword and swinging up, into the last's jaw and nearly decapitating him, just as skilled as he. They ran down the street, Élise ahead as she was always faster than Arno, red curls bouncing loosely. If Hôtel Voysin was the epicenter of the attack, they needed to move as far away as possible.

Élise took a sharp right, Arno following, the alley in the shadows of the sun and dark as a result. Arno needed to keep ahead of the game, and he risked the dull ache in his head, reaching in and calling the fireworks, the pop of sound drawing his eyes to the exit of the alley.

"Two of them up ahead," he whispered. Staves, one with a pistol.

"You take that one," Élise said with a jut of her chin, "I'll handle his friend."

Arno extended his blade, Élise pulling out a dagger and the pair simultaneously killed the threat. Beyond was a marketplace, already packed with people praying they could find bread or getting food for the day's meals. An auction was being held on a raised platform for the parts of a cow before it was to be slaughtered, the crowd bitterly haggling for food. Beyond the crowd were even more people, someone standing on a box above everyone with a news sheet in hand, shouting yesterday's news and today's events.

"There," Élise said, "Do you see them? They all have red feathers in their hats."

Arno looked and realized she was right – how had he missed that? Diable he could never think...

"What now?" she asked, expectant.

"Too many to sneak past," Arno admitted, doing a mental tally. "We'll have to work together, take them out quietly."

Élise nodded, dagger disappearing behind her back for a later strike. They nodded, like they always did as children, and parted to their separate roles. The auction crowd was thick, movement was difficult but so was visibility.

"Have you seen a young woman?" one of the marked men asked a woman in noble clothes. "Tall? Red hair?"

Damn, that's right – Élise's bright hair was a beacon to the enemy. They would have to hide it under a bonnet – hell, they would have to put her in a dress. Arno spied a fabric merchant, moving between four women arguing how rich the fabric really was, and lifted a simple wool skirt, swinging it over his arm and also hiding the blood on his cuffs. Another pair was up the street, Élise sneaking ahead, dagger fisted between her shoulder blades. The sky was already blue now, the bright morning light turning everything slightly gold as his former lover did her work, and Arno took care of the partner.

"We're clear for now," Arno said. He took a deep breath, fighting through his growing headache
and asking for another burst of insight. And also... "They moved the snipers."

"I see them," Élise said. "That will make things difficult."

"No," Arno said, handing over the wool skirt. "Here. Grab a bonnet, hide your hair. I'll have a better angle from the roof." He ducked into an alley before she could protest how much she hated dresses, grabbing a storm pipe and powering his way up to the roof in less than a minute. He stumbled for a moment, landing on his knees. He was exhausted.

No, not now, later. When Élise is safe...

Arno summoned more energy from somewhere, taking a deep breath. Another gust whipped over the roof – reminding him the windstorm might have died down but it wasn't completely over. He moved with careful footing, snapping open his phantom blade and hoping he could aim in this wind.

The first sniper was in a window, scrawny little thing with a rifle almost too big for him. Arno took careful aim, waited for the wind to die down, and fired. The sniper fell. Très bien. The other sniper was below, mostly in brown except for that red feather in his small cap. Arno reloaded and took aim. He missed with another stiff breeze, forcing him to fire again before the sniper fell. Calling his eagle again for a splash of insight, he didn't see anyone else in a window. His head was starting to hurt, he was using his other sight too much. The back of his head throbbed and he forced his shoulders to relax, reminded himself he didn't have time to distractions like that.

"Did you see a young woman come through here?"

"Non, Désolé."

Merde. It was too light out for him to just jump from on high and kill someone in view of this thick nest of people. But as Arno was making his way down to kill the target he saw the man stagger and fall. Élise was there still in her pants and no bonnet. In fact, the skirt he stole was nowhere to be seen. What?

"What are you doing?"

"You didn't grab enough," Élise explained, voice low. "I can't wear a fardingale without at least six petticoats and a criarde. Do you want to make me look like I'm failing at hiding?"

"Désolé," Arno said, rubbing his temples. God, he needed to sleep. He needed a drink to take away the headache. He looked up to his former lover. "Let's get out of here."

They finally left the market Élise led them down another alley, across the street, down another alley, slowly turning south. "Your red hair makes you easy to pick out," Arno said, following her. "So, do the pants. You'll have to change."

"That will take time," Élise countered, "Time we don't have."

Arno rubbed his temples again, feeling how stiff his cuffs were with the dried blood, with the fresh blood. Nom de dieu... "Then you go on. I'll distract them."

"Arno, we've been moving for the last thirty minutes I hardly think—"

"They can't have gotten far. Find them!"

They both shared a look. They were right in the middle of the street, this would be a bloodbath if it
were a fight! Arno growled. "Go. I can handle this."

"Arno you can't seriously expect——"

"Trust me," he insisted, moving into her personal space. He willed intensity into his gaze, hoping it could be seen. "I'll distract them," he repeated. "Meet me tomorrow at Café Théâtre. I'll explain everything."

"Get out of the way!"

They were out of time, Élise had to decide, and Arno watched her face relax into resolve. "You're mad," she declared. Then, "I'll be there."

She ran away, and Arno turned to see the brutes. This crowd wasn't as rich as the Marais, they were closer to the old Bastille, where his journey had, in some ways, started. He took a deep breath, knowing he couldn't draw a sword, knowing that the hidden blade wouldn't be as effective in combat. What did he have? He felt around his belt, passed his lockpicks and to his bomb pouch. To his utter surprise he found a smoke bomb – he didn't remember packing one when he was ordered to find Germain, but he must have. He pulled out and lit it in the span of a blink, throwing it to the ground and letting the latest gust push the smoke into the oncoming enemies. Arno darted in the opposite direction of Élise, pulling off his bloodied coat and cream surcoat, tossing them into an alley and pulling out his hair to retie it, merging into a crowd moving south and just... disappearing.

It was late morning by the time he felt safe enough to return to Café Théâtre. He took the entrance to the banquet hall, so often used for morning meetings and exiting into the main hall, going up the stairs to the dance hall where Grizier held his sword practice. Passed that was the landing of the grand staircase, and Arno moved to the hall above the café proper where his excuse of a room was.

Safe. At last.

Arno almost collapsed right then and there – he'd been up for thirty hours – but he dutifully grabbed buckets to fill for a bath. First and foremost, he needed a bath, to wash away all the blood. It didn't even matter that the water was ice cold, he jumped into the tub and scrubbed every inch of himself, throwing his linen shirt into the fire (there was even blood there... and taking a bar of soap and rubbing himself raw. He was numb down to his bones when he was done, he couldn't feel his extremities, but he mechanically crawled into bed. Once he fell back with the covers over him, he knew utterly nothing would get him up.

He was asleep in an instant, the lunch crowd starting to gather below him.

April 2, 1791

Three times, she had almost died.

Once as a child, saved by the spirit and fire of her mother and Weatherall.

Once at Hôtel Lauzun, nearly strangled and chased off a bridge, leading to a month's long fever.

And now, today, to meet Chrétien to learn he was already dead and she had nothing.

Malaise had struck her once, crippled her and left her bedridden. Now she welcomed the numbness, it gave her clarity of thought. Simply put – if the world wanted her dead she would spit on the world and show it how dangerous she really was. Her father's killer and his cohorts would
die in the most painful way imaginable, they would suffer as she had suffered until they begged for something as luxurious as death. Nothing would stop her. Nothing would slow her down. Nothing would prevent her from her revenge. Life was dangerous, and she would meet that danger head on and show that she was just as deadly. She would never, never, never be vulnerable again.

"Grab a bonnet, hide your hair."

Élise sat in her chemise and stockings, looking at the clothes she had brought for herself when she had finally left Weatherall and the boarding school, excited for the chance to lead a new collection of Templars to the correct course. Once her enemies had suffered and died, she would build a network for the new world the Revolution created, damn any changes the peasants thought they could incur. Someone always had to be in charge, and the Templars were that someone. That's what Chrétien would say, but the words were hollow to Élise. She only cared about her revenge.

With her she had brought three outfits: one noble, one peasant, and one male. Her greatest comfort was in the man's clothes: sans-culottes, knee high boots, a stay to hold her chest in place, and stomacher to hide it under a man's waistcoat – double breasted, buttons and all, with leather gauntlets for fighting.

"Grab a bonnet, hide your hair."

There was truth in those words, not many people in Paris or even France in general had rich auburn hair as she did, and that made her an easy target. She was about to see Arno for the first time in over a year. The man who failed to warn her father of his impending death. He had swept in to her secret meeting, killed people trying to kill her, and shown remarkable potential: clearly, he had not stopped practicing sword work, though Élise suspected she could still best him, he clambered up a wall in seconds, and had half a bright idea: hide her head. Clearly his time with the Assassins had been spent training, but there was much work to do – thinking one petticoat would be enough to disguise herself? With no stomacher or gown to show modesty? Arno had never been able to think on demand: plans for mischief always fell to her and if something went wrong it was because he did something stupid. That had always been the way of it.

Back when she still had feelings, Arno's dimness had been quaint, adorable. It had enforced the fact that she could keep him as the one person outside the Templars that was hers and hers alone. Now he was an Assassin, one of her many enemies who wanted to see her dead.

Only... he had saved her. He didn't kill her. The Assassins hadn't completely poisoned him against her. That thought alone was intriguing. And now she had to decide what to wear, what impression she wanted to give to someone whom she hadn't seen in so long, someone whom she couldn't completely trust, someone whom... had once meant something to her.

Should she put on the petticoats? The gown hooked in the back? The cap and hat? Could she play the part of a proper woman, kerchief and bun and a pouch of needle and thread?

No. No she would not perform for Arno, she would not do as he said simply because he said it. He may have meant well – he always meant well – but he didn't know that which he spoke of, he did not have any semblance of authority to tell her what to do and one adequate idea did not absolve him of the fact that he never delivered the letter. No, Arno couldn't be trusted, past sweetness or not. He was an Assassin, and their kind never had good intentions. She would not bow to his suggestion, and besides, wearing a gown made fighting for her life harder. She needed pants to keep her legs free, sword at her hip, gun at her belt.

Élise dressed herself and armed herself, leaving her meager lodgings she had chosen to hide her arrival (to no avail). She made her way to the nearest crowd she could find and started asking
about Café Théâtre. After shaking the ensuing threat yesterday and partaking of an entire bottle of wine to steady herself she had started asking about the establishment Arno had named, but the Ventre de Paris had no idea of the café and now she had to work to find the place. If it was on the Left Bank...

She worked south first, towards the Seine and slowly making her way to Hôtel de Ville, knowing that the seat of the city's government and the National Assembly would have people from all over Paris and therefore have a hope of knowing where this café supposedly was.

It was midmorning before she was finally on the isle, studying the locale with curiosity. The café had clearly seen better days, the sign's paint was chipped and weathered, the driveway overgrown. It was before the lunch rush, so she couldn't tell much from the patrons – or from them, what to expect. Still, she walked around the establishment, seeing a servant's house and a rooftop garden. Unable to discern more, she entered.

The café had a theater – to be expected from the name – with faded curtains and raised dais. The tables were mostly sunken into the floor, leaving an aisle to wrap around it in order to serve the customers. No one was there, so she moved deeper in. Beyond was a grand hall, floor clean and carpets horrid. A tiny waif of a girl was sitting on the staircase with a bucket and rag, working the marble steps.

Élise kept her back straight, feet solidly under her hips, hands relaxed. Waif or not she could be an Assassin. "I'm here to see Arno," she said clearly, authoritatively.

The girl looked up and squeaked, wet hands covering her mouth. "Mademoiselle!" she said, "You startled me."

Élise had no time to deal with incompetence. "I'm here to see Arno," she repeated.

"Monsieur Dorian isn't here, Mademoiselle," the tiny girl said.

"Then go and get him," Élise ordered, stepping forward. "Are my words so hard to interpret?"

"Ah, Mademoiselle de la Serre," a new voice, female, said. Élise looked up the staircase, seeing a woman in a green dress. She moved across the landing and glided down, poised and clearly of noble lineage. "You will have to forgive Célestine," she said. She glanced at the girl. "Help the cook," she said softly.

The girl quickly disappeared, leaving the two older women alone.

Élise sized up this new face: her dress was a few years out of fashion but was finely made, the velvet patterns on her gown subtle and feminine, sleeves punched at the shoulders and then lace cuffs that started at the elbows. She was clearly wearing a hoop of some kind to make her petticoats flare out – not extravagantly, and the modest slit in the middle of her gown showing striped pattern with ribbon. Her hat was the only extravagance: elaborate white feathers flaring out, a clear sign of confidence and attention.

"Madame," Élise said. "You'll of course forgive me but I'm at a slight disadvantage."

"Madame Gouze," the woman introduced herself. "I am the proprietor of this establishment. Monsieur Dorian of course told us that you were coming but not that you were so lovely, nor that you were so bold."

"He was always prone to understatement," Élise offered.
"He will be with you shortly," Mme Gouze said, "He is finishing inventory. Come, do sit down."

Élise was led back to the main salle, taking a seat at one of the tables while a man stood behind one of the counters cleaning dishware. She could hear talk in the main hall, indistinct voices and dull whispers. And then: Arno.

_Culottes_, fresh hose, simple brown waistcoat and red cravat. Blue coat, cuffs just peeking out of the sleeves. His shoulders were broader, now that she had time to study him. His eyes were darker. And there was that damn hood. _Assassin._

"So," she said.

"So," Arno countered.

"Seems you've been busy," she said, prompting him to get to the point.

He looked away, lips twitching. "Tracking down the man who killed our father, yes," he admitted.

"Best of luck," Élise countered. "He's killed most of my allies and intimidated the rest to silence. This is the second time he's almost killed me and I'm no closer now than I was two years ago."

Arno held her gaze, face serious. "I've seen him."

"... What?" Arno was many things when they were children: charming, lively, funny – adorably dim, that was how she had described him to mother – there were so many things about the world that he didn't know, didn't understand, and now, suddenly, he had become capable enough to _see her father's killer_? No—even more important—he had seen her father's killer! "When?" she demanded, leaning in. "Where? Where can I find him?" Oh, the things she would do to that—

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Arno said carefully, "He wants you dead, Élise."

"So what?" she demanded. "I want him dead, so I rather think we're even. Do you somehow think you can protect me? Of the two of us, who always needed more protection? You were always the one who got us caught, I was more likely to protect you. And who even thinks I need protection? I've survived him twice now. Protection is the last thing I need."

"Élise, I want to help you," Arno said, leaning forward as well. "You're not the only one intent on reversing what happened to _Monsieur_ de la Serre, I want to make it right. We both want the same thing, and you've just admitted you've no allies. The Brotherhood has resources, manpower—"

"You cannot be serious," Élise said, scoffing at the very idea. "The Assassins? Really? So they can take one of their hidden blades and put it between my ribs when I let my guard down? So they can learn how vulnerable you think I am and take advantage of it? You're a fool. I don't trust the Assassins."

The moment drew out, filling the space with distrust and contemplation. Then, finally, Arno lowered his hood.

"Do you trust me?"

Oh, what a loaded question that was. Which Arno was he referring to? The houseboy that her _père_ latched onto after the death of her _mère_? The friend who gleefully followed her into trouble and
happily took direction? Or the fool who had failed to deliver a letter that could have saved her père's life? Or the Assassin that he had become?

Lowering his hood didn't change anything, it didn't erase that he had joined with the sworn enemies of Order and Direction. He was a cold-blooded killer now, unafraid to stab enemies in the back and lie and cheat and steal. Ever since his escape from the Bastille all he ever could be was an enemy, the so-called "Brotherhood" would have changed him from the sweet naïve boy she knew as a child into something darker, colder.

"I haven't changed that much, Élise," Arno said, seeming to read her thoughts. "I'm still the same boy who distracted the cook while you stole the jam. The same one who helped you over the wall into that dog-infested orchard."

"You got caught that time," Élise said, unwilling to be bowed by these memories.

"But I followed you anyway," Arno replied, soft smile on his lips. "What about Strasbourg? We made that poor cook think a French prince had died there. Did I protect you then, so precariously balanced on little more than wire in the attic while you jangled chimes and I asked where the sweets were? Did I stop you from going into the orchard, or did I help you over the wall and join you? Do you honestly think I would bar you from what you want now, or do what I could to support you?"

Something flickered, deep inside Élise, something that wasn't rage or cold malaise. It was warmer, softer, something she could almost remember feeling when she was with Arno as a child and as a lover. For a brief moment she could feel, and it was good.

... Damn him.

"All right," she said, and even her voice was soft. "Take me to your Brotherhood. I'll hear their offer."

"... 'Offer' may be a bit strong..." he muttered.

Élise stilled, the warmth disappearing like smoke. "And what does that mean?" she said flatly.

Arno held her gaze for only a few seconds before lowering his gaze. "Only that they might not know I'm making an offer," he said, slightly sheepish.

"What?" Élise demanded. "You go through all that effort, make me meet you at this bawdy establishment and you don't even have a card to play?" Of all the...! Did he never consider the consequences of his actions? For a split second she had dared to hope...!

"I have a card to play," Arno said quickly, defensively, hands up in supplication. "Mirabeau, the Mentor, has spent all this time honoring the Truce in memory of Monsieur de la Serre. I've been allowed to track his killers because of Mirabeau, to bring justice, he would be open to offering you our resources."

"But?" Élise prompted.

"But... the other maîtres are not completely for the Truce."

"Then why bother even offering anything?" Élise demanded, irate.

"Because they still listen to Mirabeau!" Arno said, hands still up. "Even after all the fighting they still do what he said. Besides, where else can you go?"
... and damn him a second time he was right. She didn't have any other options, the Roi des Thunes had already shut down every other avenue – especially with the death of Chrétien Lafrenière. Whoever he had inducted the night before last didn't yet know she was the Grandmaître, the whole point of the meeting at Hôtel Voysin was to introduce her and give a speech. Did they even attack Hôtel de Beauvais? She's never had a chance to read the papers... bon sang there really weren't any better options.

"Fine," she said. "Take me there."

"What? Just like that?" Arno said.

"You said they have resources, manpower. Well, let's see just what can be brought to the table."

Arno blinked, expecting more of a fight, pursing his lips several times. He never did well when caught flatfooted. He offered a polite, "Je m'excuse," before getting up and disappearing from the café.

That was how, an hour later, Arno came to be leading her around the island with a goddamned blindfold on.

"This is utterly ridiculous," she said, staring at the thing.

"I know," he admitted, a wince in his voice. "It's as you said. The two sides don't overly trust one another."

Élise offered a ten-minute explanation of her opinion on the matter, but Arno insisted, and Élise knew when to play nice to get what she wanted. She allowed the indignity, sectioning off a piece of her mind to list all the curses she knew to describe this sophistry while the other part carefully started cataloguing how much of the isle she could traverse with an obvious blindfold. They entered a building of some kind, and then a series of stairs, sound dying away and echoing at the same time. Then,

"Is that...?"

"... a maudit Templar?"

"What's he doing?"

"Really?"

... This was going to go swimmingly. Élise turned her blind gaze to Arno, gently guiding her by her elbow.

"They're a touch paranoid when it comes to security," he said, obfuscating as best he could. Oh, he was such a baby, always trying to make things sound better than they were. Élise – as she always did – corrected him. "Two right turns, seventy-three steps, then down a flight of stairs, a left, and another right," she said, pitching her voice to carry to make her point. "Did I get all that?"

"Please don't make this difficult," Arno moaned.

"I'm not the one leading me on with a blindfold," she countered. "Do you think I enjoy this?"

"No, I—"

"What the hell have you done this time, merdeux?"
"The Templars have marked her for death," Arno said quickly, "She has no other place to—"

"So you just brought her here?" the new voice demanded. Élise was inclined to agree, and turned her head to where she believed Arno to be.

"The Brotherhood has resources, manpower," she quoted. "Mirabeau has spent all this time honoring the Truce in memory of—"

"Tais-toi! Putain de chatte!" the man cursed. Élise did not react to the vulgar language, did not even react to the voice moving into her personal space. Her hands were free, she still had her dagger, she could kill him if she had to. She could kill the entire crowd, Arno at her side like he always was, and damn the Assassins for daring to think she was vulnerable. She would kill all of them, even this small man with a small voice and probably a small—

"Well, what have we here?"

There, the sound of authority, the dimming of bloodlust except for the man directly in front of her. This was Mirabeau. Nobody else in the room mattered.

"My name is—"

"Pour l'amour de Dieu, take that blindfold off," Mirabeau dismissed, voice actually pained. "Ridiculous."

Arno complied immediately and Élise took size of her surroundings: clearly, they were underground, under the island, and she counted at least a dozen Assassins, hoods up and scarves obscuring their faces, surrounding her. The venomous voice that slandered her had greasy hair and a scar on his cheek, sliding down to his lip, a scruffy beard and nothing but hate in his eyes. He would be the first to die. Stairs, grand and old, dotted with Assassin flags and leading up to three men and a woman. Mirabeau was obvious, powdered wig and pockmarked face and girth identifying him immediately. The others were irrelevant, she narrowed her focus to Mirabeau, stepping forward and keeping her back straight, arms loose at her hips. Time for one grandmaitre to talk to another.

"My name is Élise de la Serre," she announced. "My père was François de la Serre, grandmaitre of the Templar Order. I've come to ask for your help."

The eruption of noise was overwhelming and immediate: gasps of shock, curses and accusations, pointing fingers. The detractor's face was rapidly shifting from red to purple, several took aggressive steps forward, and Élise readied herself for the worst, but as Arno had said, Mirabeau held up a hand, and in several seconds the room quieted. The hateful glares did not stop, of course, but Élise was fine with that. She hated them, too.

"Obviously this conversation needs to continue in private. Let us retire to the Observatory."

Arno had a hand on her wrist again, gently pulling her to one of the stairs. The vulgar detractor moved to follow, but Élise held still. "You first," she said coldly. "Lest a knife end up in my back."

"Bellec," Arno said, "Trust me, she won't do anything."

She most certainly would, but not here, not now surrounded by people who were skilled at murder. Presentation was everything, but Élise was not going to roll over for these people either, she was a Templar, a grandmaitre, she knew the standing her position afforded and she would brook no one demeaning the honor she rightfully deserved. The man, Bellec, led the way up the stairs, Arno taking position behind Élise to keep her back safe, and she moved up the steps, down a hall and to
the presumed Observatory. The place was old but well maintained, with an elegance that belied a
cult of fools who thought the poor and degenerates could govern themselves. There was noble
blood in this place, and Élise realized she was about to deal with hypocrites. So be it.

"Now," Mirabeau said, immediately sitting in a seat and sagging to one side, one leg stretching out.
How could such a weak man hold sway over the entire Brotherhood? Élise started to calculate.
"Continue."

The woman Assassin: "Mirabeau..." her tone warning.

"Must we rehash this debate again?" an older man said, the tired tone of a fight that had repeated
many, many times.

Mirabeau, to his credit, did not bend. "We must, and we will, Maître Quemar. If you cannot see the
advantage in being owed a favor by François de la Serre's daughter, I despair for our future." The
last was a vicious hiss, not defensive but fed up. These maîtres fought with each other, right in front
of their enemy? They were weak, all of them, even Mirabeau whom Arno held so high. How did
dey even last as long as they did? Pathetic. That Élise was reduced to this...

"Continue, Mademoiselle de la Serre," Mirabeau prompted again.

The detractor, Bellec: "Here we go."

Élise glared at him. He held her gaze, did not back down to someone superior to him.

"You are not men with whom I would normally parlay, monsieur." She put her eyes back to
Mirabeau, taking in his tired frame. "But my father is dead, as are my allies. Twice now my father's
killers have nearly killed me, and I am forced to lower myself to asking help from those for whom
I have no love. Simply put: I want revenge. I want the fools who think they can wrest the Templar
Order from me to know that I will do anything to see them suffer for their crimes. If I must turn to
the Assassins for my revenge, so be it – your kind are obviously well equipped for torture and
murder, and so there is logic in pitting you against my enemies. I do not know of the Truce of
which Arno speaks, but when the work is done I will honor it and not trouble you for a period of
time that we may predetermine now, if you wish."

"And allow you to solidify your powerbase?" the older man, Quemar, said, incredulous.

Mirabeau held up a hand. "To explain the point," he said, "The day your père died we met at
Versailles. I had been summoned for the Estates General, and we discussed the impending
Revolution. We agreed to forestall our respective rivalries until the Revolution had settled out, as
we both gained something from the changes that we are witnessing. François had time to send
letters out, I know that much, and I did the same. For the last two years we have circled around
your business assuming the Truce was still active. We did not know who killed François until Arno
came to us and we interviewed him."

"Le Roi des Thunes," Élise said. "I already know."

"And Charles Gabriel Sivert," Mirabeau said, "and of course the person who organized this from
the start. Now we know it is a fanatic group of the Templar Order instead of a third party, and Arno
is correct, that will give us direction for an investigation if you chose to temporarily align yourself
with us."

"Mirabeau," the woman said, again a warning tone.

"Align my cul," the grizzly Bellec said. "Do you really think a belle putain chatte like her has
anything that she can give us? Unless you want another lover to add to your list of conquests, or throw her to Hervé and Guillaume. All she has is a promise that she'll back out of as soon as she gets what she wants, and that's assuming the putain chatte is even telling the truth."

"Your language is filled with condescension, mademoiselle," the aged Quemar said. "Your words are flowery but your delivery has much to be desired. Tell me, what conditions would you consider your revenge fulfilled? You alluded to torture and suffering, how do you define those terms? What percent of the work do you expect us to do, and when is the job passed to you and the allies you have not yet mentioned?"

"Hervé, don't entertain her lies with your lawyer rhetoric," Bellec spat. "This is a trick to lower our guard. Sneak a pretty face into our ranks, lead us around by our noses, bed whoever she needs, and then poison our wine cups and laugh while she delivers her intelligence to her true benefactor. I say we kill her and send her head back as a warning."

"Bellec!" Arno said. "You don't know her!"

"And neither do you, merdeux. You said it yourself, you were just a houseboy. You don't know what that putain chatte was trained to do, you don't know what she's capable of or what she's already done."

"She's not some cold-blooded—"

"You never think, merdeux, just because you never saw it doesn't mean it never happened!"

Arno took an aggressive step forward, Bellec doing the same, before the large African man, silent up to now, put his hand between them, the gesture making both of them stop. "This is enough," he said quietly, dark eyes impaling both of them.

"Enough indeed," Mirabeau said, holding his head, presumably against a headache. "It would appear there are many strong opinions and throwing them out in one ring will accomplish little more than setting the room afire with empty rhetoric. Cooler heads must prevail. Plainly this discussion is better conducted in private. We will retire to our separate corners, as it were, and talk once we've settled our minds. If you will excuse us, Mademoiselle de la Serre."

In the span of four sentences the man had reduced the tension and reorganized the meeting; Élise could see why Arno would give this man credence, and Élise knew from the start this would be an uphill battle. She nodded her head. "Certainly."

"Arno, perhaps you should accompany her. I'm sure you two have much to talk about, and an afternoon reminiscing will keep you out of trouble. We'll talk more at my estate – that should act as neutral enough ground."

Élise watched Arno bow his head, a deference he reserved only for her père, and gave her a look bidding her to follow. She did so, backing out of the room and down the stairs. Once she was beyond she gave him a flat look. "I'm not putting on that blindfold again."

Chapter End Notes

And today's theme for this chapter: mistakes and shame.
Small things first: the "four hundred armed noblemen!" line is a reference to the Day of Daggers. That was when, like Maitre Trenet said, 400 noblemen came with daggers to "protect the King" because they thought Lafayette and the National Guard were a little too Pro-Revolution for their liking. It was a big event, but there are so many big events going on in the Revolution and Arno can't really be everywhere. We don't blame the developers for choosing to omit certain events just because there's SO MANY, but there were some that should have been covered a lot more - even as multiplayer - and it never happened. Another small thing: Robespierre pops up again, being very articulate about why the death penalty is a bridge too far and should be abolished. Oh, irony...

But really, we start to dive into just how badly Arno did in the last chapter. The biggest and most important was him killing the wrong man, of course, but there are extra points for basic technical precision (or lack thereof) that start to show the cracks in Arno's education and prove even further to Mirabeau that Bellec is a terrible teacher. We also see Arno's default reaction to failure: intense shame and a desperate need to fix it in whatever way possible. It's almost like he feels the exact same way with M. de la Serre...

Moreover, we also see mistakes being made by other people. Fanfic writers tend to do... well, weird things to the Council, either completely villainizing them or making them deeply incompetent. On paper that makes sense because the game is from Arno's perspective, and he was never high enough on the food chain to understand the decisions the Council was making. On one hand as a writer it's refreshing to write as a grunt instead of the higher up. The drip feed of information can be more tightly controlled for big reveals and twists, but on the other hand it's a balancing act to show that the Council is doing the best that it can in a period of history where no decision is a good decision. I don't know if we did it enough be we tried whenever possible to point out that the Assassins are stretched very thin during the Revolution. More on that later.

Mirabeau, however makes what is his last mistake: he doesn't send someone with Arno to Hôtel de Beauvais. He sees the shame Arno is feeling and knows that he won't make a mistake as a result without yet understanding how damaged Arno really is.

Arno meanwhile is just about flying apart at the seems. He hasn't had time to process what he's just done and he's the type to process something like that slowly. Like Mirabeau thought, he's desperate to do it right and get back to the Council right up until the worst words possible could be said: Élise de la Serre. Then, like all idiots in love, he stops thinking all together. The memory itself plays pretty straight, and then we get to see Élise's point of view.

Élise. Writing her was hard, because her mindset is very hard to stomache. Several reviewers have already diagnosed the malaise correctly, where Arno feels things too deeply and needs to numb himself Élise's depression makes her numb and desperate to feel. (almost like we did it on purpose :P). She's a Templar down to her core, and, well, more on her in later chapters.

Next chapter: .. a murder investigation...
Death of an Extremist

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Arno took a deep breath once they were out of the Sanctuary and above ground. Intense was too small a word for what had transpired. Élise, of course, was a revelation – calm, cool, collected, even when it looked like danger was approaching. She had been like that as a child as well – even when M. de la Serre was yelling at them she said and did nothing, just taking it with a straight back. Even now, after two attempts on her life, one of them only yesterday (a lifetime ago), nothing ruffled her. Arno was envious, he was certain his legs had turned to pudding.

"That went about as well as I expected," Élise said, red curls swishing in the sun.

"Give it time," Arno assured. "Mirabeau will talk them around."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Élise countered, voice doubtful. "He has skill, I grant you, but you can hardly call those people unified. They're as broken as Paris is."

"It's not that bad," Arno said. The conversation paused, a natural lull, the two lost in their thoughts as they looked out over the Seine.

"I saw you, you know. At the Bastille."

Arno looked over. "What?"

"The day of the assault. I was trying to get back on my feet, I was following the crowds, trying to learn what they were doing. I saw you take the leap. They picked you up early."

Arno looked at the churning waters of the Seine, mind back on that day, following Bellec and marveling and the skills he had. "I wasn't one of them then, if that's what you mean," he said. "After you..." he paused, trying to think of how to word it, how to phrase something that was so monumental in his life. "When you showed me Lafrenière's letter, I had nowhere else to go. They told me I could fix my mistakes. I've been training ever since."

"And have you done an Assassin's work?" Élise asked. "Have you killed people?"

Arno looked down to his hidden blade, clean now, and thought of all the blood he had spilled in the last two days, all the bodies left in his wake, and how many were the result of his stupidity. The emotion of the last forty-eight hours threatened to overwhelm him, and he fought to keep it contained, for Élise. She had been through enough, especially yesterday. She would call him a baby for crying and he didn't need to hear that right now. He leaned against the stone rail. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry you've been in such danger. This is my fault for never delivering that letter."

Élise didn't correct him, leaned forward as he did. The silence stretched out again, sun continuing to climb into the sky. The wind had finally died down.

"Mirabeau said there was someone else. Sivert?"
"Oui, they got that from me," Arno said, nodding. "They were able to pluck it out during the interview. We found him two months ago, and I killed him. Same for the Roi des Thunes."

Élise turns sharply to him. "What?" she demanded. "They're both dead?"

"Oui, bien sûr," Arno answered. "They killed Monsieur de la Serre. Justice had to be served."

Fire was in her eyes, she leaned in aggressively, the perfect image of when they were children and she had a bright idea. "What was it like?" she asked, hunger in her face. "Did they suffer? Did they beg?"

Arno blinked. "Non, of course not. You needn't worry about—what?" he asked, because Élise's expression had turned from hunger to rage. This was the face of the girl who would pull his hair if he suggested something was a bad idea, or if he admitted something to her père. That face usually meant the silent treatment, and apparently that was true for adulthood as well, as she quickly turned around to compose herself. Arno had done something wrong, but he had no idea what. "They're Assassins, Élise, not cold-blooded killers. They don't let their targets suffer, they respect the death to make it quick and painless."

"Stop," she said. "Just... stop."

Arno stopped talking, clueless as to what had happened. What was she so angry about? Respecting the dead? That she didn't deliver the killing blow? That she didn't know any of this?

The silence was painful as Élise composed herself; all Arno could do was be there for her, let her work through whatever the revelation was and offer support when she felt calm again. He almost put his hand on her shoulder, but he wasn't sure if he could. Too much had happened, he had wronged her in so many ways, so much blood was on his hands, and he wasn't sure if she would accept something as intimate as that. The Brotherhood wasn't the only thing that was broken, and Arno wasn't sure he would ever – was ever – worthy of a woman like Élise.

"Do you really think we'll find him?" she asked finally, changing the subject. "The killer? After all this time?"

Arno breathed a sigh of relief, answered as best he could. "His luck can't last forever," he said. "François Germain believed—"

Élise whipped around so quickly her hair spun to the other side of her shoulder. "François Germain?" she demanded.

"Oui."

"Where is he?"

"His shop is on the Rue Saint-Antoine, why?"

She bolted.

"What the...? Élise! Élise, slow down!"

De la Serre's daughter had always been faster than Arno, a point she proved yet again as she pulled ahead of him, running out across the street to the consternation of a carriage and down and alley, forcing Arno to sprint to catch up. No amount of calling made her slow, and it was everything in his power to keep her in his line of sight as she crossed a bridge to the right bank of the city and down another alley, coming out on Rue Saint-Antoine and running pell-mell to the east, shoving
through crowds and frightening children as Arno struggled to catch up.

"Where are you going?" he demanded. "Wait for me!"

She finally skidded to a stop, Arno nearly bowling her over it was so sudden, and she wasn't even winded. Arno needed to take a couple deep breaths. "What was that about?" he demanded, confused.

"Arno," Élise said, "François Germain was my father's lieutenant."

... what?

"... What?"

"He was cast out of the Order when I was a girl – I don't remember much but something about heretical notions, or Jacque de Molay, the last public Grandmaître of the Order. I remember my father talking about it with Chrétien – Monsieur Lafrenière – in the stables when they thought I couldn't hear them. He's dead, Arno; he died years ago."

Arno blinked. Slowly. "Did anyone tell him that?" he asked, voice a little flat.

"I would very much like to ask him a few questions."

Hm. "So would I," Arno added. He turned to the house, gazed at the windows that had been so filled with guards – they were empty. Clearly the enemy had cleared out after he'd freed Germain —

Arno realized he was back to start. This was how his day had started forty-eight hours ago – given Germain's name and a mission to interview him. From there: La Halle, the gunpowder, the induction ceremony, Lafrenière, Hôtel de Beauvais, learning he had been duped, and then... Élise. His world had turned full circle.

"Empty," Élise said, having walked right up to the main door, unlocked and open. "Come on, let's see what we can find."

"I doubt it will be much," Arno said, remembering the break-in and then the breakout. He could still remember how strong his eagle felt, all the details his eyes picked up of the man, the utter relief that he had found someone to free him, his horror upon killing a captor. "It might not even be the same Germain..."

"Tall? Grey hair? Eyes two different colors?"

"... All right. Perhaps it is the same Germain."

But then why the subterfuge? Why not admit to being a Templar straight away?

They moved into the house and it was truly empty of everything. Except... there were the bloodstains. The signs of the murder Arno had committed. He stared at them, realizing he'd never returned to a place where he'd killed before, never saw the... the stains he left behind. Where were the bodies? Who dragged them away? Missing them didn't make the weight any less, and Arno was starting to realize this was more complicated than breaking out a prisoner. Was Germain even a prisoner? Were there more innocent deaths on his conscience?

*Stay your blade from the flesh of the innocent.*
He shook his head. The Creed was the last thing he needed to think about. "Upstairs," he said, "his workshop was up there."

Élise moved confidently, Arno slinking behind her, eyes constantly drawn to the floor and the small pools of red. The shop was empty of everything. Why was everything so empty? The enemy might leave a lost base but that didn't mean it was completely abandoned immediately, Bellec had beaten it into his head often enough that it took time to clean up rogue documents and incriminating—

Arno stiffened. "Élise..." he started to say.

But she had also figured it out. "Don't tell me: It's a trap?"

Three men swept into the room, Élise already drawing her sword and Arno pulling for some kind of bomb in one of his pockets. It was a stun grenade, the flash of light making everyone pause except for Arno, who had closed his eyes before the flash. He swatted two swords to the ground before the men even realized what had happened and the third tried to parry him but missed completely with his ruined eyes. Arno caught the blade and circled it away, throwing a punch and following it up with the guard of his sword cracking into his enemy's nose, breaking it. Élise had her sword out and made short work of the disarmed guards, killing them efficiently and letting their blood splatter on the walls. Oh, that hurt to see, but she took a stance next to him and all at once they were children again, training under Monsieur Weatherall and watching their footing. The flood of nostalgia made Arno smile through the pain, and he turned to his former lover.

"Well," he said with charm. "That was bracing."

"Just like that time in Marseille," Élise added, smile on her lips.

Really? He looked around the room. "A bit more blood this time around," he said. "We won't have a lot of time after this."

"Then let's be quick about it."

They picked apart the workroom, looking around tools and projects, opening drawers and looking for papers, ledgers, anything that suggested Templar affiliations. Arno started pocketing lists of clients, bankers, determined not to forget them again like he had two nights ago. Diable, there were so many mistakes to correct.

"There's nothing here," Élise said in frustration.

"He must have known his bluff wouldn't hold up."

Élise made a face. "So we've lost him again."

"Maybe not," Arno said quickly, hoping to reassure her. "Let's keep looking. He might not have worked just in his workshop." Though... the rest of the house was full of covered and unused furniture... Arno looked around, eyes skimming over the (new) bodies on the floor. That was the way he had come in, that was the way he and Germain had escaped, and that was... a third door? On this side of the building? He reached over, testing the knob.

"Locked," he said, turning briefly to Élise while he reached for his lockpicks. "I could—"

Élise pulled out her flint-lock and shot the doorknob, then kicked open the door.

"... do that," Arno finished lamely.
Élise ignored him, moved right into the hidden room, Arno following suit. The walls were covered with flags of the Templar cross, a similar design standing on the fireplace mantle. Incense was burning somewhere, faintly, and there was a desk in the middle of the room that had piles of books under it. Shelves lined a wall and Arno hoped they had enough time to sort what needed to be taken and what didn't. Especially with the sound of a gunshot it wouldn't be long before someone came to investigate. He saw a bust of some ancient grandmaître, and he couldn't quite stop a whistle. "Well," he said, "Now I know why this wasn't on the official tour."

They started going through documents, Arno taking fistfuls of lists of numbers and stuffing them into his waistcoat, hoping they could be sorted later. Élise didn't care about taking anything, she went from one paper to the next, skimming and scanning and tossing it aside and moving on to the next. She flipped through four books before she found one with handwriting on it, taking care to slow down. Then,

"Arno, look."

She flipped the book around for Arno to read, and he saw a list of names, the date May 5, guests of the Estates General. M. de la Serre's name was there, underlined and then scratched out, as were several others that Arno didn't recognize until he saw Lafrenière's name. "It's him," she said, her voice taught, pained. "The connard killed my père."

Arno grabbed the book, adding it to his waistcoat. "We have to tell Mirabeau," he said. "As soon as po—"

The glass shattered and the two quickly ducked, scrambling to a wall for invisibility.

Out of time. Germain had expected someone to come in after his false breakout and set up a trap as a distraction to set up the snipers. Diable. Arno looked to Élise, still reeling from the revelation of her father's killer. She was in no shape for this kind of fight, and the intensity in her gaze told Arno everything he needed to know. She had already fired her pistol regardless, and reloading a flintlock took time. His phantom blade would be faster. "I'll take care of this," he hissed, hoping his voice would carry. "Meet me at Mirabeau's estate, they'll have a harder time if we separate."

A second shot, impacting the floor not four inches from Arno's feet, making him tuck them in.

"Do you see them?" he asked.

"Windows across the street."

Arno nodded, standing and loading his phantom blade. He had to be fast. Even with Fabre's training he hadn't had to fire this quickly. Eagle, fireworks, he needed help. He took a deep breath, reaching inside himself, and lifted his hand. Pop of sound, burst of color, there! He fired, pulled back, reloaded in less than three seconds. Another breath, and he pulled out to fire again. He could just hear a grunt, and he risked peeking over the sill of the window. Both were down. Good. He crawled along the floor to the other side of the room, seeing two more. His first shot missed but his second was true. He only had one dart left, and he'd rather not pull out his gun and make more noise if he could help it. He called on his eagle again, begging for a short burst, and looked – there – and fired.

Silence.

He sighed in relief, attention drawing back inside.

Élise was nowhere to be found. She'd made it out. Good.
He would circle back, take the long way, and meet her at Mirabeau's estate. He patted his chest, full of papers and the damning book, and took a deep breath. One mistake erased. One more step towards redemption. One more hope of a future.

It was midafternoon when Arno finally made it back to Isle-de-la-Cité. He had been cautious maneuvering the streets from Germain's abandoned base. Just because he had removed the snipers didn't mean there weren't people watching. So, Arno had blended into the crowds, stayed the main roads and their crowds before ducking down an alley and then down into the sewers. He exited by the Seine then took the bridge to get to the island, still watching his back. Nothing tingled his senses, but he still kept his eyes open as he continued down the length of the island until he reached the familiar city house of Mirabeau.

Mirabeau's home was familiar to Arno. Not only had he recuperated there briefly during his time underground, but he also was often a runner here. Mirabeau couldn't always make it down to the Sanctuary, and the Assassins were always exceedingly good at using young novices to run messages to Mirabeau as a letter from a concerned citizen of France. Mirabeau always accepted and insisted on the novice staying until he could compose a suitable reply. It gave a chance for even more delicate matters to be communicated in person, and Mirabeau could often provide both written and spoken instructions.

Granted, Arno had never been a favorite for that type of courier work, he was getting too old to pass off as a young houseboy. But he was still used in that capacity, even as steward of the Café, since he was easier to reach than going directly to Mirabeau. Ostensibly, the excuse was that Mirabeau had an interest in the Café and liked getting reports on how it was doing. Given that Mirabeau had brought a small delegation over after they had reopened, no one ever questioned it. That and bringing over samples of wine, for Mirabeau's well-known penchant for drinking everyone under the table.

So, Arno entered as he always did. He used the servant's entrance and went up the backstairs to check in with the butler. "Monsieur Phillipe?"

"Ah, Monsieur Dorian," the butler greeted, always polite and with a smile. "How is the Café? Monsieur Mirabeau is always speaking in delight about your establishment."

Arno managed to smile easily. "Slowly growing," he replied. "We have a new cook, with some Caribbean flair to our usual French dishes. She makes a delicious pumpkin soup. Drop by sometime and give it a try."

Phillipe chuckled, head dipped, and he scratched at his hair, just starting to turn gray. "Someday, perhaps, when little Marie is stronger."

"And how is she?"

Phillipe's whole face lit up. "Wonderful. I can't thank Monsieur Mirabeau enough for paying for her treatment."

Arno softened a little, after all the tension of the past... how long had it been? Day three of this nightmare? "I'm glad. I've missed her running up to my legs."

"She's almost there. I'll let her know that your knees need her knocking."

That actually got a surprised laugh out of Arno. "Is le comte taking visitors?"

Phillipe smiled. "Bien sûr," he replied, eyes shining in admiration. "He'd have to be deathly ill to
not see people. I'm certain even then, he'd let people visit to speak with him."

"Hopefully he isn't too busy, then."

"Oh, a young mademoiselle came by in a flurry, not five minutes ago." Phillipe made a face. "Dressed most unbecoming of a woman. Were it not for her hair, I'd have assumed it a man save for her voice. And really, unbound hair?"

Arno chuckled. No one understood Élise's penchant for comfortable clothes she could fight in. "Who are we to understand how a woman chooses to express herself?"

Phillipe shrugged. "I just keep my mouth shut."

"Likely for the best."

"Indeed."

"Shall I head up?"

"Naturally," Phillipe replied. "I'm sure le Monsieur won't take long with that young mademoiselle."

Arno grinned wryly. Oh, if Élise was already there, there were probably barbs and insults flying as Mirabeau loved debate and Élise couldn't stand Assassins, let alone bluster. "Monsieur's office?"

Phillipe smiled warmly. "No doubt." He shooed off Arno and Arno climbed the servant stairs to the third floor, where Mirabeau kept his private office and where he took most of his visitors.

"Élise?" he called out. "Mirabeau?"

But there was no reply.

Very odd.

The servant's stairs were only two doors down from Mirabeau's office, as it often let Mirabeau have a chance to disappear from more unwanted visitors. He should have heard them.

Turning the corner, he listened to the silence and something cold started to settle about him. He entered the office to find Élise, white as a sheet, staring at the slumped body of... Mirabeau. Blood slowly oozing from his mouth.

Safe and sound, only slightly delayed.

Arno, no exploring.

Again... Again he had failed! He wasn't fast enough! How many more? Lafrenière, Germain, Monsieur de la Serre, his own father, how much blood was going to coat his hands due to his own ineptitude?

"Élise?" he looked at her, her face ashen, mouth open in shock. "Élise? What is this?"

Because it couldn't be Mirabeau's body. That would add another mistake he just couldn't afford.

Everything hurt.

"I found him like this," she stuttered. She turned to look at him, then her eyes widened. "I didn't—"
"Of course not!" Arno snapped back. *Diable! Nom de dieu!* He needed to investigate! He needed to get on the trail of the killer right away! He needed to—

Arno's face twisted. The last time he'd run off on a lead had been when Germain had pointed him right at Lafrenière. The absolute last thing Arno should be doing was making any sort of decision. Impulsiveness had him following Élise as children and his father had died. Impulsiveness had him go to a party to find Élise, and M. de la Serre had died. Impulsiveness had sent him after who he thought had been a killer and Lafrenière had died. Impulsiveness had sent him off to save Élise, but while she was alive, the Council was still arguing about what to do.

No.

Impulsively going after whatever had happened here would lead to someone else dead.

"I have to report this to the Council immediately," he stated, looking Élise in the eye and *burying* his feelings with as much effort as he could.

*Mirabeau...*

He turned, sweeping out of the room.

"They'll know what to do."

They *had* to, because Arno's first impulses were always *terrible* ideas.

"No!" Élise shouted, grabbing his arm and yanking him back. "They don't trust me as it is," she stated flatly, looking him straight in the eye. "I'll be their suspect, first and last."

*Diable.*

"You're right. *Damnitall!* Of course, you're right." He pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead, trying to think. "What are we going to do?" Going to the Council would kill Élise, covering it up would be useless, they were *Assassins*, they knew a cover-up better than anyone else! What options did they have?

"We find out what happened," Élise said coldly. "We present evidence and facts. Unless your *Assassins* don't believe in pesky little facts."

Arno offered baleful eyes at that comment.

His first instinct had been to investigate. This was a terrible idea. But what other choice did he have?

With a deep breath he straightened, reburied his grief and worry, and looked around. "You saw no one else when you arrived?"

Élise shook her head. "Just the butler. He let me in, but he never came upstairs."

Of course. Phillipe made sure Mirabeau's privacy was strictly maintained. That was part of the reason why Mirabeau had requested Phillipe personally from whatever country estate he had served at.

"But he was here before you," he nodded to himself. "Did you see any other servants?"

"No, no one else."
Diable. Where the hell was he supposed to start?

Arno took a breath. Start with Mirabeau. Carefully, Arno pulled Mirabeau back in the chair, Mirabeau's head lolling to the side. Not stiff. It couldn't have been long. But moving Mirabeau had also revealed... A Templar pin. He picked it up.

"What is that?" Élise asked, looking over his shoulder.

"It's..." Arno hesitated. Templar pin. Germain? Another of his subordinates? How would they know? He showed it to Élise. "It's the weapon that killed your father," he said, holding it up to the light.

"That's a Templar badge of office."

Of course it was. And of course it doubled as a weapon.

"What's it doing here," he asked quietly.

Élise stared at it, then looked to him. "Painting a picture," she said softly.

Indeed. But a picture of what?

Gently, he closed Mirabeau's eyes. "Repose en paix."

What to look at next. It couldn't have been anyone Mirabeau had known... But then how did they get in? The April air was far too chill for an open window, and the street too open for anyone to climb up the side. He checked the windows anyway. All secure. He looked at the door. "Doesn't look forced."

"So the killer was expected." Élise summarized.

"A guest, perhaps. Or a servant," Arno nodded. Who was working today? Phillipe would know. He'd have to ask. But he needed more than that. He needed to know what to even look for. What he was missing. What he couldn't see...

He was an idiot.

With a deep breath, he reached into his mind for the part of him like an eagle, and looked.

The sparks of color were small, and the pops of firecrackers quiet, but it was enough. First, he went to a handkerchief he found on the floor. He looked it over carefully. Lace along the edges, simple design. He carefully picked it up. There was something...

A small sniff was enough to wrinkle his nose. "A lady's handkerchief." With far too cheap a perfume.

Élise scoffed. "So we can count half the noblewomen of Paris as suspects then?" she offered with cynicism. "That's not much help."

"One of the staff might recognize it," he bit back.

He grit his teeth. Élise was in a mood. She was going to snap derision at anything she deemed beneath her and, in a corner like she was, she was wielding it like a sword. He hadn't seen her like this often, growing up, but when she did her sarcastic cynicism often left blood behind.

So, he ignored it and went to an armoire that his vision had guided his eyes to. Élise scoffed, not
having gotten whatever she wanted from her sharp words and started pulling out books that were on the shelves. The armoire wasn't locked, so he opened it. A heavy cup fell out.

He picked it up swiftly and sniffed carefully. After all, every Assassin learned how to recognize wines and drinks because one never knew when... "Poison," he grunted.

Élise immediately came over. "Let me see that." She took a sniff as well, then held the inside of the cup towards the light, studying the interior closely. "Aconite," she said confidently. "Hard to detect, unless you know what you're looking for."

She knew it so fast. Templar poison? Germain? Germain's pins were used to poison. Arno offered a snide smile. "Popular with Templars, is it?" he asked dryly.

Élise clearly did not like his tone. "With anyone who wants to get away with murder," she replied bluntly. "But yes."

Not helping Élise. Arno understood she felt cornered, but he was trying to help. He let out a controlled breath. Looking around again, nothing caught his eagle's eye and he sighed. "Please, Élise, stay here. I need to talk to the staff."

Élise narrowed her eyes. "I'm coming with you."

"That's a bad idea Élise. They know me here. They don't know you. They'll be wondering why you're asking questions. Don't make this more complicated than it already is."

"What?" Élise hissed. "I'm to be some damsel for you to save. I have survived worse than people thinking ill of me. I have survived Germain's attempts to kill me."

"Élise," Arno said slowly, gritting out each word. "Who will the staff respond to? Someone they see somewhat regularly or a new person? A woman in man's clothes with unbound hair, demanding like an uppity noble?"


"Merci," he murmured, before heading back down to Phillipe.

"Ah, Monsieur," Phillipe greeted. "Done already?"

"Not really," Arno replied, trying to keep everything normal. *Nom de dieu*, how was he going to explain this to Phillipe? "Have you been here all day?"

"No," Phillipe replied genially. "Monsieur Mirabeau gave me the morning to be with little Marie. I arrived at four to see to this week's delivery of wine."

"Anyone else arrive since then?"

"Only you and the young lady."

"Any appointments?"

"That lawyer fellow, Monsieur Quemar." Phillipe made a face. "Why he meets with a Jew is beyond me, but le comte has an open heart for everyone."

Right. Quemar was likely coming over to keep arguing with Mirabeau about Élise. "And you haven't been upstairs?"
Phillip smiled wryly, a light twinkle in his eye. "As you know, the weekly wine delivery is quite extensive."

Arno pasted on a smile. "Indeed."

"Was le comte expecting someone else?" Phillipe asked.

Arno shook his head, "No, no, just something in conversation tickled my mind."

"Of course, Monsieur. Does le comte need anything?"

Not anymore...

"No."

"Very well."

Arno pulled out the handkerchief. "I did find this in the hall, do you know whose it is?"

Phillipe reached over and took the handkerchief, studying it. One whiff had him wrinkling his nose. "It belongs to Émilie. Shall I return it to her?"

"Émilie?" Arno asked, thinking of all the staff he knew for Mirabeau.

"The maid," Phillipe replied, handing back the handkerchief. "Hired two months ago after Claudette finally admitted she was too old to do this anymore. She saved her first month of wages to purchase it. It made her feel like a lady, she said. Pity she doesn't know a good perfume."

"Where is she now?"

"Check the kitchens," Phillipe replied, looking back to his ledgers, "she's making a list to go to the market."

"Sorry to have interrupted you."

Phillipe offered a winsome smile. "No worries, Monsieur Dorian. You know how when you're interrupting and when to move on. I can't express enough how I appreciate that to other people who will just chitter away and leave me unable to get work done."

"Merci."

Arno headed downstairs and to the kitchen. Inside was a thin slip of a girl, checking the pantry and writing things down on a slate with a piece of chalk.

"Mademoiselle Émilie?" Arno asked.

"Oui, Monsieur," the maid said, stepping out promptly and standing attentively, ready for orders.

Very new and eager to please to keep her job. Particularly when Mirabeau paid very well. "I found this earlier, is it yours?" he asked softly, pulling out the handkerchief.

All at once, her eyes widened in surprise and her hands immediately dove into her pockets. She patted herself down frantically, looking around. "Yes! That's mine! How did you get it?"

"I found it in the hall," he lied.
Blushing furiously, Émilie dipped her head as if Arno was a superior. "I apologize, Monsieur, I don't know how that happened. I always keep that buried in my pockets. It's the one thing I own that makes me feel—" she clammed up, but Arno understood where she was going.

"The one thing that makes you feel like more than a maid?"

Her head nodded and her cheeks burned brighter.

Arno couldn't quite stop a chuckle. "Olivier, the majordomo of where I was a houseboy made sure I felt incredibly small and useless. The one thing I had was the watch of my father to make me feel like I wasn't just a houseboy." And Élise, but that was too complicated to explain.

"Oui, Monsieur," Émilie replied, a look of relief flashing across her face. "And losing it is terrible."

"Oui." It was more complicated for Arno. Sometimes he wanted nothing more than to be rid of the watch, even now that he had found the Assassins, the cult his father was a part of. "I shall see it returned to you, but Monsieur Mirabeau has me running about looking for wine today," the lie fell out easily, "and I need to find someone le comte had an appointment with today?"

"Oh, that would be Monsieur Quemar, the Jew. He arrived this afternoon while I was leaving to collect laundry at Madam Duvall's."

"Thank you," Arno replied. "You've been most helpful." He looked around sheepishly. "I've heard le comte has an extensive wine cellar?"

Émilie smiled, but shook her head. "Only le comte and the butler have the keys."

"Merci."

Arno climbed two sets of stairs and joined Élise in the study. He walked over to Mirabeau, heart still aching at seeing him dead.

"What have you discovered?" Élise asked.

Arno sighed heavily, trying to organize his thoughts.

A woman's handkerchief, an appointment with Quemar, a poisoned cup of wine, only the butler Mirabeau and the butler with the keys, none had a motive, all the evidence was all over the place with no clear suspect if anyone knew Mirabeau.

The only consistency was a Templar.

"Templar poison," Arno sighed, "Templar pin, lady's handkerchief. It looks damning."

"Bravo," Élise replied icily, "you've figured it out. My cunning plan was to murder the only Assassin who doesn't want to see me dead, then stand about waiting to be discovered."

Diable, did Élise need to be prickly now?

He looked tiredly to her. "Not the only Assassin," he said flatly.

Her face almost immediately softened, the guarded coldness warming, and she glanced away with a twinge of guilt. "You're right," she said softly. "I'm sorry. But you know it wasn't my doing."

"I believe you." With all of his heart. She would never do something like this. She was too careful in all that she did. "The Brotherhood, though..."
Élise's eyes hardened again. "Then let's find the real killer before they get wind of this."

"I know."

He needed to think. With a deep breath, he closed his eyes and looked at everything in front of him. Lady's handkerchief was not really evidence. It was planted there, that much was obvious. Émilie's surprise at not having it had been genuine and Arno recognized that she held onto that handkerchief the way he held onto his father's watch, only without the more complicated feelings. The butler was the only one with access to the wine, but that was a distraction. Phillipe had been a loyal servant for years and his admiration for Mirabeau was plain to anyone with eyes. But with the door not being forced, it had to have been someone that Mirabeau knew or expected.

The Templar paraphernalia, as Élise said, painted a picture. His thoughts earlier that it had been Germain or some other Templar were folly. Germain would be closing ranks after Arno had found him and let him go (idiocy!) and Mirabeau was a trained Assassin. He wouldn't have gone down easily if he was attacked, even as old age was slowing him down. Therefore, all the Templar paraphernalia was to cast suspicion on the only Templar that the Assassins knew and were arguing about. Élise.

The killer had to be an Assassin.

Arno frowned heavily. What had Mirabeau once said? Only two hundred Assassins in all of Paris, a city of around a million people? Well, Assassins knew how to kill. And Assassins knew how to cover up. The problem was that whoever had done this coverup had done a poor job. Planted evidence for Élise, but anyone who spoke to Mirabeau's staff would quickly find out the handkerchief was Émilie's, that Phillipe wouldn't harm Mirabeau, and that cast all the suspicions on Élise in doubt. It was obvious that it was set up for Élise. Assassins were better at coverups, weren't they?

Arno stood and looked to Élise.

"I need to speak to Maître Quemar."

"You can't be serious," she glared at him. "The one member of your precious Council that most wants me gone? You won't turn me in!"

Arno actually rolled his eyes, "Élise!" he hissed. "I understand that you feel cornered and alone but I am trying to help you. I'm not taking you to the full Council, I'm not taking you there at all. I'm going to speak to Maître Quemar because he was the last Assassin to see Mirabeau. He might have information. Stop assuming the worst of me."

Élise stood straight and narrowed her eyes. "You have done the worst to me, Arno. My father is dead."

That hurt. His eyes stung and he took a sharp breath, holding back everything he wanted to say. He wanted to scream, M. de la Serre was my father too!; he wanted to shout, You're not the only one who suffered!; he wanted to bellow, I'm trying to redeem myself!

But Élise would just dig in her heels and he knew that as certain as he knew that he now had a third father dead behind him and cooling.

Really, Arno needed to stop finding father figures. They always died.

"Look," he said with a quavering but calm voice, "whether you believe me or not, I'm trying to help you. I need to speak to Quemar, and you can't be there because that will just put him on edge. Since
you know aboutaconite, could you look into what apothecaries might carry it? Let me know and
we'll interrogate him together?"

Élise softened, and that was probably the only apology he was going to get. "You're right," she
admitted. "I would be fuel to the fire. I know some apothecaries that use aconite, but none of them
would sell to anyone but a Templar with a pin. They know better," her voice was cold again. When
had she gotten so cold?

Stupid question, Arno. The same night his life had fallen apart.

"Right. Where shall I meet you?"

Élise actually offered a small smile. "Arno, it won't be that hard for me to find you. You're
probably the only man in Paris who wears a hood."

Arno rolled his eyes. "Right. Now unless you want all of Paris knowing that Mirabeau was
murdered and poisoned, help me clean up the blood so it looks like he died of natural causes."

Together they were able to settle Mirabeau comfortably, though he was stiffening, and it looked
like he'd been reading through papers when he passed peacefully.

"Repose en paix," Arno said again, touching Mirabeau's shoulder.

Élise was looking at him strangely, but they headed down. Arno checked in with Phillipe again,
making sure everything seemed fine. "Although, Monsieur Mirabeau was looking pale," he said
slowly. "I hope he's not coming down with something. The Assembly needs him."

Phillipe immediately expressed concern. "I'll check in with him in an hour or so," Phillipe
promised, "see if he needs a doctor."

Mirabeau was well past needing a doctor. "Please do. I do worry about him."

"All of France does," Phillipe said emphatically.

Once outside, he and Élise went their separate ways. Arno easily headed to the sewers and made
his way to the Sanctuary. A quick check showed that Quemar wasn't there, but at his law offices.
After dropping off the papers collected from Germain's hidden office, Arno headed above ground
and to the Marais to find Quemar's office.

Once there a clerk testily asked if Arno had an appointment.

"I am expected."

"You most certainly are not," the clerk growled at him. "I keep Monsieur Quemar's schedule and
you are not listed. Now shoo!"

"I beg your pardon—" Arno growled right back because he didn't have time for this.

"Ah, Monsieur Dorian," Quemar was at the door to a back room, squinting at him. "This is a
pleasant surprise. I wasn't expecting you till this evening."

Arno glared at the clerk, but bowed politely to Quemar. "Something came up. I thought it prudent
to bring it to your attention right away."

"Interesting, do come in."
"The door shut behind them."

"How safe is it to talk here," Arno asked very quietly.

"Keep your voice at that level and we'll be fine," Quemar replied. "There is a reason none of us usually discuss business at our daily jobs."

"This couldn't wait."

"So, I gathered," Quemar said dryly, squinting at him again. "You're pale. What's happened?"

Well, there was no tiptoeing around this. "Mirabeau is dead."

"Dead?" Quemar's eyes widened.

"Murdered."

"Merde."

"Indeed."

Quemar let out a gusty sigh. "I knew this truce would come to a bad end. I'll have to summon the rest of the Council to deal with this. Heaven knows how Guillaume will be able to sneak away early."

"Monsieur, Élise had nothing to do with it! I'll stake my life on that fact! Please, you were the last Assassin to see Mirabeau, what can you tell me?"

Quemar looked at Arno measuring. "Stake your life that? What has you so convinced, boy? She's a Templar."

So, Arno went through everything. He treated it like a report to the Council, explaining every piece of how the day went (was it really just a day...?), going back and finding that Germain wasn't just a prisoner of the Templars but the Templar that had caused the civil war the Templars were currently fighting.

Quemar looked critically at Arno. "This was why you needed to report to us before going off half-cocked."

"I know."

He explained the ambush and escaping. Finding Élise over Mirabeau's body—

"And you still don't think she's the one who killed him?"

"No, I do not," and explaining all the evidence he found. The convenient Templar pin, the handkerchief, everything he knew about Mirabeau's staff—

"You actually speak with Mirabeau's staff?"

"Of course," Arno replied. "Phillipe is the one who lets people up to see Mirabeau. Being on the good side of a majordomo always makes things go more smoothly."

"You do this for every noble?"

"When I was being sent out by Olivier, yes. Since joining the Brotherhood, I haven't had much
opportunity to interact with nobles, since the Café is still barely getting by."

"You do have a gift," Quemar murmured.

And Arno continued, pulling out the evidence he had collected, having Quemar sniff the handkerchief to realize just how cheap the perfume was, compared to what a noble like Élise might prefer (which Arno knew very well from when Olivier sent him out to fetch perfume and just how expensive it was...), pointing out just how convenient it was that so much implicated Élise, but not everything as Élise didn't have pockets for carrying poison the way a more traditionally dressed woman might, or a man with his layers of coats, to bluntly asking why Élise would kill the only member of the Council who was sympathetic to her.

"Please," Arno asked softly, "Give me a little more time. I'll find the killer."

Quemar sat back heavily, scratching at his beard. "You present a convincing case, Arno. I agree that I have doubts on if your lady Templar killed Honoré or not." He gave a wry grin. "If I had known you'd be so good at investigating, I'd have taken you on as a clerk."

Arno shook his head. "Lawyering wouldn't be for me."

"That's true. You don't ask enough questions."

Arno bristled, but said nothing.

"Still. I have a few questions."

And Quemar cross-examined him with the skill of an experienced lawyer. Arno had no idea why he was answering the same questions time after time. The testy clerk came in and offered them both a coffee as the interview continued.

Finally Quemar sat back. "You're consistent, I'll give you that. Very well. You have until tomorrow morning. No later. The butler will have discovered Mirabeau by now, if not momentarily, and I need to inform the Council before it hits the newsheets, tell them an Assassin is already investigating."

"You realize," Arno said standing, "that it was likely an Assassin who killed Maitre Mirabeau."

"Sadly, I do see the possibility," Quemar tried to get up, and fell back to his chair. He tried again, then sighed heavily and reached out a hand.

Surprised, Arno took Quemar's hand and helped him to his feet.

"The gout is always terrible in the spring," Quemar grumbled. "Now, you said the poison was aconite?"

"Oui."

Quemar raised a brow. "Do I need to point out that that particular strain is a favorite of the Templars?"

"You do not," Arno growled testily. "But where might one acquire aconite in such strong concentrations?"

Quemar's first steps were stiff and he leaned heavily on Arno as they reached the door. Quemar quietly dismissed his clerk for the evening. "Any doctor could prescribe it in diluted form," he
explained, the motion seeming to limber Quemar as they headed out to the chilly evening. "I myself take a tincture of it for my heart. It's strictly regulated of course, but I do know of an apothecary not far from here who's willing to overlook such petty legal matters. Pity nothing sticks." A convenient stumble had Quemar murmuring the address to Arno.

"Merci."

The clerk was still outside, huffing against the chill. "Monsieur Quemar, you won't be able to take the stairs to your apartment on a night like this, especially after having been here all day. Let me walk you home."

"Ah, I'm not going home, Thomas, I'm going to a café I've heard of. Café Théâtre. I hear they have food we can't find anywhere else in Paris."

Right, Quemar was going to the Council, even though he could barely walk. Quemar turned and squinted at Arno. "Go on, young man."

Arno bowed his head and left.

The address Quemar had given him was two streets down. Arno kept his hood up against the chill, and many had scarfs. The wind of two days ago (had it really been two days? It felt like he'd already lived a lifetime!) was nothing more than a chilly breeze. He stood across from the apothecary, studying. He quietly asked his eagle if anything was amiss and his eyes immediately went to a spark of color about the druggist behind the counter, moving nervously about as he set about closing shop for the evening. Then, with a popping noise, he turned to see Élise coming down the street, looking around. Arno went to her, startling her.

"Finding a hood in a crowd not as easy as you thought?" he asked wryly.

She scowled at him. "Thought you might need some help," she said archly.

He chuckled. "I think I can handle a lone druggist," he said dryly.

"Hmm, we'll see," she replied with a raised brow.

"Bon soir," Arno greeted once he opened the door, the bell overhead drawing the druggist's eyes to them. "I wonder if you might answer—"

"Merde!" the druggist gasped, backing up. "Not again!"

Then he fled to his back room, slamming the door.

Arno turned to Élise who had raised her eyebrow again. "Well played."

Arno let out a heavy sigh and leapt over the counter.

"Wait!" he shouted. "Damn you, come back here!" He kicked down the back-room's door and found a hatchway to the sewers. No doubt for the druggist's more illicit deals. He could hear the echo of footfalls and took off after them. Behind him he heard Élise follow.

"Slow down! Wait!"

"Let me be!" the druggist screamed, terror quavering his voice.

"I just have a few questions!"
"No!"

The druggist clearly knew this part of the sewers very well, navigating with very little light with ease, but Arno called on his eagle, and little sparks of color guided him easily. At the stairs leading up to the street, the druggist almost disappeared into the crowd. But Arno didn't have any trouble following the crackle of fireworks and the people the druggist had knocked over. He heard Élise behind him again.

"Arno! Hang on!"

But Arno was focused. This man clearly knew something and it was time Arno got some answers. He needed to undo another mistake, do something for redemption, and this would likely help.

The druggist ducked into a park and Arno knew he had him. He leapt over a hedge, cut across the lawn, and tackled the man to the ground.

The man screamed, drawing eyes, but Arno just slammed him up against a tree. "Now," he growled, "about selling regulated drugs!"

"Please!" the man sobbed. "I never told anyone! I did just as you said!"

"What are you talking about?"

"You..." the man gasped, "you are with the other one, aren't you? The hooded man."

Arno's frown deepened. He'd been right. It was an Assassin that had killed Mirabeau.

Nom de dieu, who and why?

"Tell me about this 'other one.' Who is he?"

"I don't know! I never saw his face!" the man was hysterical, blubbing and sobbing. "He threatened to kill me if I didn't give him the poison – I didn't ask questions!"

By that point people around them were talking and Arno was fairly certain that the gens d'armes would be called. He needed to make this fast.

"I keep only a small quantity in stock!" the man kept explaining. "He took that straight away, but he told me where to drop off the second dose!"

Arno narrowed his eyes and leaned in. "Second dose?"

The man handed over a piece of paper and Arno took it.

Right, time to stake out a drop off. He threw the man to the ground, noting that Élise was coming up fast.

"Go on then," Arno stepped back, the picture of gentility and dark sarcasm. "Think of this as a wonderful story to frighten your grandchildren with." The man ran right into the waiting arms of the gens d'armes.

Arno had already faded into the crowds. Élise had more difficulty following him, but they left the park and leaned against a wall, watching the passersby.

"Well?" Élise asked.
"You were right," Arno replied. "He gave our mysterious killer the poison. How did you get his name, anyway?"

"The Templar apothecaries," she said shortly.

"He said the killer wore a hood like mine."

"Well," she said softly. "There are shades of grey in every good story."

But Arno was livid. The Templar civil war was leading to bodies in the Seine, and if something similar happened within the cult...

"If we've been betrayed from within..."

There was enough bloodshed in just the past few days. Wasn't that enough?

Élise offered no sympathy. "That would explain why the killer tried to frame me."

That's what Arno was worried about.

Two hundred Assassins in Paris. How was he going to narrow that down? Or recognize who it might be? The drop off point might be standard for Assassins. How was he going to know? He'd have to trust his eagle. Arno passed Élise the note. "Here," he offered. "This is where the apothecary delivered his wares."

She offered a winsome smile. "What are we waiting for?"

Back to Île de la Cité they went. Arno had traveled the narrow streets of these isle so often he didn't even pay attention to the roads, but now as he passed the quais and moved deeper into the island he started to realize where he was going. Surely it wasn't... but there it was. Sainte-Chapelle, where he had come, half starved, looking for the rose symbol and struggling to understand what he was walking into. This was where his second chance at life had started, without the Brotherhood he had nothing, and the memories flooded his mind as they entered the courtyard. His steps slowed to a stop, and he looked up at the stained glass rose window, the explosions of color inside... The skies were grey now, dark and threatening rain.

"Charming place," Élise said at his side, snapping him out of his reverie. "Appropriate to deliver poison to a church, don't you think? Given everyone's opinion of them these days. Poetic."

"Non," Arno corrected, looking up to one of the towers. Someone was up there on honor watch, people with eagles had shifts up there, looking for others with the entrance disk, like he had, waiting for the recruits to arrive and become novices, become Assassins. Someone had been up there when Arno had arrived, and someone was up there now, and he stared at that tower, glared at it and the murderer it held. The poison had been delivered at shift change, the killer had it on his or her person now, ready for another murder. "This is something different."

"Then let's go," Élise said, putting a hand on her sword.

"No," Arno said quickly. "Wait here."

Her instant reaction incredulity. "Don't be ridiculous, I'm not letting you go in there alone."

Arno touched her arm, stepped in front of her and held her gaze. "Élise," he said softly. "I have to do this myself. Whoever is up there is framing you for murder, if he or she sees you any chance of
this ending peacefully will go up in smoke. There's been enough death in the last few days..." He ran out of words, unable to admit that he had been the one who killed Lafrenière, her closest ally, because of yet another mistake. He had to play this carefully, he had to be thoughtful, had to make sure that the killer, whoever it was, could be talked down from their rage over Élise and the Templars and turn them over to the Council for trial. He had to try. He had to do his best to undo this latest mistake... "I have to do this myself."

Élise was glaring at him, and he put as much as he could on his face, to show his concern and his love and his desperate need to fix this disaster. She always understood him, always knew his moods. "Please," he said, softly.

A hundred thoughts spread across Élise's face, but she finally closed her eyes and sighed all the way down. "I understand," she said.

Arno touched her shoulder as he didn't that morning, glad that she could see his needs. He turned to face the killer.

"You'd better come back to me."

The sentence surprised him, he turned and she gave him a level gaze, unwilling to repeat herself. They had a lot of ground to cover, a lot had happened to them in the last two years but... the spark was still there, and Arno would do whatever it took to be close to her again. He smiled, happy to have her back, and entered the church.

The lower chapel hardly had any parishioners left with all the hatred blowing at the church, and rumors were flying about that the structure would be used for other things. Arno ghosted around the edges before he found the staircase to the second level, the King's chapel and reliquary where the stained glass had so affected him before. The colors were mute now with the iron grey clouds, the windstorm a few days ago having swept in a thunderstorm apparently. He saw a flash of light, heard an ominous rumble outside. Just what he needed.

Two apprentices were coming up, chatting about something, and Arno stopped them briefly to ask who was on watch.

"Sorry, monsieur, we don't know."

Arno pursed his lips. "Could you do me a favor, then? Go below and ask for Maître Quemar. Tell him I've completed my investigation and will be waiting for him up there."

"He can't make that climb, though."

Arno nodded. "I know. Tell him anyway. If he's not there, then any maître. It's important."

He took a breath when they left, hoping that would be enough. He made his way up to the tower, circling the narrow steps and keeping a hand on his sword. Who was he going to find up there? Who was the killer? Who could ever think killing Mirabeau could gain anything other than the ugliest of punishments? Who could hate the Templars – no, who could hate Élise so much as to frame her for murder? Nobody knew her. Who could—

"Took you long enough, merdeux."

Arno froze at the crest of the stairs, his entire body rigid. There was the oily hair, the scraggly beard, the weathered scar on the cheek. The killer turned, leaning against the far wall, and looked down at his student.
Arno couldn't believe it.

"Bellec?"

...Bellec? Who saw something in him at the Bastille? Bellec, who broke him out of prison, who gave him his second life? Bellec, who brought him here, to Sainte-Chapelle; who trained him, who fought to get him to think? Bellec, who said he was ready, who set him on the path of M. de la Serre's killers? Bellec?

Bellec?

He crossed his arms, perfectly nonchalant. "Should have known you'd be the first, merdeux, Mirabeau's pet and all that. Of all of us you'd be the most desperate to find his killer so you'd get a pat on the fucking head. The only question is what happens now."

Arno was beside himself. "You poisoned Mirabeau!" he exclaimed. What did he think was going to happen?

"He poisoned us," Bellec corrected, his voice a low hiss. "For two years he held us back from our sworn duty of killing Templars for that damnée Truce and as soon as the opportunity to kill one is put right in front of him he talked to the putain de chatte, was actually thinking about helping her! Peace with the Templars is a fairy tale!"

Arno couldn't believe what he was hearing. "And, what, you're the only one who can 'save' the Brotherhood?" he demanded, emotion rising in him. "Kill the man in charge and things will magically go back to the way they were?"

Bellec snarled, pushing off the wall and taking an aggressive step forward. "Do you think it's the first time this has happened?" he demanded. "The first time that the Assassins have been forced to purge their leadership? The American Colonies didn't get shit done until Maître Davenport died and Maître Connor took his place. Aveline de Granpré got nowhere until she killed her Mentor. Merde, the great Altaïr himself had to kill Rasshid addin Sinan to make the Brotherhood what it was! Purging corrupt leadership is in our blood! Ezio Auditore killed a pope, and city leaders left and right in Italy, and killed all over Europe to purge leadership of their grand ideas. The Assassins have built themselves up from scratch, again and again and again, building ourselves back up to power. It's all happened before, merdeux, and we've risen anew, stronger every time!"

Arno didn't know half these names, there was too much information and he didn't know how much of it was true or how much of it was fantasy, but he understood one thing: "But there's nothing to 'save' here!" he countered. "The Assassins are not lost in ashes or reduced to rubble. Mirabeau was doing perfectly fine until—"

"We've lost our purpose, merdeux! Mirabeau has mired ourselves in politics and revolutions – he's put himself on the Assembly and thought he could lead us all like the director of a play! He thought he could fix everything that was wrong with everything, absolutely blind to what Assassins are really meant to do. We're not a nation, merdeux, we're an army. And in an army, 'making peace with the enemy' has a name: it's called 'treason!'

"And you think you're the only one who can give direction?" Arno demanded.

"Non," Bellec said, his voice softer as he took another step forward. "I'm not the only one that can save the Brotherhood. I've been watching you, Arno, since you begged me to kill Sivert. Mirabeau tried to cull it from you, but the bloodlust is there. It's in you to kill Templars, just like it's supposed to be. You're Charles Dorian's son, and I've taught you everything you know in his memory."
lifted a hand. "We can fix it. Together."

We can fix it.

Bellec had no idea how deeply those words cut, how hard Arno tried to fix... everything, anything. Fixing was Arno's raison d'être, the only way he could live with himself after all the mistakes he had made. But this... this... Mirabeau wasn't a mistake, Mirabeau was the only person who looked after Arno – not even Bellec could claim that. Mirabeau helped him when the challenges came, checked in on him, asked after his health, gave him space to mourn M. de la Serre, graced the Café Théâtre with his presence and gave him gentle advice. Mirabeau understood Arno's love for the de la Serre family, allowed and even encouraged it. Killing Mirabeau was the mistake, and that Bellec thought Arno...!

"Bellec," Arno said. "You know I can't do that."

The man's face froze, the soft plea to join him slowly disappearing. Arno watched Bellec's face close off, become more guarded, his back straightening and his hand lowering. "That's a pity," he said simply.

The thrust came from nowhere, the confined space of the tower claustrophobic and giving Arno no room to evade. Bellec lead with his left hand, the hidden blade, and Arno grabbed it by bald luck and diverted the energy away, twisting it up as Bellec put more force in his thrust, trying to go for the throat instead of the ribcage. Arno twisted, or tried to, but the stairs were behind them and they fell back, down the spiral staircase and down the tower. Direction and orientation disappeared in the spinning, it was everything Arno could do to keep himself separate from Bellec before they finally tumbled down to one of the floors of the chapel. There was another rumble of thunder above them, louder this time, and Arno struggled to his feet, fighting the dizziness of the fall. Bellec was in similar straights, they shuffled to their feet and caught their breath.

"Bellec, please," Arno begged. "Come back to the Council with me, we can resolve this like reasonable men."

But Bellec was completely shut down. "Reasonable men don't treat with Templars, boy," he said simply. He thrust again, but this time Arno had room to maneuver and jumped to the side, pulling out his sword to have superior range. Bellec did the same, the pair settled into their stances. Bellec was aggressive, of course, and Arno settled in for defense. He blocked and parried, struggling to understand how it had all come to this – unable to comprehend how the man who had offered him a second life was so quick to take it back. Bellec pushed and pushed and Arno gave all the ground he could, unwilling to kill the man who had saved him from starvation with a simple disk.

"Please!" he said. "It doesn't have to be this way!"

"Yes, it does," Bellec hissed, still advancing, "Mirabeau's poisoned you just like he poisoned everyone else!"

Arno growled, tired of hearing the man ridicule the only person in the entire Brotherhood who believed in him. He moved to the offensive, stepping under a swing and doing something Grizier had shown him, a parry followed by a punch with his fist and a kick to the knee. Bellec stumbled and Arno held his sword to Bellec's neck, winning the bout. Bellec refused the defeat, however, knocked the sword away and growled, surging up and shouldering Arno in the ribs, knocking the wind out of him and making him stagger back and fall over. "You're weak!" he shouted. "Connard! I taught you better than that - you disappoint me, merdeux."

"I don't want to kill you, Bellec!" Arno shouted, struggling to get back on his feet and air in his
lungs.

"Get up, petit merdeux. I'll show you what conviction looks like."

Arno had to block the blow from the ground, scrambling for purchase before he finally was able to
stand. "Stubborn little baise, aren't you?" Bellec growled. Arno didn't answer, desperate to stay
alive, feet shifting back and forth, gaining and giving ground as he tried to stop this insanity. He
kept his hand behind his back, leaning on his back leg, as Bellec made another aggressive thrust.
He parried, grabbed the wrist with his free hand and yanked, using Bellec's momentum and this
time used the pommel of his sword to punch his teacher. His cheek split open, blood splattering on
the floor and Arno yet again held his sword to Bellec's neck.

"Yield!" he pleaded.

Bellec spat on the floor. "Never should have plucked you out of the Bastille! You father'd be
ashamed of you!"

Arno flinched at such a low blow, and Bellec used it to grab Arno's wrist and twist, Arno fighting
to stop the break and the two started to struggle for footing, one yanking and the other pushing,
swords in both of their fists and Arno at least keenly aware that one was dangerously close to his
neck. They circled around each other, struggling, struggling, evenly matched. It was a stalemate
until Bellec, of course, did something unexpected. His entire body went loose so suddenly Arno
didn't have time to really understand what happened, the lack of resistance making him pitch
forward – Bellec fell to his back and rolled, momentum making Arno nearly flip over him.
Something hit the top of his head – a boot maybe – and the flush of pain blinded him as he
instinctively tried to cover his injury.

Exactly as Bellec wanted, as he crawled on top of Arno and pulled an arm free, taking his hidden
blade and plunging it deep into the bicep, fire exploding through Arno's frame as he screamed. His
nerves were afire with the blade in his arm, and the only thing that stopped him from screaming
was an unhindered punch to the face.

"I had hopes for you!" Bellec shouted, spittle flying out of his mouth. "I thought you could think
for yourself!"

Arno's entire body twitched with the pain of the hidden blade, he didn't know what more he could
do or say to stop this from happening. Fed up, he said: "I can think, Bellec! I just don't think like
you!"

Bellec's response was to take the hidden blade and twist, and everything was white for several
seconds as Arno was certain his arm had been wrenched of him.

"Open your eyes, boy! I've seen Templars put entire villages to the sword, just for the chance of
killing one Assassin! Tell me, in all your vast experience – what have you seen?"

"Arno!"

Eyes snapped to the fiery redhead, having ignored Arno's instructions and marching into the king's
chapel, pistol in hand and advancing. Élise... Arno might have cried in relief if Bellec weren't still
above him, and from his vantage he saw the master assassin reach behind.

"Grenade!"

The stun bomb went off and the light dazzled Arno's eyes as the blade was yanked out of his arm.
He grunted and finally curled around himself, fighting to get to his knees. Hot blood dribbled down
his arm to his elbow, and the sensation was the only thing reminding him he needed to keep fighting. *Merde,* how was he supposed to fight someone he had never bested?

"Arno!" Élise darted towards him, hand touching his shoulder. "Where did he go?"

"I'm fine," he managed to groan. "Find a maître, where are the maîtres?"

"I should have left you to rot in the Bastille!" Bellec shouted, voice echoing over the grand chambers. Above, he was above. Arno hunched, shoving Élise away to find someone, eyes up and looking everywhere. The grey sky outside cast everything in dull shadows, it was hard to see. "Tell me, did you ever really believe in the Creed, or were you a Templar-loving traitor from the start? Did you like watching us get slaughtered? Did de la Serre teach you how to torture us? Were you a plant from the start?"

"*I was an orphan!*" Arno shouted, voice cracking with pain. "My father was dead at my feet because I was ten minutes late and the man you accuse of torture – the Grandmaître of the Templar Order - took in a frightened orphan and raised him as his own son! You didn't do that! You didn't encourage me to write letters to my father to process my grief! You didn't give me time on your lap to cry! You didn't even look for me!"

"... so you've chosen the Templars..."

"I haven't chosen anything!" Arno shouted, still looking around, trying to find the voice, praying he could stay alive just a little longer. "Enough people have died in the last three days, I don't want another! It doesn't have to be this way, Bellec!"

"You're the one who's making it so! If you'd just see sense, we could take the Brotherhood to a height we've not seen in two-hundred years!"

"Oh, yes!" Arno replied with sarcasm, "Killing everyone who disagrees with you is a brilliant way to start your rise from the ashes! Especially when *there are no ashes!"

*Merde,* he couldn't see, he needed to – he closed his eyes and looked inward, arm cradled to his side, begging his eagle for help. Fireworks, where were the fireworks...

Only instead he heard an eagle shriek, pained and high above him, and his eyes moved with his body in a way he didn't understand, looking up and seeing more than just black shadows, seeing bright colors of stained glass and an angry, angry red that should have been blue but it wasn't and it was coming and he had to be ready there was a leap and an eagle and Élise shouting, "Look out!" and he reached his good arm up, sword in hand to deflect the blow. The eagle dimmed, pops of color and sound giving Arno just enough information to move... right... now and he was able to jump away from Bellec's dive, the master assassin having nothing to cushion his fall. Arno heard a leg break, felt echoes of pain that weren't his.

Bellec groaned, still conscious somehow, and managed to sit up. "Well," he said, spitting out a dollop of blood. "Now we see the heart of it." He lurched to his feet, one leg unable to take his weight, but he stood to his full height regardless. He leveled a dark glare to Arno, face full of hate. "It's not Mirabeau that's poisoned your mind. It's her. She's the last piece in this folie diabolique."

"Bellec..." Arno said, but a pistol appeared and pointed at him. Arno was too far away to avoid the shot, he was forced to stay still, trumped by the weapon.

"You never even had a chance," Bellec said. "You'll thank me for this. One day."

The pistol turned to Élise.
Safe and sound and only slightly delayed.

Arno lifted his bad arm, blood spurting out of his bicep as he snapped open his phantom blade and fired, the dart plunging into Bellec's wrist and forcing him to drop the gun. Arno advanced, but the fight was already over, one punch and Bellec's broken leg gave way, sending him spilling to the ground.

He struggled to a sitting position, and for the third time Arno held his sword to the killer's neck.

His teacher looked up to him, bloody and at last defeated. "Do it," he ordered. "If you've got an ounce of conviction and you're not just a love-addled milksop, you'll kill me now. To save the Brotherhood, I'd see Paris burn."

"Please, Bellec," Arno said, eyes moist.

"Come on, merdeux, at least have the balls to finish it."

Arno pursed his lips, fighting with himself, knowing what he had to do but unwilling to do it. How could he kill Bellec? After the Bastille, there was nothing: Élise had rejected him, he had nowhere else to go, he had nothing left to do but shrivel and die. Bellec had given him the entry disk, had brought him to the cult and brought him to Mirabeau, who showed him it was a Brotherhood. How could he kill the man who had done him such a kindness? Even with everything else, the trouble Bellec had put him through, he had done this one thing, and Arno had to kill him now?

Except... he did. Because Bellec had killed Mirabeau, had spat on the very thing he had brought to Arno, and he would pursue his ideal no matter the cost. And now the cost was his life.

Arno took a deep breath and extended his hidden blade.

Bellec... Pierre... smiled.

"Repose en paix," Arno offered, stepping in, lifting his bleeding arm.

And then the gun went off.

Bellec fell, blood splattering on the floor, and Arno staggered back, startled. He looked where the shot had come from, saw Élise standing there, smoke wafting out of her pistol, eyes cold. "You took too long," she said.

Only then did he realize there were others in the chapel, a dozen different assassins staring, Maîtres Quemar and Trenet walking forward, Trenet kneeling down to close Bellec's eyes. "Repose en paix, mon pauvre ami," she said, voice gentle for the first time. Quemar put a hand on Arno's shoulder, and gently guided him away from the body.

"So, you're really going through with this?" Pierre asked, resigned.

"Your protégé vouches for her," Mirabeau said. "Don't you trust him?"

"With my life. It's the girl I don't trust."

"That's because you don't know her. None of us do, really, and this is the perfect time to do so. Imagine: gifting her with her father's killers – the number of favors we could warrant from such an act. The amount of work we could get done."

But she's a Templar didn't even enter into the equation.
"Nothing I can say to convince you?"

"I'm afraid not."

Then there was only one thing left to do.

"Here. Tchin."

"Tchin."

"... Repose en paix."

Chapter End Notes

Heavy ending is HEAVY.

A few small things to point out: Even this deep into the fic the Assassins are a "they" to Arno. He doesn't identify as one yet. Remember that for later. Arno yet again begs for Élise to "Wait for me!". Oh, Arno, has she ever waited for you once in your life? The scene at Germain's estate is a little gamey, but narratively it's a great place for Arno to internalize his mistakes a little more - like Mirabeau said, he learns these things the hard way, and seeing the consequences of his actions hurts more than almost anything.

The result is that Arno is learning, but Élise remains a bad influence on him. He makes the right decision to go to the council but is easily talked out of it because of her power over him, and he wants to help her in any way he can - whether he should or not.

This is also Arno's first murder investigation. More on that later, really, but we yet again see that Arno does have a brain in his head, he just lacks the training and most importantly the experience to use it properly. He is the C student in class, who can regurgitate all the information correctly but can't make the connections.

Which leads us to Bellec. How many of you noticed that Bellec never, not once, called Arno by name? He has always been "Merdeux", and though we did translate it once, Bellec is constantly calling Arno "Shit." And now, when he finally does use his name, it's because he thinks Arno can feed into his delusion about "fixing" the Brotherhood. The whole fight is raw, it's messy and lopsided, more emotional than physical - it's less about the physical damage but the psychological. Some very painful truths are pulled out of Arno, like, to the point that we sort of love rereading this moment. It's wish-fulfillment for us; because we never had the chance to confess truths to our abuser.

From the giant folder of scans a reviewer gave us for research is this quote: "Bellec seems an unusually harsh taskmaster- I have mixed feelings about the man. Arno, with that stubbornness of his, is determined to take everything Bellec dishes out, and then some, to prove himself. What he doesn't see, is that Bellec is verbally abusing Arno and taking out his own feelings on him." ... That sounds about right.

Note that Arno started the fic being unable to best Bellec - even now things that he can't - but Grizier's training has helped him to the point where he beat Bellec three times in that fight. Arno has at last grown out of Bellec's abuse, physically if not yet
mentally.

Next chapter: this little thing called fall out...
April 3, 1791

Sophie pushed the heels of her hands into her eyes, trying to ease the burn. Hervé was on his third glass of wine, and Guillaume simply sat, arms crossed, staring off into space, military jacket slung on the arm of his chair.

"This is a disaster."

"One of our own..."

Sophie pulled her hands away, rubbing at her damp cheeks. "The de la Serre girl?"

"Disappeared into the night. Young Cosette watched her return to her lodgings and pack her things. With all her allies dead and we unable to help her, she will go looking for trouble elsewhere."

Hervé sighed. "It isn't saying much when that's the best thing that's happened."

"We have to make some decisions," Sophie said. "Quickly."

"The first is obvious," Guillaume said. "You are the new mentor, Mentor."

"Agreed."

Sophie nodded, mind filled with memories of England: watching Honoré interact with that American, Jefferson, in debate, writing lewd poetry as some kind of wretched flirtation, seeing his eyes open when he first understood the Creed. He did not have an eagle, but there was a sight in him, and Sophie saw hints and flashes of the kind of world he worked towards. And now it was gone, never to be realized. Oh, Honoré...

"What, then, do we do with young Arno?" she asked, leaning back and looking to her friends.

"He let a Templar kill Bellec," Hervé said, mulling his wine. "And even if she didn't pull the trigger, he was about to do the deed himself."

"Pierre forced his hand," Guillaume said. "I can see now why Honoré though them a bad match. The things he said..."

"Which one?" Sophie asked. "Pierre's declaration to purge all of us to lift the Brotherhood from the ashes? Or Arno declaring de la Serre as a father?"

"His loyalties are split," Hervé said slowly, eyes not looking at anything. "He can't see the Templars as he should, and Pierre never taught him the Creed to keep him on the right path."

"And yet he bested Pierre thrice in combat, tried to spare his life, begged him to come back from the brink." Guillaume leaned back. "He also avenged Brasseur."

"And came back blind drunk from that."

"In the end," Sophie said, tired, "He held to the Creed. He did everything in his power not to
compromise the Brotherhood, he tried to keep it in house, and he solved the murder without anyone the wiser. Perhaps we should have put him with the *gens d'armes*, but given the circumstances he did the best he could. Pierre never made it easy for his students."

Everyone hummed in agreement.

Sophie turned the problem over in her mind. The boy was unspeakably arrogant, killing targets on his own and only selectively following the Creed, but if one thing had become patently obvious from last night was that the boy was fundamentally broken. They knew of his regrets from the Interview but now Sophie realized how deep he held his guilt, and guilt blinded someone as much as wine did. He was a romantic – swept up in the emotion of the moment and unable to pull back and see beyond the illusion. That made him dangerous. He had been promoted too soon, Honoré was right to have him retrained, but now that he was already established in Café Théâtre they could hardly pull him out and put him underground for another year. His ego wouldn't be able to take such a blow and he might hurt the Brotherhood further.

"We'll ban him from assassination," she said finally. "He's a fine lockpick, we'll set him with other things, use it to assess his skills. We'll need Charlotte and Augustin to provide a more thorough assessment of his mental state, and we clearly need to dive deeper into his life in Versailles to better understand why he acts as he does."

"But he doesn't know the Creed," Hervé said. "I don't mean to harp on this, but how can we expect him to perform appropriately if he doesn't know the Creed?"

"He will learn it," Sophie said. "Or he'll be attainted. Honoré told me once that he would learn the Creed the hard way, and we've all known someone who did."

"But not like this," Hervé said.

"No, not like this," Guillaume said, "But we can't turn him out over this. These were special circumstances – a Templar girl who by his own account would make her his sister, a teacher who turned into a fanatic, the death of a *mentor* who took special interest in him... there are too many personal pieces to these events. Let us see instead if there is a pattern."

"And let us see if he can grow," Sophie added.

Charlotte ushered little Célestine home, leaving only Yvette left to finish up in the kitchen for them to close for the night. Augustin was with her as she closed the *café* doors, looking out into the darkness.

"He will be alright," Augustin said, placing a warm hand on her shoulder. "The Council will know what to do."

"He's been gone all day," Charlotte said, "That usually bodes ill. Especially after what he said last night."

Summoned for a mission, gone for two days only to be found sleeping in his room and his tub filled with grime and blood. He had told them to expect a redhead, Élise, and to let him talk to her. Charlotte had hardly let something that bland pass by, and had worked him gently over his preferred *café au lait* to get more details: Élise was the girl he had grown up with in the de la Serre house, the next *grandmaître* of the Templars, and he had just saved her from an assassination attempt by a mysterious third figure. Augustin, bless him, reacted like any Assassin would and Charlotte had to reach out and touch his hand to prevent him from speaking as she guided Arno
through more of the story. She had read through his report before submitting it to the Council, absorbing what those forty-eight hours had done to him, and both she and Augustin had watched their conversation discreetly when the woman arrived.

Tall, haughty, presumptuous and contemptuous of the staff. Those were common of Templars, but what really drew Charlotte's eye was the change in the woman's face when Arno arrived. Arno did not speak often of his time in the de la Serre residence but he did say that he saw the maître as a father figure. It was obvious, though, watching those two, that "sibling" was not what best described their relationship. What a complicated mess! Charlotte had watched him at his most charming as he convinced the de la Serre girl to come with him, to the Sanctuary.

"He's a fighter," Augustin said, squeezing her shoulder.

"He is a glass sword," Charlotte corrected. "He will cut so long as he isn't hit too hard. This... if things don't go well he will break."

"... then we will fix him," Augustin said, thumb rubbing a circle at the base of her neck.

Yvette came up to them, making the pair quickly disengage, tightening her shawl to brace against the early spring chill. "I will see you tomorrow," she said, beautiful Haitian accent lilting softly.

They made their goodbyes, but Yvette made it maybe four steps out of the café when an operative came running up to them.

"Madame," he said, out of breath. His eyes glanced at Yvette, his rich green coat speaking of his assignment. Pontmercy. Marcel Pontmercy. "Madame, forgive me, is this the Café Théâtre?"

"It is, monsieur," she said quickly, falling into her part. "What can we do for you?"

"Je suis très désolé, Madame, but one of yours has met an ill fate."

"Monsieur Dorian?" Yvette asked, shrewd. "I knew it! Meeting that girl playing at being the next Théroigne de Méricourt and wearing pants. She's led him to a world of trouble!"

"S'il-vous plaît," Charlotte said. "Where is he?"

"Come with me," Marcel said, perfectly in character. All four darted down the street, Yvette cursing mightily as they crossed the bridge and toward Notre Dame. "He has been injured, and he has been treated, he told me to take him to you but I could hardly carry him that far."

"Carry?" Yvette demanded.

"I will help you," Augustin said grimly, rolling his shoulders.

Arno was curled in the corner of an alley, alone for the world to see, but Charlotte and Augustin both looked up, seeing more Assassins disappear to create the illusion. Damn Yvette for not leaving an hour earlier, they wouldn't need the subterfuge if she had! Charlotte took a breath, kneeling down to Arno. "Monsieur," she said carefully. "Monsieur Dorian."

He was conscious, looking up upon hearing his name, and Charlotte could see the glassy eyes of someone full of wine. "Madame," he said, voice low and slurred. "... I was late..."

"Don't worry," Charlotte said gently. "We don't mind."

"... I'm always late... I can't fix it..."
Marcel and Augustin hoisted him up, making Arno groan as Charlotte realized his arm was bound to his body. Yvette gasped, hands covering her mouth. Charlotte made a decision. "Madame," she said quickly. "Go back to the café and start boiling some water. We'll need... I don't even know what we'll need but he should come home to a warm home."

"Oui, bien sûr," Yvette said, nodding in the dark. "I'll start a fire in his room and see if any of my pumpkin soup is left. Food will help him."

She disappeared into the night, and Charlotte turned hard eyes to Marcel. "What happened?" she demanded.

"... Mirabeau is dead," Arno moaned. "He killed Mirabeau... I was too late... I couldn't fix it..."

Nom de dieu, what?

"It's like he says," Marcel said, he and Augustin shouldering Arno. "Mirabeau was murdered. One of ours. Pierre Bellec."

Augustin quickly made the sign of the cross with his free hand.

"I was making a report to Maître Trenet, some apprentices said we were needed in Sainte-Chapelle, that Arno had finished his investigation and that Maître Quemar would know what that meant. The main stairwell was locked, we couldn't get up and had to go around the long way – you could hear the fighting above, Arno had joined him in combat – he was begging the man to see reason and turn himself in. Bellec had locked everything up, we were trying to pick our way in when a redhead came in and demanded to know why we were there instead of stopping the fight. She showed us how to get in and we saw Bellec try to air assassinate Arno! Diable I couldn't believe it! Bellec tried to kill the girl but Arno stopped him, and then the girl shot him."

"... I took too long... ten minutes late... another mistake..."

Marcel winced at what Arno said, but carried on. "Maître Trenet told me to see that Arno was treated. We gave him wine to dull the pain but he just kept asking for more. Took a hidden blade to his arm, the doctor said he'd be unable to use his arm for over a month."

"Merde," Augustin cursed as they made it to the bridge. "Do we know if the public knows of this?"

"I don't know," Marcel said. "Cosette is keeping an eye on the redhead, the other maîtres are meeting right now to figure out what to do. It didn't make the evening papers, but I don't know about the morning."

"We'll deal with that when it comes to it," Charlotte said. "For now, we have to get him in bed."

"Agreed. The things he said..."

Charlotte could only imagine. The light was on at the café, they could hear Yvette buzzing around the kitchen. Back in character then. "Up here," she said, moving up the staircase and opening Arno's room. She went about lighting candles as Augustin and Marcel laid Arno out on the bed. He tried to sit up, "No," he slurred. "I can't sleep now... I have to fix..."

"Enough of that," Charlotte said gently, putting a palm on his chest and gently pushing him back.

"Élise, please... I know it's my fault... just let me..."
Charlotte held him in place, casting her eyes to Augustin, who understood immediately what she needed. He took Marcel to a different part of the room, the edge of privacy, and Charlotte leaned in. "Arno," she said softly. "Listen to me. You can fix it in the morning. You'll do better with some sleep."

"But it's my fault..." he said weakly, eyes watering. He tried to sit up again, moaning when he pulled at his bad arm and collapsing to bed. Yvette arrived shortly after with the leftover soup. The women helped him sit up, Charlotte propping pillows up behind him as the cook took a spoon of soup and gestured for Arno to take it. He did so quietly, the odd tear spilling down his face.

"Do we know what happened?" Yvette asked.

"Not completely," Charlotte said. "Something about visiting Mirabeau and fighting a man. We'll know more once he's lucid."

"He's dead... like Monsieur de la Serre... like mon père..."

The women shared a look, Charlotte very still as she watched Yvette absorb the words. "He told me once," she said, giving him another spoon of soup, "That I fed him in the slums. I used to live in le Cour des Miracles."

"I'm so sorry," Charlotte said gently.

"Don't be. It wasn't any different there than Haiti, people sitting in misery and unwilling to change. I've seen people like this all over there, lost in the pain and wanting it to stop. I don't remember feeding him, but I remember 'him.' We'll need to lock the wine cellar tomorrow, and we must make sure that woman playing at being a man never sees him again."

Charlotte nodded, letting Yvette make the decisions for now, slowly fading away and joining Marcel and Augustin. Arno eventually fell asleep, and Charlotte dismissed Marcel and Yvette a short time later. She looked at Augustin as she pulled off her hat, and in the dark of the café he held her close.

That morning all the papers could talk about was the death of Mirabeau, passing of natural causes and the entire city mourning the loss. The entire café cried over the loss, knowing the city leader was fond of their establishment and what they represented for the future of France.

"He made me feel fancy," Célestine said through her tears.

"Loved my pâté," Yvette said.

"Our income will plummet with this," Jacques said, rubbing his face. "The nights he decided to drop by brought more business than reading the papers to everyone."

"And poor Monsieur Dorian," Yvette said, "Seeing him right before his passing. When he wakes he will cry anew!"

"I'll talk to him first," Charlotte said.

"Yes, you have a gentle touch," Jacques agreed.

"Did we ever learn what happened?"

"Non," Charlotte said, "Best I find out now."
"And remember, I locked the wine away. Nobody serves him, only the customers."

They stood from the banquette table and Charlotte went upstairs with a cup of café au lait, Arno's favorite, at Jacques insistence. She knocked twice, once gently and once more firmly, before letting herself in. She remembered when Arno had come home drunk once before, two months ago when Urbain had whisked him away to kill le Roi des Thunes. He had hardly spoken then, only muttered that his work wasn't done. She had left him to his privacy as much as she could, but yesterday had broken him she needed to know more.

She held the cup under his nose, seeing him stir with the scent. His face needed a shave, chin a shadow of stubble. His hair had come undone at some point, spilling out every which way. She reached down and slowly started to pinch at his neck, the slow increase of pain forcing him awake. His eyes snapped open and were a bloodshot red. He'd used his eagle, too, apparently, and he groaned pitifully.

"Let me be," he mumbled.

"Non," she said, gently insistent.

Arno wasn't quite petulant, but it took quite a bit of effort to get him sitting up and drinking his café. He squinted at every form of light and rubbed his temples constantly, hands slightly shaky. Charlotte didn't say anything at first, giving him the chance to wake up. He had been here long enough for her to know he wasn't a morning person, but she couldn't wait until the lunch crowd arrived.

"Arno," she said gently.

He finally looked to her, bleary and bloodshot, and the prior day hit him all at once. Charlotte watched his eyes double in size and then wince as he touched his wounded arm, drawing his knees up from under the blankets and pressing his forehead into them.

"Madame..." he moaned.

"I know," she said simply.

He grieved, and Charlotte let him have his cry, getting up and doing light work around his room, moving stacks of papers or properly hanging his clothes from yesterday. She ran a finger over the mantle – dusty, even after months on his knees cleaning the rest of the café. She stuck her head out, saw Augustin watching for her on the landing, gestured that this would take a while. He nodded and went downstairs. God bless him.

When Arno was out of his emotional storm Charlotte had a fresh cup of café au lait, and he drank it numbly.

"How will I be punished?" he asked, voice flat.

Charlotte offered a gentle smile. "You found the killer of the Mentor," she said. "And he was your teacher. I should think that punishment enough."

"Non," Arno said, exhausted and hungover. "More will come."

"How can you be so sure?"

"... because it will..."
Charlotte started to press. "Do you know this from experience?"

Arno looked up at her – for all his sleep from the drink his eyes were still so dark. He hadn't slept well in days, and it was catching up to him. "When we were children," he said, reaching up to rub his temples. "We would have these grand ideas of adventure. But she was always quicker, smarter, better, and I would get us caught. Then the monsieur would yell at us, and then he would punish us, and then Olivier would punish me for not knowing my place. I'm always slow. Always late."

"Ten minutes late?" Charlotte asked, keeping her voice so soft as to sound like a dream for him.

He stared at her, wide eyes, uncertain if she had spoken, and Charlotte let him think what he would, let the sentence from last night that had made Marcel wince hang in the air, drill into his mind and draw out an answer.

"There was a story, when I was underground, that they made us read," he said, speech slow and still a little blurry. "I never finished it, tragedies are too depressing, especially Greek ones. A man was said to kill his father and marry... I don't remember." He winced with his headache, head falling down and hands rubbing his temples, his neck, anything to provide relief.

"... I've killed all three of mine..."

Oh...!

Protocol and etiquette be damned, she pulled Arno into an embrace. "Mon pauvre, gentil enfant," she said. "Non, you haven't."

Arno didn't say anything, but he shook his head in her shoulder, denying the absolution. His body shook with grief, falling apart all over again, lost in his emotions. Augustin came to check on them when the lunch crowd began to arrive, and Charlotte met him at the door, explaining what she'd learned. Augustin winced when he realized why Arno was so upset, and agreed to take over watch while Charlotte entertained downstairs.

For the next three hours it was all customers and café and conversation. Everyone was mourning the loss of Mirabeau, everyone had a toast of some kind, and eventually someone got up on their stage and spoke. "He wanted everything to be fine," he said in a broken voice. "We must show him everything will be fine. Ah, ça ira, ça ira!" The chorus was wet and weak, but it slowly built into an emotional plea: it'll be fine, it'll be fine! Even with the loss of such a hero, it'll be fine! There was intermittent clapping, people moved by the tribute and adding their voices before the whole café was singing. People wandered into the café from the street, listening to the emotion more than the lyrics, and joined in, Jacques rushing to serve them coffee. Someone with a paper came in, quickly reading out that the Assembly had made a proposition: requisition Sainte-Geneviève and transform it into a Panthéon, and dedicate it to the heroes of France and the Revolution, and they had moved that Mirabeau be its first occupant.

The crowd cheered, sobbing in grief turning to joy at such an honor. Charlotte weaved through the crowd, nudging and pushing the conversation before the rush finally ebbed. She walked two patrons out, and when she looked up the stairs she saw Arno sitting atop the stairs. Had he listened to the entire crowd? She darted up the steps and saw tears streaming down his face, staring at nothing.

"Ça ira," he murmured, "ça ira, ça ira..."

Charlotte put a hand to his shoulder, and he dipped his head, sobbing again.
Yvette came up with a tray, *flamiche, soupe à l'oignon*, and *coq au vin*, all Arno's favorites, with of course a cup of *café au lait*.

"Here, *monsieur,*" she said gently. "Pain can't be starved out or drunk out, it must be eaten out."

Arno looked up, blinking slowly. Still in shock, Charlotte guessed. He looked at the tray, a little confused, but managed a soft, "*Merci.*"

"Let's see you at a table," Yvette said.

Arno did eat, but slowly. Yvette and Charlotte watched for a while before giving him some space.

"Did you learn what happened?" the Haitian cook asked.

"Not completely," Charlotte said. "He was one of the last people to see Mirabeau, I think he saw him take ill before he left."

"Oh, *mon dieu,*" Yvette said, eyes doubling in size and a hand going up to her mouth.

"*Monsieur* Dorian said he saw Mirabeau as a father figure. He blames himself for not seeing the signs sooner. The injury... I think he fell into a riot on the way back, but I can't be sure."

Yvette clucked her tongue. "And he lost his father and the man he mentioned last night. *Mon dieu,* a boy like him can only take so many blows like that in rapid succession. And the *mademoiselle* is of course nowhere to be seen?"

"I don't know where she is, no," Charlotte said, keeping her answers simple and honest. Yvette supplied the rest.

"I didn't like her from the first," she said, full lips pursed into a frown. "Dressed in man's pants, hair loose and acting like she was the next Théroigne de Méricourt and ordering around poor little Célestine like that. It's not my business, I know, but a woman like that is nothing but trouble, and we all saw his face when he heard she was here. Oh, of all the women to pick! If he never saw her again it would be too soon. We'll have to keep an eye out for him. You can't find stewards like him in this day and age, I don't want to lose him to the bottle."

"Agreed," Charlotte said, letting Yvette control the conversation. "Work will help, but he can't use his arm."

"Doesn't matter," Yvette said, shaking her head and leaning against the wall. "He can give directions well enough, and he can do inventory and place orders and his penmanship is beyond reproach. We're not letting him go out to find better deals for a month! He has the worst luck, always finding a riot or a robbery and coming back all scratched up, but this takes the cake! *Nom de dieu,* that boy needs a guardian angel for his luck."

"Then we'll have to play the part to the fullest of our ability," Charlotte agreed. "We've some time before you have to start preparing for the dinner crowd, correct?"

"*Oui,* all the soups are on the fire, they won't need tending for another few hours. Oh, and I have *boeuf bourguignon* on the fire, too. That's another of the *monsieur's* favorites, it'll be ready the day after tomorrow."

"*Merci,*" Charlotte said. "You're so thoughtful."

"He plucked me from the slums, *madame.* I'd give my life for him."
"Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that."

In ten minutes, the entire staff was assembled: Augustin, Yvette, little Célestine and Jacques. Charlotte took the lead. "Monsieur Dorian was one of the last people to see le comte de Mirabeau before his passing yesterday," she said simply, not beating about the bush. "He left knowing the man ill and feeling guilty for not saying something. This after coming across another riot on the way home that hurt his arm. He can't use it for a month, the doctor says. He saw le comte as a father, and the loss is hitting him harder than most, seeing as he's already lost a father before. We must all be very sensitive to him; his moods will change rapidly as his heart tries to process the loss. We can't serve him any wine, at this stage he might lose himself in the bottle, and we have to keep him as busy as possible. Ask him questions, make him explain things. Engage with him intellectually, if you can."

"Oui, madame."

"Oui, madame."

"We can't read papers for a while," she added. "The politics will hurt. I've finally gotten a theater troupe of a little skill. We'll let them perform for us tonight, with the monsieur. Don't expect much of him, but maybe we'll be lucky."

They weren't, of course, not this soon. Arno didn't say two words, just sat and stared off into space before retiring early. Charlotte kept half an eye on him before talking with the troupe and suggesting which acts to perform and arranging a start date.

And, twenty-four hours after it had started, Augustin and Charlotte again dismissed Yvette, their Haitian cook giving some very firm directions on what to do with Arno before leaving.

They checked on him again, but he was tucked deep into the covers, lost to the world. Charlotte tucked him in, remembering when her two children were alive.

"We have quite a job ahead of us," she told Augustin as she pulled her hat off.

"More than you know," Augustin said. "I was able to get him to talk some while lunch was going."

"And?"

"He blames himself," Augustin said, pouring two classes of wine and offering one to Charlotte. "The ten minutes, that's an allusion to the death of his father. Monsieur Dorian apparently told him not to go exploring, but he did and he thinks that's why his father was killed: He was ten minutes late. There was a letter for de la Serre he was to deliver, but he became caught up in the Estates-General, and he ended up slipping it under the door to his office. That letter was a warning that someone would kill de la Serre. He thinks he failed to save him. And now with Mirabeau..."

"He thinks he's killed all three of his fathers," Charlotte said, slipping out of her gown and pulling at her petticoats and stomacher. Augustin shrugged off his waistcoat and cravat. She pulled off her stay and ah, she could breathe freely now. "I remember Mirabeau giving out the report of his interview when he was looking for placement. Redemption, that's what led him here."

I can't fix it... I have to fix it...

"And all of this after realizing he killed one of his lover's allies."

Charlotte looked up. "What?"
"Lafrenière," Augustin said, pulling at his stockings. "His mad two-day excursion. He wasn't the man who ordered the death of de la Serre, he was one of his allies, and a mentor of the girl, Élise de la Serre. The silversmith he was sent to track, he was the man who put out the contract."

"Oh," Charlotte moaned, sipping her wine as she climbed into bed. Augustin joined her.

"Oui. 'Oh.'"

"Looks like we have our work cut out for us, mon amour."

Augustin nodded. "I always said I wanted a child. I just didn't expect one this old."

"I worry we'll even be able to help him," Charlotte said, leaning back into the pillows. "He's been hurt so many times, there's so much ground to cover, and he's already grown. It might be too late to help him."

"It's never too late, madame," Augustin said, strong arm wrapping around her shoulders. Warmth flooded through her, and she felt safe. "We're both testaments to that."

Arno was sitting in the intendent's office, staring at nothing.

He tended to do that since... everything.

Sit down and stare off into space or the fire.

He still did his job. He kept the accounts up to date, went over what was needed, sent Célestine to the market for whatever was needed, assigned duties like laundry or scullery as needed, all still accomplished.

But he just... found himself staring out and thinking of... nothing.

Letting out a gusty sigh, he stood. Nothing was getting accomplished at the moment, so he walked out the door and down the hall to the kitchen.

"Ah, Monsieur Dorian," Yvette greeted warmly. "Always good to see you up and about. I have some pâté; would you like some?"

Arno shook his head, not feeling very hungry. "Desolé, no. I'm not very hungry. Just thirsty." He glanced about the kitchen. "Where are the wines? I'll take sherry if that's all that's out at the moment," though he winced at the thought, "white or red, just something to sip on."

Yvette was looking at him with shrewd eyes and he wondered why. He wasn't hiding anything. ...

... Other than being an Assassin and the fact that he had so much blood on his hands.

"I know how this works, Monsieur," she replied. "Grief needs to be fed. You're pale and thin. Here, let me fix you a plate."

Arno thought his stomach started cramping. "No, thank you," he replied. "Food doesn't appeal to me. Just something to drink."

"Well, I still have some milk then, fresh from the udder this morning. Jacques would love to make you a café au lait, if you'd prefer."

Arno let out a miniscule, soft sigh. This had been happening for two days. He wasn't an idiot.
Everyone in the café was trying to prevent him from having alcohol. Jacques kept making him the perfect cup of coffee, Yvette was offering milk or sending him to Jacques, Celéstine would say she’d get something for him and then come back without alcohol and Madame Gouze and Grizier were the worst. They simply asked what food he wanted to go with the drink, and since he wasn’t hungry, he said nothing. So, he didn't get anything.

He wasn't a drunk.

His brief week in the slums had him see just what drunks were, and Arno wasn't that. But he just needed... something. This was part of the punishment. That was his job. Sit there and take it.

But no alcohol?

Arno closed his eyes as he felt tears well up yet again and he let out another sigh, this one more gusty and wet.

Control. Control. Not now. He'd cried enough.

And suddenly his hand was being filled with a warm bowl and he looked down to see steaming soup.

"It will quench your thirst," Yvette said warmly, patting his empty, currently useless hand. "You look pale. This will do you well."

Arno merely nodded and turned to go back to the intendent's office. Or maybe his room. But soon Yvette was bustling him into the café proper where Madame Gouze settled him into a booth and Jacques was soon bringing some café au lait. With another sigh, Arno set about eating, even though he really wasn't hungry.

They were between crowds and the small theater group, if one could call three people a full theater group, were at another booth eating their lunch while they could before the dinner rush started.

Not that it was much of a dinner 'rush'. He simply ate mechanically. Madame Gouze sat with him. She didn't say anything, she never did, but she was simply... a presence. Soup and coffee finished, he sighed and leaned back, suddenly very tired. He wanted to go to bed.

But Madame slid a paper over to him, and went back to reading the papers.

Right.

He took the paper with his right hand and turned more to the café to read it in the light.

Then he blinked.

Blinked again.

Tiredness was the last thing on his mind.

"Tonight?" he hissed.

"Oui, Monsieur Dorian," she replied lightly.

"Diable," he muttered. He quickly stood up and rushed upstairs, not seeing Madame Gouze's tiny smile.

"Diable!" he groused more emphatically. One of Mirabeau's secretaries was coming to the Café
that night for a meeting of some kind. He didn't know what for. He pulled open an armoire and
looked about. Celéstine seemed to have come in for laundry at some point, as many of his clothes
looked freshly cleaned, always a good thing since the cold of winter usually prevented getting any
sort of laundry done, but what to wear…? He'd been in the same clothes for days, something fresh
would be best. He had bathed after... everything, so he would have to run a comb through his hair,
something... did he have a good waistcoat somewhere, further back?

Without thinking, he reached back to pull out some stockings and immediately hissed in sharply as
his left arm rather firmly reminded him that bad things happened recently and there was no way on
earth he could change into something more presentable in time.

"Do you need some help?"

Arno threw a baleful glare at Grizier, who had appeared in his door.

"No," he growled.

The dark man actually chuckled. "I remember what it was like to have a broken arm. If you want to
change into something more presentable, you're going to need help."

"Fine," Arno groused.

Mirabeau deserved his best after all.

It would fall short. His best hadn't stopped Mirabeau from being murdered. But Arno had to do his
best anyway.

He simply had to.

Grizier insisted on slowness, but he helped Arno change into a fresh change of clothes. Tan
breeches, pale waistcoat, blue coat, red cravat. Hair combed and retied, a fresh shave. Arno felt
much more presentable, but he argued with Grizier about the sling.

"I'm not wearing that sling," he said firmly.

"Arno," Grizier said softly, "you need to let that arm heal. If you don't keep it still, you'll jar the
stitches. It will take even longer to heal."

"I am aware of that," Arno groused. "I'm not saying that I'll never wear a sling again, but I can
afford an hour or so with my arm resting on the desk and not appearing like an invalid."

"You aren't an invalid."

"I won't let anyone think so."

Grizier frowned. "Arno, people understand that injuries happen. It's hardly like Paris doesn't have
hundreds of injured after all these riots. Anyone would understand—"

"I'm facing someone of authority, who worked for Mirabeau," Arno insisted. "One thing Olivier
pounded into me was that you never showed weakness. If I showed any weakness to Olivier, he
made sure I would get the worst work. If I admitted that I didn't care for mucking out the stables,
hed make sure it was the only thing I ever did. And some of the nobles are even worse." Arno had
always known that being a servant and a Third Estate was the bottom of the rung. And he also
knew he had it easy at the de la Serre household. M. de la Serre treated him as a son, for all that he
worked for the home, Élise was just as fond of him, and because he worked for a noble, he always
had food and a decent place to sleep. But Arno was also an errand boy for Olivier. He often went to the shops and vendors in Versailles, and as he chatted with the people he was sent to fetch things from, he understood that he had it easy. A butcher might have a relative in Paris when it was nothing but slums, others spoke of family out in the countryside that were starving. Arno hadn't paid much thought to it at the time because he wasn't aware. He was now. He looked back and remembered those stories. Of a cooper whose cousin was a maid at a noble's estate and the cruelties that she faced if she made the smallest of mistakes.

No, if he was going to meet with a person who had worked for Mirabeau, Arno had to be at his best.

Grizier clearly didn't approve. But he insisted on a sling at least until the representative arrived. Arno grudgingly agreed.

Of course, all this changing of clothes and moving his arm left it in agony. But he ignored it steadfastly and went down to the intendent's office to wait. He pulled out the ledgers, went over the accounts to refresh his knowledge, studied the books. He had no idea what a representative of Mirabeau's estate would want, but it was known that Mirabeau was fond of the Café and he expected that he'd need to provide some sort of information or update.

The dinner crowd was in full swing when Célestine guided a bent old man, receding hair covered by an ill-fitting wig, and greeted him. Arno stood and offered his hand, ignoring the fire in his arm for the motion. "Bon soir," Arno offered a chair, the one least in need of repairs, brought in from the banquet hall for the man to sit down. "What can I do for you?"

"Bon soir," the old man smiled, adjusting his spectacles. "Young man, it's nice to meet the steward of this café. Young Mirabeau always spoke highly of you and your little project here."

Feeling swelled, but Arno kept it down below his throat. "We try," was all he said.

The old man smiled kindly, eyes twinkling even as they squinted through spectacles. "Well, young man, it's very simple. I need to rent a dining hall."

..."Pardonez-moi?"

Another twinkle and a gentle chuckle. "Oh, it's very simple. I need to rent a dining hall. I'll be inviting several of le comte's closest friends so that we may have a dinner in his honor. I can think of no better place, than the small café that le comte spoke so highly of, and of their promising future."

Emotion was up behind Arno's eyes and he needed to stay silent just to swallow it all. "Promising future...

After the third swallow he offered a polite cough, covering his mouth with his right and as he didn't dare move his left. "How could we say no to such a kind offer," he said. He pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and dipped his quill in ink. He had to swallow again. "Shall we go over the details?"

Dining hall.

Right. Dining hall.
With over a hundred of Mirabeau's "closest friends", which included several politicians, fellow nobles, and a wide, wide variety of businessmen and entrepreneurs, their small "dining hall" of one long table that seated, at best ten, wasn't going to cut it. So the old coot had simply rented the café entirely.

"The entire café?!

Arno rubbed his forehead the following morning, as he went over the details with everyone at the usual morning meeting. "Yes, Célestine, the entire café. There's a lot to do between now and next Friday and we don't even have enough time by half."

They went over everything. Grizier (and perhaps a few Assassins apprentices) were going to scrub down and tidy up the training hall that was designed to be a dance hall, Célestine was to scrub every nook and cranny of the entire establishment until it sparkled, and clean and air out all the linens. Jacques was to help as he could, but he was to split his time with Yvette, going to the market for whatever Yvette needed for whatever she could prepare in advance. Madame Gouze would be working closely with the theater troupe and arranging for other entertainment for the evening. A four-piece orchestra for the dance-hall, the entertainers for the main café, a gardener for the roof garden, etc.

Arno was going to have to find other staff. He, Jacques, and Célestine wouldn't be able to serve so many people at once. Yvette was going to need help because all her prep would be the day before at best and then spending the day of running around the kitchen. And above all, there was a "small" advance that Arno intended to use. The largest problem that needed to still be addressed in the Café was the plaster on the walls. That was something that could be done while the Café was still open, and especially for the main entry way and the halls, with their glistening white, a good coat of plaster repair would work well once the candles were glowing during the evening dinner. The woodwork needed to be refinished, but that could hide in the dark better than bad plaster and repairing the wood parquet floors would require the café to close. That would have to be put off.

Of course, the problem with finding a good man for plaster was that the good ones were already booked for various jobs. Arno spent the better part of two days that he didn't have running around Paris to try and find someone to do the repair work. This had to be perfect. A tribute to Mirabeau. There was no way Arno would let anything go wrong in this.

It was, perhaps, the only way to redeem this small part of all the blood on his hands.

On the third day, one of the men he spoke to took pity on him, and suggested getting one apprentice from everyone he had visited. The plasterer himself could loan one of the more experienced members of his team to supervise. Arno gratefully accepted the offer. With said experienced plasterer and one apprentice, Arno brought them both back to the Café to estimate how many people they would need to get the repair work done in the small time frame they had and then took them back around all the tradesmen with the experienced one doing all the talking and Arno being the wallet.

With that arranged, Arno then went to all the various cafés around the island to see if any were willing to offer other staff for a day. Then to find someone to look after horses and carriages. Then for someone to help Yvette in the kitchens. That was harder as several turned up their nose at taking orders from a black woman. Arno kept a pasted-on smile.

When he wasn't running around Paris to get help, he was helping Célestine, Jacques, and Grizier with cleaning out everything they could. Arno had found some old paintings up in the storage attic.
and had Grizier help him get them down and covering barren walls or areas where the plaster damage was too severe to handle in the limited time. He hung lines up in the storage attic for linens, tablecloths, napkins anything Célestine could wash, could hang and dry. He sat down with Madame to interview various musicians and theater people. He ran to the markets to reserve meat and arrange delivery if Jacques was too busy with Célestine or working. And he still kept at his regular job. Reading out the papers as needed, which was less and less as people liked the performers more (Arno was utterly fine with that). Rugs that had been repaired were taken outside on any sunny day they had and beaten to get out the worst of the dirt.

What else, what else, this had to be perfect, what else?

To say the week was busy, would be an understatement. New staff started to come after hours to ask how the event was to be handled and Arno had to explain, and in more cases than he liked, train them. Many came from other cafés that were bawdier, or more flirtatious. It seemed no one had ever served an event where there were nobles, or if nobles came to their establishment, they expected bawdy and flirty service.

"No," Arno said firmly. "Your job is to be invisible, and to anticipate. If someone's drink is getting low, you politely offer to refill. Use your most polite and proper language, every plate must be clean and perfect. This is for Mirabeau. He deserves nothing less than our best."

That sobered several of them, and two said they would best serve Mirabeau by not coming. Arno dismissed them with some pay, as they had been putting in the effort and went back out looking for more.

Two days before the soirée, Arno and madly going over checklists. This was the time to get everything for Yvette and Jacques was no longer helping Célestine at all, but instead running to and from the markets to make sure Yvette and her helper Claudette had everything they needed. Most of the linens had been cleaned and Célestine was furiously scrubbing floors and windows. The plaster job was just finished the previous day and had been drying overnight with less chance of anyone bumping into anything. The dance hall was clear, and Arno was with Grizier, deciding where the small four-piece orchestra they'd hired would go. It was a small space.

"This is going well, Arno," Grizier said softly. "You've thought of every detail, attended to every concern, anticipated all problems."

"I can only hope I have," Arno groused, sitting tiredly on one of the chairs brought down from the attic. "When Monsieur de la Serre held these sorts of get-togethers, Olivier made sure I was out in the stables and was never inside or a part of it. I'm sure I'm forgetting something obvious. When Élise dragged me to her parties, I was the guest. I never knew how these functions are run. I'm guessing."

Grizier huffed a small laugh and put a hand on his shoulder. "You've thought of more than I would have. Or Charlotte for that matter. We wouldn't have thought of training the staff after hours. We wouldn't have thought of handling horses and carriages, we don't get enough customers of that caliber to have even considered it."

Arno waved it off. "I wouldn't have been able to do all this without you, Monsieur Grizier, or Madame Gouze."

Grizier gave a small smile. "Arno, don't you think it's time you called either of us by our given names? You are the steward. No one would look twice if you refer to us by our given names, the same way you do with Jacques, or Yvette, or Célestine."
"You're both older than me and deserve respect. You've worked here longer and have invested more."

Grizier squeezed his shoulder. "Don't try and compare 'deserves'. Those are never comparable. You're our friend, Arno. That's enough."

"Maybe."

Arno would have to think about it later. When he wasn't trying to do everything he could to make this last gesture to Mirabeau be the best he possibly could.

"What about here by the back stairs?"

Grizier... Augustin, smiled. "No, it would block the way to the garden."

The night finally came. Yvette and Claudette had been madwomen in the kitchen, shouting demands to Jacques and Célestine and the other servers all day. Yvette was handling the main courses, but Claudette was both a baker and patissier, and she had been making all sorts of small desserts all day. The day had been cool, but as the April evening continued, it got cold, but not frigid. All the fireplaces were stocked and burning, (Arno realized he'd never had the fireplaces cleaned. Diable.) candles had been lit and everything had a warm glow. Arno was running every which way, and to the staff's firm disapproval, without his sling. This was another day where he couldn't be weak. He went through each room several times, making sure everything was just so, locking the window-doors that led to his room so that no one slipped by, and put up a folding screen to block that there was even a door there. Paintings were straight, the walls glistened, the floors sparkled, the linens were all clean, the roof garden was perfect, and any time he walked by the kitchen it smelled delicious.

Staff had arrived that morning to help with preparations, and Arno was very clear on what was expected, and took a few aside to see how the training had gone. Madame Gouze had the performers with her for most of the day, providing some very firm directions, and doing rehearsals, Augustin was making sure the kitchen had everything they needed and dealt with the people handling the horses and carriages, so that no one would see his darker skin color.

Shortly after mid-afternoon, the bent old man arrived. Everyone was in position, and the evening officially started.

Arno greeted him and an old woman, just as bent, who seemed to be his wife. "Bon soir, Monsieur, Madame," he said with a polite bow. "Welcome to Café Théâtre."

The old woman gave a slight laugh, holding her husband's arm, and with a small gesture from a finger, Arno had one of the staff coming to take coats. The old man gave a warm smile, and reached out to take Arno's hand. Holding back the wince, Arno accepted with both of his.

"Wonderful job, young man," the old man smiled. "I see you used some of that advance."

"This is a tribute to le comte," Arno replied heavily, with a small, almost broken smile. "I could do no less."

There was a gentle smile and Arno lead the pair into the café proper, sitting them down at the best table. A glance had Jacques coming over to see to their needs and Arno continued with small talk, discreetly watching the street. Madame Gouze had a violinist from the orchestra on the stage for now, playing gentle songs as the evening began. Once Arno saw a carriage coming over the bridge and turning, he made his polite getaway to once again be in the grand entrance hall to greet the next
arrivals. He offered polite greetings, demur conversation, and gestures to staff as needed.

Almost two hours later, the café was filled, people were talking and laughing, and food was starting to be served. The main rush of people arriving had slowed, so Arno disappeared to the kitchens. "Mesdames," he greeted. "What do you need?"

"Nothing yet," Yvette said, ladling out a warm stew, then cleaning off the edge of the bowl. "I'm certain something will go wrong eventually, but we've only just started with serving."

"Call for me when you need me."

"Of course, Monsieur."

Up in the dance hall, Madame Gouze was speaking with the tiny orchestra. The violinist had come up and was resting, and all four of them were having a small meal while they could.

"We're all set, here, Arno," she said gently. She turned to the orchestra. "I'll be downstairs with the performers if you have any questions."

"I'll walk you down, Madame."

"You have my thanks," she smiled. They headed down the back stairs. "Don't worry about the entertainment," she said softly. "I'll handle it. The performers will be on stage in about twenty minutes. Everything will be fine. You just focus on being a good host."

"I've never had to be a good host before."

Madame Gouze gave a light, bell-like laugh. "You'd never know it. Now go rest that arm while you can. Wear a sling for a few minutes."


In a few minutes, Arno took to the stage, raising his good arm and quietly calling for attention. It was full dark outside, the warm glow of the candles made all the clean linens glow, and no one noticed how worn the woodwork was.

Good.

"Mesdames et Messieurs," he greeted. Once all eyes were on him, he took a deep breath. "Tonight, we are gathered to honor, and remember le comte de Mirabeau. He was a many-faceted man. Many would hear rumors of his ability to imbibe vast quantities of alcohol, or his affectionate way with the fairer sex. They would assume him a drunk womanizer. Others would read of his work at the Assembly, his passionate defense of the Third Estate, firm stances on our rights. They would think him a politician or philosopher. We here at Café-Théâtre would hear of both versions of Monsieur Mirabeau. But for us, he was an interested customer, who wanted to see us grow... his voice cracked. He cleared it. "In many ways, le comte was like a father to us. He watched over us, took an interest, and offered advice."

He protected the Assassins, guided them, fought for a future so few could see...

"The day after he died, we offered a small tribute." Arno gave a watery smile, reached off stage and Madame Gouze came out, in a resplendent gown, offering him a glass of wine. She had one as well, and the staff had been passing such glasses out to everyone present as Arno spoke.

"To le comte de Mirabeau."
There was a chorus of replies, and as everyone sipped their wine, Arno, barely able to keep the tears to his eyes and the crack from his voice, started to sing. "Ah ça ira, ça ira, ça ira..."

Madame Gouze joined him, and soon the entire staff, that Arno had been training to be silent and invisible, sang along as he had instructed. The customers looked around surprised, as one could also hear it in the halls outside the café, from down the halls to the kitchen, up the stairs as staff were preparing the dance hall, the Third Estate offering the best tribute they could, to the man who had championed their cause.

It didn't take long for the various businessmen to join in and soon the entire café, much like before, was singing. Arno took this as his chance and disappeared off stage. Behind the curtain he downed the rest of his glass in one gulp, letting the buzz go straight to his head. He reached for another glass but Madame Gouze was already bustling him out. "Check with Monsieur Grizier and make sure the horses and carriages are taken care of."

Right. If tonight was to be perfect, Arno needed his wits about him.

Thus, the evening had Arno running around even more than he had in preparation. There was a kerfuffle in the kitchen when Yvette and Claudette, who had only been working together for a few days, crashed into each other without meaning to, leaving dishes and food spilled across the floor. Arno hurried to help them clean up as best he could without using his arm (Yvette's cross glare told him that he would be kicked out if he damaged his arm) helping pull fresh napkins when requested, guiding guests about the café and explaining what they had accomplished since opening and what plans were for the future. The performers kept the café laughing and cheering, the orchestra in the dance hall kept the couples entertained, and the dining hall became a place for businessmen to sit and talk deals. Arno kept running from one room to the next, having made the trip up and down the stairs easily a dozen times in the span of a half hour, making sure everyone was being taken care of.

He made sure that all the drivers of the carriages got a decent meal and were in out of the cold, checked on the horses, made sure even they had enough fodder, till Augustin kicked him back to the café. He made sure the orchestra was given a break and took the people in the dance hall outside to observe the stars after he had the staff bring up coats against the deeper chill, he had one of the staff grab drinks for the orchestra as well, going from one group to the next to keep them outside till he was told that the orchestra was ready and gently guided people back inside to warm up just as the orchestra started up again. He retrieved paper and ink for the businessmen in the dining hall, who were eager to jot down notes about whatever deals they were discussing, even as wives tutted against doing business during a party.

For three hours, Arno ran around making things go smoothly.

Then, at eleven, people started to leave and Arno was outside, once again, with Augustin, to make sure everything was going well. Coats were collected and returned, carriages pulled forward, and Arno offered a warm smile he didn't feel as he wished them a good evening.

Two hours later, Arno helped the bent old man and his wife into their carriage.

"Thank you for a lovely evening, young man."

"You are most welcome," Arno dipped his head, wishing his arm wasn't such agony. "Anything, for le comte de Mirabeau."

The old man gave a warm, knowing chuckle. "You'll find, young man, that this entire evening was
more for you than for him."

Arno blinked. "I don't understand."

"You will. Au revoir."

Arno offered a puzzled look, but nodded to the driver and waved their last guest goodbye.

With a tired sigh, Arno headed back in to the dining hall. The staff was almost collapsed along the table, all tired and as exhausted as he was.

He stood at the head of the table, and bit back a yawn. "Merci beaucoup," he said. "Tonight was a success because of every single one of you. Everyone had a good time, no complaints or hysterics occurred, this was a good evening. But we're not done yet. We have clean-up to do. The Café will not have lunch rush, but we will be serving dinner. So we need to do as much tonight as possible to make things easier for those of us who still work here tomorrow. Those of you who have been kind enough to join us for this soirée, I'll make sure you're paid by the end of next week. Let's get the tables and chairs back in order, clean up all the dishes, sweep up the leftovers, you all know what to do."

"Before all that, Monsieur Dorian, we all have something to say."

Arno blinked, his tired mind not quite processing that everyone was still here when he was already halfway to the door to get to work. He turned, looking to Jacques, attention honing in. "Yes?" he asked, stepping back. "Did something go wrong? What happened?"

"You happened, Monsieur Dorian," Jacques said, as the entire staff, old and borrowed, nodded. "You work harder than all of us combined. We all discussed it. We all agreed. We've paid for a proper desk for you. It will be delivered week after next."

Arno blinked. "What?"

"Tonight," Jacques continued, "it was about Monsieur Mirabeau. We owe a lot to him. But tonight was also about you. We wouldn't have been here if it wasn't for you. You never asked for anything since you came here. You just went to work and did anything that needed to be done. Nous vous remercions."

Well, Arno had been holding back tears all night long. That was his excuse on why they fell so freely then.

April 25, 1791

Easter had been spent with the city in an uproar: against Lafayette's orders, the National Guard had prevented the King from travelling to Château de Saint-Cloud to celebrate the religious holiday. Everybody and every paper had an opinion on the affair - everyone was dissatisfied with the King, two years on into the Revolution that was a surprise to no one, but the entire city was split on the action the Guard had taken. Some were so frustrated with Louis they thought it did him good; some feared he would flee and were glad he didn't leave the city; some were irate that the Guard had defied Lafayette's orders, what if the Guard decided to turn on the Revolution with their bayonets?; some thought it was ridiculous to block any man, let alone a King, from worship - if someone could think it, someone had printed it. The Café was awash in conversation and speculation and demonstration over the event, the lunch crowd packed to bursting and the diner crowd almost as large. For days it was all anyone could talk about.
Arno, personally, didn't care one way or the other. If anything, he was irritated, because it was like
the entire city had forgotten Mirabeau, and he couldn't understand how, given the love they
professed when his death had first been announced. Memories did not fade the way ink did on
paper, Mirabeau had done so much for so many people… why did everyone else move on to the
next crisis?

Even the Sanctuary was talking about it, as he entered and moved down the hall to the grand
staircase. He glared at everyone under his hood, mood sour, as he made his way to the Observatory
to meet with Maître Trenet, per her summons.

She was alone in the Sanctuary, at the back of the room looking through the opening that yawned
out to the induction room, where Arno had been interviewed. She was in a dress today, according
to rumor that meant she had been visiting with her children who weren't old enough to know what
she was. She turned to him, back straight, arms crossed in front of her.

"Monsieur Dorian."

"Maître."

She did not say anything after that, there was no warm smile or gesture to sit, no small talk or
sagging of feet. She was not Mirabeau, and all Arno could feel was hurt.

Finally: "Do you know why you are here?"

To be punished for killing his third father.

"I can hardly say," he said instead.

An eyebrow rose, and the maître gestured to a pair of chairs by one of the fireplaces. Arno moved
to it and sat down, Maître Trenet doing the same and crossing her legs. Still, she didn't say
anything, let the silence hang. Arno didn't like the silence, too many dark thoughts were in his
head. He needed a drink, but the entire staff at the Café saw to it he was kept painfully sober.

"Recite the Creed," she said.

Arno blinked slowly, not expecting that. "Don't kill the innocent. Don't get caught. Don't
compromise the Brotherhood."

"Those are the tenets. What is the Creed?"

"Nothing is true and everything is permitted."

Her head cocked to one side. "And what do you think that means?" she asked.

Arno frowned, knowing this was a test but uncertain how to answer. "Mirabeau likened it to the
Declaration of the Rights of Man that came out, shortly after I came here: that a man can do
whatever he wants so long as it does not harm others."

Trenet nodded. "A good analogy. Why do you think the Creed has lasted for so many centuries?"

Arno racked his brain, hoping someone had explained that to him, but the Creed was something
that the cult never really talked about. All they ever said was that people learned it in their own
time and in their own way, and that was too complicated for Arno to wrap his head around. Seven
words could hardly have that many interpretations and it wasn't like anyone - even Fabre or
Pontmercy - bothered to articulate what their answer was, let alone why it lasted for so long.
His silence spoke volumes, Trenet nodded as if she somehow expected it.

"What do you think of rules, Monsieur Dorian?" she asked instead.

… "I don't understand."

"I've been reading up on you," she said, voice flat and without emotion as it always was. "We interviewed some people in Versailles who remembered you, and of course we have the marshalcy records from your Death. They paint a very specific picture, monsieur, as does some of the things you yourself have said. Here is what can be drawn: de la Serre took you in but didn't know what to do with you. You weren't his blood, nor were you documented as a ward, nor were you paid as a member of the staff. You describe yourself a houseboy, but you also describe de la Serre as the man who treated you like a son, whom you saw as a father. Is this accurate so far?"

Arno nodded, remembering his time in Versailles, the niggling uncertainty on where he stood with the monsieur.

"The number of bribes to the marshalcy - or rather, the number of complaints that were suddenly dropped - dictates that you broke the law, broke the rules, several times. Do you agree?"

"... oui, but I don't see where-"

"You thought you were special, Monsieur Dorian," Trenet said, flat voice cutting through Arno's question. "I don't yet know if you knew it consciously, but at the very least at a primal level you knew that you were above the rules, because you had the favor of de la Serre. You thought you could do whatever you wanted and never suffer the consequences of it so long as your maître held you in favor. You grew up self-assured, confident: a swagger in your steps, one person recounted. When de la Serre was killed your safety-net was killed with it and you had an immediate consequence: you were thrown in the Bastilles."

Arno winced, thinking of blood and airways and the butt of a rifle impacting his face. He needed a drink.

"You have come here," Trenet continued, "And you still think you are special. You pursue your vendetta regardless of the Council's wishes, kill a target we didn't assign, bring your near-kin to our secret location for us to help her regardless of her origins. You somehow think nothing will come of flaunting these rules, that you are beyond reproach."

… And here came the punishment. Arno grit his teeth in preparation, his face grim as he faced his fate. If they cast him out… he didn't know what he would do… this was the only thing he had left. The silence drew out, Trenet watching Arno, waiting for… he didn't know what.

But, eventually, she tilted her head and uncrossed her leg. "A lot has happened to you," she said, her tone always so firm, flat. "We are not without understanding of your circumstances. Mirabeau was right that Pierre - Bellec - had been a terrible choice for you."

"Tell me, did you ever really believe in the Creed, or were you a Templar-loving traitor from the start?"

Arno winced, his eyes suddenly burning.

"Mirabeau told us that you needed to be retrained," Trenet said, not at all reacting to his pain. "Between the arrogance, the loyalty to de la Serre, and most especially for what Bellec did to you, the Council is inclined to agree."
There it was. The punishment.

"So I'm to 'die' again?"

"Non," Trenet said. "You are already established and it would be foolish to reteach you physical skills you clearly already have, nor would it help you after these recent events." Something in her eyes changed, too subtle for Arno to understand. "He hurt all of us," she said. "None of us suspected he had fallen so far. An Assassin's first job is not the kill, despite our name. It is to teach, and through no fault of your own, you have not been taught. That can't be held against you and it won't, but there must be some changes while we correct the mistake."

In other words, she was punishing him. It was freshly washed, dressed up and tied in a bow, but he was being punished.

"Assassinations are banned," Trenet said. "For now, they would hurt you too much. Your assignments will be mostly fetch and carry, always paired with someone with more experience. Instead of one teacher you will have several, to help show you the different facets of the Creed that you were barred from seeing. Above all, Monsieur Dorian, I want you to understand the value of rules. Do you understand?"

"Oui, Maître."

Trenet leaned back, and finally both feet were on the floor. "You don't, monsieur, not yet, but that is what we're hoping to change. Once you've proven you can follow the rules, once you've demonstrated learning the Creed, then we can move forward. Your first assignment is with Monsieur Pontmercy. Seek him out tomorrow. For now, reflect on the Creed, and try to determine why it is so valued."

Arno left with the dismissal, returning to Café Théâtre to listen to the tense debate on whether the King could be trusted to stay in the city and he just… he went upstairs to his new desk and sat, staring at nothing until it was the dinner hour and he had to see to the staff.

As the café closed he took a deep breath and sought out Mme Gouze.

"Letter just arrived," she said, "explaining your situation. Do you want to talk about it?"

"... I don't see how there's much to discuss," he said, missing Mirabeau.

She smiled softly, as she often did, and gestured for him to sit, they sat in one of the booths of the café proper and she showed him the ciphered letter.

Charlotte,

I've just met with young Arno. From now on he is to be restricted from assassination and always paired with an assassin for field work until he can demonstrate he can follow rules. Work with him as best you can.

Sophie

"Working on your assignment?" he asked, pushing the letter back. Diable, he needed a drink.

"No," she answered. "I'm talking to a friend."

"Wouldn't that be breaking the rules?" Arno asked dryly. He rubbed a temple, then his entire face.
"Oh, Arno," Mme Gouze said, reaching out and touching his wrist. "Mon pauvre gentil enfant."

She had called him that once before, her "poor, gentle child." He didn't completely know how to take it, he was a grown man, perfectly able to function without being coddled as a child, but the way she said it in her smooth, contralto voice, the softness of her touch… it brought a comfort to him, the sensation of thin arms around his shoulders when he was very small. It felt… good.

"Maitre Trenet, she has a very hard exterior and few people indeed can see past it. Her tone is the kind that would hurt you, but she is trying to help you. We all are, in our own ways. You've been through an ordeal, one of several for one so young, and we don't want to see you break."

"Yes, of course," Arno said, "Shattered glass is so messy to clean up."

"It's not the cleaning up, Arno, it's the putting back together."

Arno shook his head, not liking the direction of the conversation. "So how does this work? I've tried asking, 'what is the Creed?' and never get a straight answer. How is internment supposed to help me learn the Creed when my leash isn't even long enough to get a scent in the air?"

"You can't scent the air if you don't recognize the scent of home," Mme Gouze said, immediately picking up the analogy. "You must walk before you run, and stand before you walk. You want to understand the Creed, but you don't yet understand all of the tenants, nor how personal the Creed is for everyone."

Mme Gouze leaned back for a moment, eyes leaving Arno for a split second before Grizier came to join them. The café was dark save a few remaining candles. Grizier sat next to the madame, his face almost invisible.

"Most of us come here with at least a partial understanding," he said, "We might not have the words for it, but we come here knowing that nothing is true. Some part of our lives, or pillar of ourselves, is often shattered when we arrive here. Death, betrayal, life choices, we come here when we are at our lowest, and we know that there is nothing left, and that something has to change."

Arno swallowed, adam's apple bobbing up and down as he remembered how he felt when he arrived at Saint Chapelle.

"The phrase itself is so bland as to be innocuous: 'nothing is true,' and then 'everything is permitted.' Some of us learn it in turns, some of us learn it all at once, some of us through fire and brimstone. When you ask, 'What is the Creed,' you are, in effect, asking a deeply personal question: what does the Creed mean to you? To recite the Creed is to tell a maître what it means to an individual. Altaïr, wrote of it extensively, as did Machiavelli in private writings to Ezio Auditore, but even they could not list or articulate all the nuances of it. Each person's creed is slightly different and very, very personal. It would be like," he added, a hint of something in his voice, "you telling us of your first intimate encounter with Mademoiselle de la Serre in detail."

The comparison made Arno turn bright red, mind jumping to exactly what the sword master had suggested - the sensation, the electricity, the rain pounding the roof, the feeling of-he aborted the thought and coughed.

"One's first should be had organically," Mme Gouze said, "born of a realization or lesson or an encounter or trial. To explain it is to wipe away the mystery, to cheapen the experience, and learning the Creed is often something so profound that one does not want to ruin it for another. We do not try to be enigmatic, we are trying to help you, in our own way, by letting the mystery come into its own."
"... but that doesn't help in the now," Arno said after a long pause. "It doesn't help end my punishment sooner."

"No, it doesn't," Mme Gouze said. "But the greatest lessons take time, and the Assassins are willing to give it to you."

Chapter End Notes

There are a couple of prongs in this chapter we want to talk about, but the first and foremost is the Council. In the game, the Council is so bland as to be forgettable, and because it's Arno's POV they look slightly inept. Here, instead, we are trying to show at every opportunity that the Council is trying to do its best. They are fair to him in a way that no one else was but Arno is such a mixed bag that some things they get right and some things they get wrong. It's not necessarily that Arno flaunted rules because he knew de la Serre would get him out of trouble - though that was certainly part of it - but rather he understood that the rules were an ever-changing goalpost and that Olivier would always get him in trouble regardless so why bother. He was, in his own way, acting out. That Arno is impulsive and doesn't think through his actions doesn't help - hell, the fic starts with him losing The Watch and breaking and entering to get it back.

But the Council is right to give Arno a rigid structure. He needs to be comfortable with the fact that here the rules won't change and he won't be punished willy-nilly - something he immediately fails to recognize when Trenet says it explicitly. He's so used to punishment and so used to gaslighting that he doesn't even notice that Trenet asked if her assessment of him was accurate - i.e. he was given the chance to correct the assumptions/conclusions she had drawn of him.

Café Théâtre understand Arno a little better, and with them, he feels safe enough to ask some questions, but he's not quite ready yet to see what they're doing. He doesn't understand that he needs help, and that will bite him a couple of times.

Prong two: Grief. It wouldn't have been healthy to be in Arno's headspace at first as the magnitude of the last several days starts to finally process, but Mirabeau as a public figure was grieved publically as well, and that gave us a perfect avenue to explore what was going on in Arno's head without spending pages wallowing in his angst. It's also more painful, in a way, to watch him self-destruct instead of being the one self-destructing, knowing there's damn little to do. But, then, it's Café Théâtre, they know how to take care of their own as part of Arno's found family.

And Arno gives himself a vehicle to grieve: Mirabeau's entourage's memorial. There's a fair bit of "us" in there, struggling to make everything perfect, running ragged to account for everything, finding new problems and fixing them oneself, etc., but in the end, it goes well, and the Café solidifies itself as Arno's new family.

Thus ends Act 1 of the fic. Act 2: people try to help Arno, but you can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped. And bad influences will always be bad influences. And the world starts to fall apart.

Next chapter: fleshing out Arno's friends as they help him in their own way.
The next day Arno woke late - six in the morning - and dressed and moved out immediately to the city, crossing to the right bank of the Seine and moving closer to Tuileries where Pontmercy had his bookshop. People were still buzzing about the King, Easter, if he would stay, if the counter-revolutionary royalists would try to mount another insurrection, Lafayette, everything. Arno tried to keep abreast of it but it wasn't in him to care, knowing he was about to start his punishment and that Pontmercy would be one of the people holding his leash.

In the bookshop three men were talking, a woman in fine clothes perusing the books. At the counter was a face Arno didn't know, but he approached after taking a deep breath.

"Is Monsieur Pontmercy available?" he asked politely.

"Are you the man at Café Théâtre?"

"I am."

"Ah, très bien. He is expecting you. This way."

Arno moved around the sales desk and to a backroom, filled with shelves and shelves of books, the scent of leather bindings overpowering. Down narrow aisles there was another room, an office, and there was Pontmercy, writing something in a ledger. "Monsieur," the clerk said.

"Yes, what is-ah!" Pontmercy stood, putting quill aside and standing. "Monsieur Dorian."

"Monsieur Pontmercy. Word came that you were looking for me?"

"Oui, oui, your establishment is all many people will talk of after the dinner you held in honor of le comte."

Arno pursed his lips as his bicep throbbed in memory. I had hopes for you!

The clerk had finally left, however, and Pontmercy's conversation dropped with his shoulders and his voice. "The cover is that we're arranging a booksellers meeting with you next month," he said softly, "But in reality, you and I are going out tonight. We have a lead."

"Lead on what?" Arno asked.

"Each cover has a purpose," Pontmercy explained. "You haven't been above ground enough to know that. You have the madame, you're meant to gather information from your clientele, the finger on the pulse as it were. This shop is a trap. I deal with books, yes, but also finer antiques as you know from when you found that chest a few months ago. We have bait, and someone took a bite. One of my customers was more than a little interested when I told him of a tapestry that had ancient runes on it that only two or three people can see."

Arno waited, but there was no answer. "... Meaning?"

Pontmercy blinked but otherwise didn't react. "Meaning only someone with an eagle can see it."

Even that was a little obtu."Oh. Templars."
"Exactly," Pontmercy said, dark smile on his face. "My shop has a storage location for our overdraft, and we're going to watch it tonight and see if he bites. Cosette is watching right now, and we'll take over her shift."

That was how, at twilight, they were on the roofs north of the bookshop, the air just slightly chill, watching a nondescript structure with a single candle in it. Cosette had greeted them and then glided down to the street level for some much-needed sleep before her next assignment. Arno remembered his few months in her position, roving all over Paris, and he found a piece of him that could still be happy, happy that she was doing so well.

The sun set with little comment from either, both intent on their watch as the moon began to rise. It was a job like any other, Arno had done this sort of thing both before his assignment and with Bellec.

Bellec…

_You'll thank me for this. Some day._

He shivered.

Pontmercy pulled his tailored green coat tighter around him. "Chill hasn't completely left," he observed.

"No, it hasn't."

Silence.

"How's your arm? I thought you'd still be in a sling."

"Still can't use it."

Silence again.

"... How are the repairs coming? With the Café?"

"A little at a time."

Silence again.

"... Damn it, man, I'm trying to make conversation."

Arno's head dipped to his knees, sighing. _Désolé,_ he said finally. "I'm not really in a talking mood."

Pontmercy breathed in through his nose, watching Arno, before nodding. "Can't say I blame you," he said finally. He shifted his weight, eyes still on the candle. The moon was well above them now, waxing gibbous casting more than adequate light. "What was it like?"

"What was what like?" Arno asked, resigning himself to the fact that he would have to talk.

"Growing up? With the de la Serre?"

"You mean growing up with the Templars?" Arno countered, having heard that question more than once during his training underground, usually before a challenge was issued that he would have to meet.
"No," Pontmercy corrected, no looking at him. "I mean, what was it like growing up with a nobleman."

Arno turned from the distant candle, looking at Pontmercy. His beard was still closely trimmed and coat perfectly tailored. "You weren't a Second?"

He shook his head. "No. Third Estate, just like you. My parents were poissards before the Brotherhood found me; I was the youngest of twelve." He shrugged his shoulders, a casual gesture so different from the stiff persona he projected. "I can't imagine what it was like living with people who weren't family. I can't imagine being…" He winced, head turning to hide for a moment. "I was at Saint-Chapelle," he admitted. "All the doors were locked, we were trying to get in. We heard… I can't imagine being an orphan."

Arno watched Pontmercy, mind long forgotten of the storehouse across the street, looking instead at the bookseller.

"It was… Monsieur de la Serre was very kind. I was just a child, but he took me in. I remember sitting in his office and crying, and he just held me." Arno's gaze drifted back to the candle across the street, mind looking at something else. "I could have been turned out on the street, dead in less than a year, but he gave me a place to stay and an education. Élise would drag me to one adventure after the next, and I was the perfect age to be her sparring partner. I remember when Madame de la Serre died; she had been sick ever since I knew her, they wouldn't let me into her part of the house. But that night I slept in Élise's room to keep her company."

"It sounds like they were family."

"They were."

A natural pause drew out, Arno thinking of the happier times: sneaking into the kitchens, making up games, running through fields, practice with M. Weatherall. He remembered when Élise went off to boarding school and going riding with the monsieur, hunting, watching M. de la Serre look at him and see… someone else.

Then,

"... We should have looked for you."

Arno turned back to Pontmercy, but he was resolutely watching the tiny beacon of light across the street.

"What?"

"I don't know the circumstances, I don't know why we never did, but we should have looked for you," Pontmercy repeated. "We are a Brotherhood, we are a family. You should never have disappeared in the first place. Never compromise the Brotherhood. Family looks out for each other. Even when it's dangerous. Even when it hurts…" He stopped talking abruptly, favoring instead a deep breath, his chest expanding. He looked away again, processing something before turning an intense gaze to Arno. "We should have looked for you," he said simply.

You never even looked for me!

Something, deep in Arno's mind, softened, and for the first time in a long time, he smiled, warm and genuine.

"Merci," he said simply.
Just as he turned to the candle he saw it flicker.

"Pontmercy…"

"I saw it. Let's go."

They stood from their positions and moved down the slope of the roof, leaping across the narrow street and to the roof of a building adjacent to the storehouse. Pontmercy open an access door and the two entered the attic of the storehouse, all business. "This is a nonlethal kidnapping," Pontmercy instructed, voice nearly silent. "We'll take them to a separate location and they will be interrogated."

"To look for Germain?"

"Who? Non, to learn about numbers and movements. If we're really lucky, we can get a meeting place. Then they'll be released and tailed."

… but Arno could ask about Germain. That thought alone narrowed his focus and his mind awakened as it hadn't since… since before.

They crept down the stairs, floor by floor, doing a sweep before they found the thieves: two men, one the burly muscle, the other in a dark but richly made coat. Pontmercy nodded silently, gesturing who took who. Arno moved on silent boots to position behind the brute, and Pontmercy threw a stun grenade, the flash startling two men whose eyes were dilated to the dark. Arno grabbed the brute in a chokehold, straining his good arm and kicking a foot out to give him better leverage. Pontmercy grabbed the tailored coat and for several minutes both of them struggled before there was quiet. Next were blindfolds and rope, and Arno was forced to use his bad arm to drag the men out to a waiting cart. A man in a hood was there, scarf up against the late April chill. "I'll ride with you," he said, hopping up.

"No," the gruff voice said. "We compartmentalize, nobody knows everything."

"But they might know about Germain-"

"That's someone else's assignment. Get off."

"Dorian…"

Arno looked between the Assassin and Pontmercy, irrationally furious that this was being denied him. The punishment chafed, and he grit his teeth, reminding himself that Trenet could throw him out at any moment. Grunting, he stepped off. Pontmercy tried to follow, but Arno shook his head. He needed to be alone.

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**June 15, 1791**

The Church was forbidden from wearing vestments in public.

It was the talk of the city, everyone feeling righteous comeuppance. They had suffered so many abuses from the church and between the attempted Oath to the Country at the beginning of the year and the reappropriation of anything silver it was only natural that making them hide instead of flaunt their power was a natural extension of their punishment - if for no other reason than to prevent more riots as people trying to vent their grievances with the Church tended to swell to violent riots.
People had left the Church in droves, nobody wanted to even give them the commitment of their time and faith. Solace came in many forms, why not make another?

"That is why you will be working with Cosette for the next few days," Maître Beylier said. "Cults are starting to pop up as people find or create new forms of comfort in these trying times without the negative connotations of the church. One of them looks innocuous at first, unless you know Templar history as well as we do: the Cult of Baphomet."

"... the what?" Arno asked.

"Baphomet was the deity that the Templars were accused of worship in 1307. Their leader, Jacques de Molay was burned at the steak as a heretic, and one of our own was responsible for killing his lieutenant in search for relics, to no avail. That there is a cult following something that obscure implies someone dug up those documents, and the most likely culprit are the Templars themselves. Cosette has been doing research, and the agents you and Monsieur Pontmercy captured have been most helpful."

"Did they have any leads on Germain?" Arno asked.

Beylier raised an eyebrow. "That is not your concern," he said, "As Maître Trenet explained."

Arno pursed his lips. "I might not be able to investigate, but shouldn't I be kept informed of news?"

"No," Beylier said. "Investigations that big must be compartmentalized so that no one person knows everything."

… Except the maîtres themselves, but Arno kept that thought to himself.

Still, he went to the cells where the novices and unplaced apprentices stayed, walking a familiar path to Cosette. She was at her tiny desk, filled with papers and books, reading something with a look of intense frustration.

"Need any help?" he asked, charm bleeding through at seeing an old friend.

"Ah, Arno!" Cosette said, smile brightening her entire face. "They didn't tell me you were the one helping me! Yes, please help me read this - it's from the fourteenth century!"

Arno sat on her bed in lieu of a seat and help her read… some kind of report on the Templar trials. Thomas de Carneillon was the author, whoever that was, giving an almost word-for-word account of the trials and the burning of the steak. "Yes, in our profound conviction, the Grandmaîtres of the Order of the Templars worshipped the Baphomet, and caused it to be worshiped by their initiates; yes, there existed in the past, and there may be still in the present, assembles which are presided over by this figure with head of goat, seated on a throne and crowned by a flaming torch between its horns."

"And you, King Philip," Jacque de Molay supposedly said, "no punishment is too heinous for the great evil you have inflicted upon the Temple. I curse you! Curse you to the thirteenth generation of your blood! You shall be cursed!"

"It is amazing, isn't it?" Cosette asked as Arno read the words, moving to the story. "That someone was there and wrote the story down for others to read? Assassins disguised as Flemish mercenaries."

"De Carneillon seems to have an opinion on the entire business," Arno said, scanning the lines again, trying to confirm his interpretation of the word choice. "Sounds like he thought the entire
venture was doomed to work against them."

"And it did," Cosette said, leaning back. "The Templars were driven underground as we were, and are stronger for it."

Arno breathed through his nose. "What does any of this have to do with your assignment?"

"Everything," Cosette said. "I am hoping to infiltrate the Cult. I've found that there is a secret entry to a shrine of some kind near one of the isle's cemeteries. I want as much information as possible. If they expect me to know what Jacques de Molay said or how he was supposed to worship Baphomet, I need to be ready."

"You know common people don't have access to this? That they won't give a lick about Jacques de Molay or the trials or even the burning at the stake? Certainly not the curse to the," Arno glanced at the text, "the thirteenth generation to the King's blood."

"So?" Cosette asked. "Having information and not using it is better than having no information at all."

… "Too bad the maîtres don't agree with you."

Cosette blinked, turning in her chair to face him more fully. "How are you?" she asked. "Really? We've barely seen each other since my promotion, and I heard about what happened in Saint Chapelle. How are you? Is there something I can do?"

Arno pursed his lips, hunching down slightly. "I've been banned from assassinations and the Germain investigation. All I'm allowed to do is fetch and carry work. I'm told I need to follow the rules and learn the Creed."

"Ah… désolé," Cosette said sincerely. "That must be very hard, you always try so hard."

"... Not enough, apparently."

"Well, we will try and help you," Cosette said, nodding to herself. "You've helped me with the last of the background research. Let us see if we can smoke out the Cult. Come, I'll show you where the entrance is."

They went above ground, moving towards Notre Dame and finally to a cemetery. "How did you even find this place?" Arno asked.

"Oh, that's a long story," Cosette said, adjusting one of her petticoats. "If I can make it short… one of the taverns here had someone who said odd things, and following him led to a lot of unsavory locations, especially in Bièvre. He disappeared in a blind alley, and that's when I knew their 'temple' was underground. That meant the sewers or the catacombs, and we have control of the sewers. This cemetery had odd silhouettes at night, and there."

They had just turned into the cimetière, and standing in the middle of it was an entrance to the catacombs. Arno and Cosette moved around the perimeter of the cimetière, touching gravestones or reading edifices. In reality they were watching the entrance, but no one came in or out. By dark they had retired to a roof, the warm air comfortable as the sun set.

Cosette leaned into Arno, hand touching his knee. "It was terrible," she said in the dark, "What he did to you."

"Who?"
"Bellec."

Arno winced. "I don't want to talk about it."

"But you should," Cosette said, "We both knew he took you above ground too often for a novice. I was there when you would bring him back drunk and write his reports. He always called you merdeux. I heard he even made you kill him. That is depraved, and I'm sorry you had to endure it."

"It… it wasn't all that bad," Arno said, shifting his weight. "After the Bastille… Élise had rejected me completely. I had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do. It was either this or the streets, and I wouldn't have known where to go if not for him. He told me he wouldn't pull his punches."

"Perhaps," Cosette said. "But consider this: did he ever once say a nice thing to you? Did he ever compliment you sincerely? Not those backhanded ones he would give but a real one? Was he ever gentle when you needed it? Even if he had to be cruel, did he look after you later? Maître Beylier. He told me he wouldn't pull his punches either, he wanted me fluently literate by the time I became apprentice. He told me I would have to do more than anyone else in the Brotherhood, because of who I was. But at night he would tell me he saw how hard I worked. If I was hurt in practice he would wait until we were done before asking if it was serious. He showed me he cared, in his own way. Bellec, he should have done the same."

Arno had trouble at first reconciling the idea of Beylier had a soft side, at least until he remembered his reverent acceptance of Brasseur's gun, doing it honor before giving it to Arno. He had never thought about his not getting compliments under Bellec, he had just assumed it was because he was so bad at being a member of the cult; and it wasn't like Olivier ever gave him a pat on the back or a "good job;" it made the praise the Café Théâtre gave him new and sometimes uncomfortable. Having the staff, or Cosette and Fabre, say nice things… they were friends, it was normal. M. de la Serre and Mirabeau… they cared. But a superior…?

Arno shut the thought down, not ready to think on it.

The first night of surveillance yielded nothing. Cosette said she expected as much, it wasn't like cults met every night. During the day, they went to the tavern Cosette had mentioned, Arno mostly off to the side drinking while Cosette played the part of someone eager to learn more about Baphomet but uncertain how, and then it was stalking the crypt entrance again.

The third night they saw someone exit, Cosette gripping Arno's arm in excitement. "My first real lead!" she hissed.

They tailed the shadow, alternating in and out of the lead to make sure they were invisible, watched him stop at the tavern they had visited before finally arriving at a rundown excuse of a building on the left bank.

"Bien," Cosette said. "All right, I know you can't be far from your café for long. Go get some sleep, spend the day doing your job. I'll meet him at his tavern and try to get myself in his good graces."

Arno gave his friend a long look. "Are you sure that's such a good idea?" he asked. "Your new friend is clearly unsavory. You might not be safe."

Cosette smiled, warm and soft, reaching out and touching his arm. "You always worry about others, and never for yourself. Don't worry, Maître Beylier trained me very well; he would not have put me on this assignment if I couldn't do it, and I will not risk myself unnecessarily. No rash action, I promise. Only thoughtful deliberation."
Arno went back to the café, but only reluctantly. He hardly slept for concern over Cosette carousing with that ruffian. Mme Gouze smiled when he told her, saying it meant he had a good heart, and Augustin nodded, saying he understood before explaining Cosette's training regime to make him feel better.

That night he left before closing and moved to the unsavory tavern, flicking his hidden blade in and out and snapping open his phantom blade several times before gripping his sword. If something had happened to her... He entered the tavern after messing up his hair and taking off his nicer waistcoat. His five o'clock shadow he smeared with a little mud from the streets and pulled at one of his sleeves, looking more appropriate for the section of Bièvre he was in. He ordered their swill and drank, the alcohol burning as it went down as he turned to watch the establishment. There was Cosette, talking quietly with the unsavory man they had tailed before. She no longer looked like the confident woman she was, but a small and nervous waif of a young wife, hurt by the Church and desperate to find solace in something else.

"That was when I thought of the Templars," she said. "Mamen would tell me their stories when I was a child. They fought in the Crusades, n'est-ce pas? They were paladins of the faith but even they were burned at the stake. I tried to read up on them, but my husband said the books would be too hard for me. I saw the name, and I thought, if the paladins worshipped this form of the Christ, then surely I can find the answers to my questions."

"It is not an easy path we walk, mademoiselle," the man said. "As you said, our Lord has been rewritten as the Devil himself. We were not the ones to give Him a goathead, but we accept that imagery because it reflects us - our true selves hidden behind the veneer of society's decisions on what we are rather than our true selves."

"Oui, oui! They all think things because of what I look like, but I am none of the things they think!"

"Don't worry, Jeanne, there is a place for you with us."

"Ah, monsieur, you've no idea how that relieves me," Cosette said, honest tears in her eyes. "There is a ritual we perform," the man said. "We show Baphomet our dedication, let Him enter someone to be His vessel. I wonder if you might fill that role."

Cosette nodded her head vigorously, and the man's grin was so predatory Arno had to hide his reaction by gulping his glass of swill, coughing as the sour drink tried to force its way down. The two made plans to meet, Cosette leaving first with a smile and Arno following after paying for the garbage he had just drank. Stomach roiling from the alcohol, he tailed Cosette for all of a few minutes before realizing she was going to the Île de la Cité. He backed off and instead kept his eye on the unsavory brute, noting the slight limp, the scars on his forearm, hoping to commit him to memory. The lout followed Cosette all the way to the bridge, but broke off his following her as soon as she crossed it. Interesting.

Arno crossed the bridge as well, seeing a second figure pick up where the lout had left off. Pursing his lips, Arno double backed and took a few back alleys before pulling up an empty wine bottle from the ground and using it as a prop, stumbling into Cosette and knocking over. "There's a second tail," he whispered, before rolling up to a sitting position and moaning about a headache, staggering to his feet and swaying into another alley before dropping the act and climbing up to a roof.

Cosette, instead of taking to the sewers, moved with purpose to the other side of the Île, to one of their safehouses. She entered like it was her own home, and Arno watched the tail leave. He made
damn sure no one else was watching the building before entering through a window. Cosette was there, ready for anything, but smiled when she saw her friend. "That was exciting," she said lightly. "This is good. That means we are close."

"Perhaps, but close to what, exactly?" Arno asked. "What is the ritual?"

"I don't know," Cosette said, tugging at her gown and pulling it off, as well as her petticoats to reveal the pants she wore. Three daggers were tucked into her belt, and one in each boot as well, not including the phantom blade. "The Templars never actually worshipped Baphomet, that was a ruse to shut down their Order; it could be anything."

"I don't like it."

"Neither do I," Cosette agreed. "But if it gets me in I'll play along for now. We don't need members or numbers, we need leaders. That agent is a recruiter, he's not the target I actually need."

She took a deep breath. "Well, it looks like this will be my 'home' for a while. Would you like to play the part of my husband?"

Arno looked at her flatly.

"Of course, you already have a 'wife'," she said, small smile hinting at her humor. "That's fine, she can be out of the city for a while. Stay long enough for me to write a report, then go home. I'll write you once we have a meeting."

Arno hardly had to wait long. During the lunch wave the next day he received a note saying the ritual would be that night, and he had to hurriedly talk to Mme Gouze and make excuses to Yvette - who had taken the last several days to glare at him over her fire, muttering about smelling drink off him and what she would do to him.

Wincing at her tone, Arno made his way to the safehouse. Cosette was arming herself and putting on her dress, adjusting her bonnet and stomacher to hide her stay. "Bien, you are here," she said. "I just had a messenger from Fabre. His beggars are going to loot the place once we've cleared out, so we don't have to drop everything to find documents or lists. Our only priority is me getting close enough to the leader to kill him."

Arno blinked. "But I thought…"

Cosette nodded, dark eyes intense. "This will be my first."

Oh…

"I don't know how, but I want you to sneak in with me. You have to keep me safe in case things go wrong. Best case scenario, you won't have to do anything. Worst case scenario, you help me fight my way out."

Arno blinked again. "But that would be-"

"And act of self-defense and protecting the Brotherhood," Cosette said, face intense. "Not an assassination, so you are not breaking the rules."

… What a good friend…!

"And if I happen to find something about the Germain investigation?"
Cosette casually shrugged. "Who can say?" she said demurely.

Arno was once again at the unsavory tavern, drinking *pisse* and knowing Yvette was going to have an opinion of it, keeping an eye on his best friend. The recruiter, as Cosette had dubbed him, came in and escorted her out. Arno tailed her from a safe distance until he was certain where they were going and moved to the *cimetière* they had staked out earlier. Several people were there, the entrance open but socializing before they arrived. One of them was about Arno's height, thicker in build, *sans-culottes* and stained shirt. That would be his best bet. Arno floated down to the cemetery - the sun was setting and the shadows were long and dark; he hid behind a grave marker and pulled off his outer layers, hiding his sword under them since his target wasn't armed.

He saw Cosette arrive with the recruiter, moving towards the small gathering of people at the entrance of the catacombs. As one they put on black scarves, tying them to obscure their faces. *Parfait.* Arno grabbed a rock, checked its weight, before putting it down and grabbing another, looking for something small. Just as the group entered he threw it, tapping his target on the neck and making him turn around. Arno was on him in seconds, that small distraction giving him space to put in a stranglehold and take the man's pants over his own *culottes*, and tried to pull the scarf in the same tie over his face.

He made his way down into the catacombs, catching up with the others in just over five minutes. Cosette looked around like a wide-eyed girl, asking if Templars were buried in this holy place. Bones were everywhere, femurs and skulls the most obvious to point out, piled on top of each other, torchlight was smoky and ill placed, giving the entire catacomb a dark, foreboding atmosphere. Nobody talked until they came to the obvious destination: a stone altar with markings on it. There everyone made the reverse-sign of the cross and mumbled something Arno didn't understand. He followed up with a low hum, mimicking the gesture and watching as the recruiter let Cosette sit on the altar.

Then began the waiting. The others followers were mostly quiet, two engaging in whispered conversation, waiting for the ritual to being. Arno flicked his eyes around where he could; the confines were narrow and dark, hard to fight by but easy to disappear into. There were eight people in all, only two women outside of Cosette, the recruiter, and whoever the leader was. It was perhaps twenty minutes before a man in a dark robe - *Templar pin he might know Germain* - came in from a different corridor of bones. He said something in Latin and the followers replied in kind, Arno bowing his head to hide him not knowing the dead language.

"Sisters and Brothers of Baphomet," the leader said, "We here dedicate the life of our beloved *Sœur*, Jeanne, to the glory and power of the wisdom of Baphomet."

Dedicate the *life what the-*!

"We stand together in gratitude to you, Jeanne, for your bravery."

Cosette, now stretched out on the altar, *smiled.* "I yield this, my body, for the good of my *Sœurs et Frères* in Baphomet."

"We honor your sacrifice!"

There was a dagger, but Arno spared little time for more thought as his body reacted, as did his partner. Cosette's entire face changed from eager *naïveté* to cold determination as her hidden blade extended and she shoved up to her target, the act of violence so sudden as to make everyone silent. She moved to catch the body but Arno was on the recruiter, who had pulled out a rusty kitchen knife to avenge his master. Arno would have none of that, grabbing the wrist and twisting down and to the side, forcing the target to expose his back or break his arm, and Arno stabbed with his
own hidden blade, twisting as he went before yanking it out and extending his phantom blade in one motion, seeing one of the followers moving forward aggressively, scarf off and exposing his face. Arno shot in his shoulder, off center to the heart.

The others seemed to realize things were happening, the women screamed as Arno's second target went down and everyone tripped over themselves to run away from the bloodshed. Arno took a slow, deep breath through his nose. He turned to the victim who was still alive; Cosette was giving last rites to her target.

"You were a plant," he said simply, kneeling over the follower. "To make sure nothing happened to those two."

"Non, non! S'il-vous plaît! Mercy!"

"Germain didn't show mercy," Arno said darkly. "Why should we?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

Arno grabbed the bolt of the phantom blade and pushed. The follower screamed before fainting dead away. Disgusted, Arno stood.

Cosette was standing as well, face closed off as she looked down at her work. Arno approached her carefully, asking, "Are you alright?"

"... oui..." she said softly. "I think I am." She didn't move though, standing over the corpse.

Arno remembered how he felt after killing Sivert, the catharsis. He touched her arm gently. "Come on," he said softly, "I'll take you back to the Café and we'll draw you a bath."

Café Théâtre was already closed by the time the two came back, Arno leading his friend through the servant's entrance and up the grand stairs to his room. He set her on his rumpled bed, putting buckets of water on the fire to warm, and opened the privacy screen. He made three trips to the well to fill the clawfoot tub, and by then Cosette was beginning to undress. He left her to her work, moving across the way to the library and the supple scent of leather. He saw the pile of news sheets by the cold fireplace. He stoked the fire and began to read.

Later, much later, Cosette appeared wrapped in one of his blankets and the hint of her chemise underneath. Her hair was loose and wet, her feet were bare.

"Je te remerci," she said, looking at him.

"It was nothing," Arno said, putting down his papers. "Madame and Augustin did the same for me. How do you feel?"

"... cleaner," she said after a pause. "I don't... I did not know what I was supposed to feel, after my first assassination. I was worried I would feel regret, I was scared I would feel nothing. Maître Beylier, he said anybody could feel anything, it depended on what drew them to the Brotherhood. I think I see that now, a little. That man, the ringleader, I saw something in him."

"And that was?"

Cosette, frowned, trying to think of the word. "Indifference," she settled on. "He did not care about anything, about me, about the people he led. The things he said - did you hear it?"

Arno shook his head. "I was rather busy handling the recruiter and his plant."
Cosette drifted to silence, lost in her thoughts, curled in her chair. Arno kept her company throughout the night, eventually hiding her in his room when Yvette arrived to start cooking for the day. She was gone when Arno next checked on her, but on his desk was a note thanking him profoundly for the kindness he had offered her.

June 21, 1791

A few days later the papers were talking about the latest elections: the Assembly had a new president was Louis-Michel le Peletier, having run on a platform of replacing barbaric hangings with more humane beheadings using a machine invented by a doctor name Guillotine, and the overall abolishment of the death penalty, as well as the use of branding and, curiously, the use of galleys. Arno read the papers and listened to the lunch crowd talk about it below him in the café proper, taking a small break before going back downstairs to the waiting plates of food from Yvette or café au lait from Jacques.

As he had suspected, Yvette had immediately read the riot act when he had come down after helping Cosette demanding to smell his breath and shaking her head on scenting the swill he had drunk as part of his cover. He had been forced to reassure her - repeatedly - that he regretted ever doing it and that he wouldn't do it again. Mme Gouze offered him encouragement when it was safe, having her theater troupe having skits about being caught drinking when nothing untoward happened to lighten the mood. One of the new regulars, always dressed well, came up to make announcements, and the madame had pointed out he was one of the secretaries for the Assembly, and that they had to do everything in their power to keep him coming.

Le Peletier had several thoughts on revolutionizing education as well as government, Arno read, and he stepped out to the balcony above the café he looked out across the Seine, roughly where Tuileries was, and wondered what the King thought.

It was the first political thought he'd had all year, and even having it surprised him. After seeing Sivert he had been so focused on his redemption that he had forgotten that all of Paris was looking for a better life, as he was. He looked down to the street, the small wooden bridge adjoining the next island, the silhouette of Notre Dame, and he realized he was still a citizen of Paris, still honor bound to do what was best for France, to pursue ideals no matter the cost.

Then, controversy:

King Abducted Against His Will, Assembly Says!

Commissioners Sent to Bring le Bon Papa Home to Paris

The news sheets read. No one understood what had happened, everyone wanted news but it couldn't trickle in fast enough. Arno even went below ground to the Sanctuary to see if they knew anything, but Trenet was - and he couldn't believe what people were telling him - was cursing in three languages and kicking over chairs. He didn't understand why and didn't dare ask if the woman was so irate, but it became obvious two days later when the King returned to Paris. Under guard.

He had run away.

Louis, Marie-Antoinette, his sister Madame Élizabeth, the Dauphine and his governess, his daughters, all found in Varennes, 150 miles away, in a six-horse carriage, the king himself playing valet. Paris watched the family be dragged back to Tuileries and placed under house arrest, and nobody knew what to say. Everyone had assumed the Constituent Assembly made their laws under
the approval of the King, that was the entire point of the new Constitution made two years ago. To know that he fled…

Eventually, one emotion finally bubbled up through the stunned shock:

Anger.

_The King had fled his country!_ Everyone had been afraid he would flee Easter, but now their fears had been justified; the king was afraid to lose the unchecked power he had, he opposed the rational thinking that had led to the Assembly, _he was against the Revolution!_ He was a counter-revolutionary! He didn't want to see the people rise above their station, he didn't want to hand the rights of law over to the educated, he didn't want _people to be fed_, he only wanted his bitch-wife's lavish parties and extravagant dresses and to have _all the comforts_ while France _starved_ because there was no grain and bread was _so expensive_ and _what did he think would happen?_

Information trickled in to be deconstructed down to the very word: He had left the 21st, with his six-horse carriage and ridiculous cover - a man had recognized him because his profile was on the _assignats_ - he had been heading to Montmédy where a _marquis_ had been waiting for him with a royalist army - entire contingents of which were from _Switzerland and Germany!_ The King didn't even trust his _own people!_

And what did it mean to have foreign troops of French soil, no matter how close to the border it was? Any hope of fixing France in her own house was now up in the air, what if all of Europe swept down to destroy the Revolution? There were other monarchies out there, did they, like Louis, hold the Revolution in contempt - afraid to lose their power and willing to invade France itself to prevent something as radical as rational thought from polluting their waters? What could the King be trusted with after this breach of faith?

Nothing, obviously, he could be trusted with nothing! France couldn't afford to have a king that was not loyal to his own people, and that meant that only the people could fight for themselves. Monarchy, indeed, royalists, were _poison_ to the Revolution and needed to be expunged! An entire section of the Jacobins broke off to be their own political clubs as they pushed for the King to be punished. But how? _Trial? Execution? What would the Assembly do?_ They suspended his functions until further notice but how would they respond to this… this… this _treason?_

Arno went through it all, each emotion in turn, as the devastation of what happened started to sink in. The escape was all the Café Théâtre could think about, even first thing in the morning they didn't ask how each other was, they asked what news they had. The news sheets were working almost around the clock to try and give people details they were desperate for. So much was wild speculation and rumor, bits and pieces of fact only barely confirmed by the Brotherhood, there was so much to process it was almost too much to feel…!

The Brotherhood was beside itself: Mirabeau's work for a constitutional monarchy feared to be completely undone with the betrayal. They were as shocked as the French people, and everything was in disarray.

Arno, and frankly, the rest of Paris was just about fed up with this. Discussions and assemblies were finally getting their voices heard, and the King up and fled his own people? What was the point of having a King if he didn't believe in them or listen to them? All around Paris, the people were speaking more and more firmly about just abolishing the nobility wholesale and running the country themselves. The Americans were doing that, right? So it wasn't unheard of.

But the Assembly was still mediating. Trying to find that middle ground that the people, and Arno, were giving up on.
This led to heated arguments in the streets, and more protests that turned to riots. As July heated up, so did tempers. On July fifteenth, Louis was declared inviolable by the Assembly, and thus could not be put on trial. However, Louis was suspended from all duties until the Constitution was completed.

The Constitution that the Assembly had been working on for how long at this point?

Paris did not care for the fact that Louis was exempted from trial for what was clearly treason to the French people.

Moderate Jacobins had split off to form their own political club, as the Jacobins focused a great deal of anger for this injustice, and more political clubs just kept forming.

Paris was splitting down the middle, workshops that had been closed and caused unemployment were fighting against higher-skilled journeymen who hadn't seen an increase in pay for years. All this with the King's flight left Paris as a powder keg.

Arno was somewhat tempted to light the fuse.

Really? Abandon Paris? What the hell had Louis been thinking!

And that was when he got the letter.

It arrived at the Café Théâtre July 1st, and Arno recognized the script almost immediately.

"Monsieur?" Jacques asked after delivering the missive.

Arno looked up, blinking as he realized he was still in public – he tucked the letter into his lapel as fast as he could, dismissing it as, "Nothing," and going back to the accounting ledger. His words were apparently not convincing, however, as in the span of half an hour both Mme Gouze and Yvette came in to ask how he was doing and if there was anything they needed. Both of them looked at his lapel suspiciously, and both of them seemed to know who the letter was from.

"I've read the papers," Yvette said, Haitian accent soft even as her tone was very firm. "I know what they said about that Théroigne de Méricourt before she dropped off the map, and that woman who was here three months ago is cut from the same cloth. She will use you for her own pleasure and leave you when she's done. Burn that letter, don't open it, don't waste a thought on her!"

Mme Gouze, Charlotte, was softer about it. "I know what she means to you," she said, sitting in front of his desk. "I can't stop you from reading it. But I can say this: Please, be careful."

Arno hardly said a word, hackles rising that such intelligent women were so determined to tell him what to do. He disappeared to his room over the café and grabbed a letter knife. He sat in the chair by the windows, staring at the penmanship, the soft curves of the o's and a's in his name, felt warmth in his chest and fear in his heart. What if she rejected him? Again? He rocked in his seat, unable to sit still, working up the nerve before he finally closed his eyes and cut the envelope open.

Dear Arno, it read:

I confess I'm not entirely sure what to say here. 'It was good to see you again' somehow rings hollow, an empty space unfit to contain the totality of my feelings. And yet I am pleased—

Arno closed his eyes to the happiness that suddenly overwhelmed him. She had been pleased. She had been happy to see him. There was still hope... He read on.
And yet I am pleased—pleased that the Assassins have not yet changed you completely.

... Oh Arno, what have you done? I know we didn’t part on the best of terms, but to go running to the Assassins? My Father kept you away from them for a reason. Their Creed is like wine—sweet enough at first blush, and in moderation it makes life seem more bearable, but drink too deeply and you find naught but madness and anarchy. They are little more than barbarians pretending to be sophisticated philosophers, bloodthirsty savages that thrive on the poor and underprivileged – thinking they are lifting them up when in fact they are keeping them from their best selves.

No doubt they've already filled your mind with tales of how dreadful we Templars are, that we would make slaves of humanity and place our boots on the world's neck. That is ridiculous. You knew my father, and you know me—I can only pray that is enough to give the lie to those tales. My Order has turned against me, and I am hunted by those I once called friend. I could not bear it if you turned against me, also, and I fear the Assassins may yet lure you into their deadly embrace. However—

Arno ducked his head, sucking in a breath as he processed the words. Did she really think the cult would turn him against her?

However—in spite of my reservations you took me to their sanctuary to bargain, defended me against their abuse, and did battle against that vermin who would frame me. Clearly, they have not felled you yet.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You were never one to be easily awed.

It seems that only we two care about my père and his brutal murder. It also seems we have both found ourselves at an impasse in the hunt for my father's killer. The Assassins are no doubt in chaos after the death of their Grandmaitre, and I am again in hiding, leaning on only a handful of people to do the work that I should be doing. How low we have been brought! Forced to rely on others until we are strong enough to do our work. But, perhaps together, we can accomplish what neither of us alone could. It's nice to think that after all this time, we're still better together than apart.

Think of me and be well.

Yours,

Élise

Arno stared at the letter, leaning back in his chair and processing what she had said.

"You had better come back to me."

The sentence drifted into his head, unfamiliar until he realized Élise had said that before he had ventured into Sainte-Chappelle, before confronting Belluc. He remembered that feeling, the relief and secret happiness that she still thought fondly of him, and that was still a chance they could be together. That emotion was in him again, now, and he struggled for the right name...

Hope.

For the first time since M. de la Serre's death, for the first time since Élise's total rejection of him, he felt hope. He had somewhere else to go, he had a place with Élise – no, rather, he could have one again. So much had been broken with the Monsieur's death, Élise most of all, but it looked like she had at last forgiven him for his greatest sin: failing to deliver the letter. She could still smile at him, think of him fondly, and think she was better with him in her life.
He smiled. Happiness bloomed in him so strongly he almost giggled, and he knew that there was a way past all of this. Redemption was possible. Even probable.

Avenging M. de la Serre came first. With his killer's vanquished, Élise would no longer have to hide, and then they could be together. Oh, he was so relieved to know she could still welcome him back.

He had work to do. Élise was not in a position to investigate, but Arno was. Assassinations may have been banned, but that didn't mean he couldn't keep looking for Germain – Trenet's rules be damned. If he saw an opportunity he would pursue it no matter the cost. He would get to Germain, he would avenge M. de la Serre, and he would earn his redemption and be worthy of Élise. He had to take his fetch and carry work more seriously, it was the Templars who killed M. de la Serre, and he couldn't let Beylier blocking from the investigation stop him if he saw something linked to the murderer.

He went downstairs and Célestine smiled as they passed each other in the hall. "Good to see a spring in your step, Monsieur," she said, blushing slightly.

Arno smiled. Yes. There was still more to do. If Paris could come back from the King's betrayal, then he could do no less.

**July 17, 1791**

Arno was almost relieved when Fabre showed up, not looking like a King of Rats, to pull him for an assignment. Arno's arm was finally back to full functionality, leaving only a scar along the bicep. Yvette and the rest of the staff still kept all alcohol away from him. He would still stare off into space, still quietly grieving the loss of Mirabeau, and everyone watched him very closely. But now he had days where he smiled, complimented them on their work, engaged in conversation with the customers, and the staff silently expressed their relief that he had turned a corner.

"Monsieur Fabre," Arno greeted when Célestine brought him to the intendent's office. "How can we help you?"

"Good to see you, Monsieur Dorian," Fabre greeted politely while Célestine shut the door. He glanced around and raised an eyebrow to Arno.

"It's safe to talk," he said softly.

Fabre nodded. "Word has reached me from some of my 'subjects' that something will be going down on the Champs de Mars. I need help observing an area that large."

Arno offered a wry, self-deprecating grin. "And the errand boy is summoned," he muttered. He may have turned a corner, but he was still bitter over his punishment.

Fabre looked hard at him, but said nothing.

"Shall we proceed?" Arno said, standing.

"I'll leave now. I'll be waiting outside in more fitting attire in an hour. That way your staff won't suspect anything."

Arno blinked not having expected the consideration. He dipped his head. "Merci."

Fabre shrugged with a grin.
So, an hour later, Arno headed out, *Madame* Gouze discreetly handing him a knife to hide in his boot, and Arno found the King of Rats as he headed to one of the bridges to the southern half of the city.

"What's been going on?" Arno asked as they weaved through the streets and crowds, not at all looking like they knew each other.

"A rally, protest, petition, God only knows, but *something* has been making crowds gather. Three guesses over what."

The King's flight from Paris was left unsaid.

It was just over an hour's walk, weaving through the streets, and they arrived to quite the site. Unbidden, Arno's eagle automatically burst fireworks around one man on a horse.

"Lafayette?" he gasped, shocked his eagle had activated on its own.

Fabre turned sharply. "Lafayette? Dammitall, we need to know what's going on."

It didn't take much. Talking to the crowds revealed that it was all about a petition. Brissot, editor and writer of *Le Patriote français*, had drawn up a petition demanding the removal of the king. But it seemed some unsavory people were hanging about to get an indecent view of women's ankles.

Arno didn't need to glance at Fabre to know that he was frowning just as hard at that piece of news. Men had come to harass women. Disgusting.

The problem was that the crowds had realized that and hanged them without any arrest or trial. Naturally the mayor of Paris had declared martial law and had ordered Lafayette to disperse the crowd. That was what Arno and Fabre had arrived to.

"So, it's all over?" Arno asked dryly. "We finally get here and everything's done?"


"Indeed."

Because no one had gone to bed to sleep on things and cool off tempers, that meant things were still festering.

"Let's get to a roof," Fabre suggested. Arno agreed.

Buildings were in short supply on the Champs-de-Mars, the military training field was in fact a massive field, and only a few buildings dotted it for administrative purposes. They did find a roof at the edge of the parade ground that looked across the Champs-de-Mars with a much better view.

"The people are still here," Arno observed. "They're dispersed, but the crowds are still around."

"Not good," Fabre grumbled. "If they're hanging around, they're going to get angrier."

Arno nodded. "Should we see Lafayette? Tell him what's going on?"

Fabre turned with his jaw dropped open. "What? No! Of course not! Assassins are invisible!"

Arno raised his brows in surprise. "Isn't Lafayette a friend of that American *Maître*? And..." Arno grimaced, "Bellec had me meet him once."
Fabre muttered several words, all terribly impolite.

Arno worked to not be offended. He couldn't win. Either he was a pariah for being raised a Templar, or a pariah for being Bellec's pupil.

Fabre finally looked Arno directly in the eye. "If Bellec wasn't already dead, I'd kill him," he said dramatically. "Asshole doesn't seem to have known a thing about being an Assassin."

That actually made Arno raise a brow. "Really?" he retorted dryly. "I thought he was a paragon among the Assassins, that he was the best of the best and the most revered teacher."

"Oh, he was good at his job," Fabre hissed, "but apparently with reckless abandon!" More swears were immediately forthcoming.

Arno said nothing. What could he say? He kept watching the crowds. Lafayette was keeping the Champs-de-Mars clear, but it was obvious to Arno that it wouldn't last. Crowds along the edges seemed to be swelling. He kept watching, people flowing from one edge to another, tension building. Something would happen, no doubt. This was Paris, and by this point, it seemed riots and violence were a daily occurrence.

"You don't ask questions."

Arno blinked, turning to Fabre. "Sorry, what?"

Fabre was looking at him intensely. "You don't ask questions."

"I'm pretty sure I've asked many questions over the years."

"No doubt," Fabre replied softly. "Questions like 'How may I be of service?' or 'When do you want this done?'. I'm talking deeper questions."

Arno raised a brow, asking sarcastically, "Such as?"

Fabre shook his head. "That's exactly what I'm talking about."

Arno gave a baleful look. "My asking a question proves your point that I don't ask questions. That makes total and utter sense. No, really. That's a completely logical conclusion."

Fabre tilted his head, eyes measuring and intense, but there was a sense of confusion about him. That he didn't understand Arno. Well, that was fine because at this point, Arno didn't understand Fabre either, so they were even. Eventually, Fabre let out a long, tired sigh.

"Arno, we are a Brotherhood of curiosity. We find wonder in discovery, and we seek answers to whatever we think of. It's why Leonardo da Vinci and Copernicus were close to the Order. It's why we often find allies in scholars and schools. Someone has a question and they question and question until they come across the Creed, in some way."

"And here I thought this was merely a cult for those with nowhere else to go," Arno offered wryly. "Oh no, you don't get a coin and get tested to arrive, you simply ask a question and you're instantly accepted into the Brotherhood." It was all dry sarcasm, but he couldn't quite keep the bitterness from his voice. Because he was someone who came because he had nowhere else to go. None of this philosophy that so many espoused. All this meant was that he wasn't supposed to be here. But dammit, where else would he be? He was going to make a place for himself here somehow.

just don't ask them as questions."

Arno was fed up. "*What?*" he asked in a flat, dangerous voice.

"You state, you use sarcasm, you make a great deal of assumptions instead of asking outright, but you ask in so subtle a fashion you don't even know you're asking." Fabre smiled brightly. "*Bien.* I can work with that."

"I have no idea what you mean."

Fabre shrugged. "That's fine. I'm glad you came with me. This has been very enlightening."

"Good for you," Arno groused, since he was more confused than ever.

The crowds below had thickened considerably, pushing back into the Champs-de-Mars.

"That's not good," Fabre muttered.

Arno bit back his sarcastic reply. Carefully, he asked his eagle for help, and with small fireworks of color, his eyes were drawn to two people. Danton and Desmoulins. Anyone who read any of the papers knew who they were: Danton was a Cordeliers and a fierce member of the Assembly, Desmoulins a radical pamphleteer too extreme for Café Théâtre. "Looks like they've reorganized."

"If it stays a petition, then fine," Fabre said, studying the crowds, "but with Lafayette still there trying to keep the area clear till tomorrow, this won't end well."

There was a sudden eagle screech so loud as to be in his ear, and Arno whipped his head around, wondering how he hadn't heard an eagle come to roost on the rooftop. But instead his eyes seemed to find a specific man in the crowds, tricorn hat with a cockade pinned to it, shouting with everyone else, fist raised, dull gray coat worn thin and patched.

"*Merde,*" Fabre hissed.

"What?" Arno asked, eyes still glued to the man and the eagle screeching a loud affirmation in his ear.

"Someone I've been looking for, for about four years. I thought I'd chased him out of Paris."

"A dear friend?" Arno asked dryly.

"A *putain de connard* that will not live to see nightfall," Fabre said darkly.

Arno blinked, the eagle screech gone from his ears, and he turned in surprise to Fabre. The ax-wielder was usually affable and friendly, to hear such loathing and contempt was beyond unusual, it was unheard of.

"Urbain?" Arno asked softly.

Fabre took a soft, quiet breath, and the rage hanging around him seemed to contain itself. Barely.

"Just the reason I joined the Brotherhood," he replied lightly. "He's down in that crowd, and I'm going to take great delight in cutting off his testicles, cooking them over a fire, and shoving them with a pike down his throat. Then I'll cut off his penis and shove that down as well. It would probably help to break each finger as well. Probably the arms too. And the legs. Maybe a few ribs. Just to be sure. Then pull out his intestines and make him put them back inside. Then leave him in a shit-filled gutter. Yes, I think that's just about right."
"What the hell did he do to you?" Arno asked.

"Nothing good." Fabre smiled brightly. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

Arno reached out and grabbed Fabre's arm. "Gray, patched, coat, tricorn with a cockade?"

Fabre blinked. "How did you—"

"If you go down there and kill him, you'll set that powder keg alight."

Fabre's nostrils flared, but he took a deep breath. Then another. And another. "Very well, Arno," he said lightly. "What do you suggest?"

Arno grit his teeth and looked below. The Champs-de-Mars was full again, and Lafayette was trying to get the crowds to disperse. The crowd's response was to throw rocks at the National Guard and Lafayette. It seemed several didn't recognize him. A warning shot was fired, but still the crowds didn't disperse. "We need to separate him from that crowd."

Fabre frowned. "He'll recognize me on sight."

Arno offered a grin. "But not me."

Fabre beamed. "I'll watch from the roofs."

Nodding, Arno made his way down to the crowds. He occasionally asked his eagle to help, and instead of the overwhelming screech, it was the usual crackle of fireworks and sparks of colors. Absently, Arno wondered why his eagle was so inconsistent with how it appeared. Still, he listened and maneuvered through the crowds, which were so thick it was very difficult. Climbing a lamppost, like others were, Arno studied the man once he was close enough for a plan. Just grabbing and dragging him was out of the question. So what to do. Lie, obviously, but how.

Oh, of course.

Arno walked up to the man and grabbed his arm. "Monsieur," he said urgently. "You need to move!"

"What?" the man growled, foul breath making it difficult for Arno to keep a straight face and not flinch from the smell. "I'm not leavin' till I've sign' the petition!"

Drunk as well. Easier and harder.

"You will," Arno promised. "I'm getting you there faster. We were dispersed earlier because some nasty people were seeking to harass the fairer half of our country. I heard people accusing you of the same, and I don't want us to be dispersed again."

Of course, giving the explanation was a halting, difficult affair. The man couldn't keep a sentence clear in his head and Arno had to repeat himself constantly. But by keeping the man so distracted, he didn't realize he was being led to the edges of the crowd as another warning shot was fired over the crowd.

"Hang on," the man coughed, "we're gettin' away fr'm th' petition!"

Great. Now Arno had an unwilling person to drag along.

"No," Arno kept gently pulling. "We're taking a short cut around the crowd. We'll get closer faster that way."
"Nnno!"

... The man was a child!

"Come now, we'll get you to that petition and you can sign—"

The man pulled his arm free and tottered back into the crowds, fist raised and joining the chants and songs, slurring the whole way.

"What the hell did you do to Fabre?" Arno muttered. "Hell, what could a drunk like you do?"

With few other options, Arno grabbed the man and yanked harder. The man spun, hat falling off and getting stomped on by the massive crowds in the July heat, and as he spun around Arno punched him solidly in the gut. Automatically, the man keeled over and threw up and Arno used that as the excuse to hook lift the man up and start leaving the crowd. "Heat exhaustion, passed out from the heat, make way!"

Another warning shot was fired over the crowds as Arno brought the drunkard to an alley. It was still packed with people, but instead they were trying to get through to the crowds behind Arno. Perfect. Fabre was there and casually walked by, and Arno heard the almost silent flick of a hidden blade being released and the man stumbled down to the ground.

"Roofs," Fabre said tightly.

Within a half hour they were once more above. Fabre was pacing, filled with energy, before at last he fell to a seated position and just started sobbing. Arno sat by him, remembering a march of women in October, and people being there for him. He sat there as Fabre pulled himself together, wiping at his face and scratching at his eyes.

There was yet another warning shot down below.

"Urbain?" Arno asked softly, as the sobs settled.

Fabre nodded. Then he let out a deep sigh and offered a small, sad smile. "So ends the reason I joined the Brotherhood."

Arno didn't ask. That was likely to private a story and Arno's own story was now being used against him. He offered a hand, which Fabre took and let Arno hoist him to standing.

"I think we should get you back to the Café," Arno said. "Return to your kingdom tomorrow. Tonight, have an honest meal."

Fabre chuckled, a little wetly and nodded. "Nothing more to learn here."

There was another shot, but this time followed by screams. Both Arno and Fabre quickly leaned out to see what was going on.

Lafayette had fired into the crowds.

Merde.

To say that Paris wasn't happy was something of an understatement. Before the Massacre of the Champs-de Mars Lafayette was a hero, a veteran of beating back the British in that American war, and as a political figure, he had clout, though he rarely exercised it. He was beloved. But after the Massacre, where Lafayette fired upon his own people, well, Paris didn't much care for the war hero
any more. Everyone was a titter. While Paris was becoming frightfully numb to the riots that were
damn near daily the fact that Lafayette of all people, had ordered firing on the citizens of Paris was
horrifying. The Assembly passed a law the next day forbidding incitement to riot and seditious
petitions. The Jacobins and Girondists felt that most it was aimed most definitely at them, and
prominent members went into hiding. Danton fled to England and Marat just disappeared.

With tempers and temperatures at an all-time high, it was amazing that nothing entirely
catastrophic happened immediately within the streets of Paris.

Fabre stayed at the Café for only one night. After discussing it with Mme Gouze and Augustin,
everyone agreed it was best for Fabre to stay in the attic so that the staff didn't notice and ask
unnecessary questions. The small rotunda made for both easy access and escape, and it was just
storage for seasonal items, things that the staff didn't normally head up to deal with. It didn't take
much to set up a cot and lay a plank of wood left over from repairs on a barrel as a table. Fabre
alternated between tears leaking freely from his eyes and staring into his own memories. Arno
stayed with him the whole time, organizing the rotunda. He'd told the staff he was doing it to keep
busy and avoid alcohol, and he noted that Yvette had a clear twinkle of approval in her eyes. He
didn't bother correcting her.

Augustin took over when Arno had to head down to dinner. After the staff went home, Mme
Gouze went up.

The following morning, Fabre slipped into Arno's room by the ladder to the attic hidden behind a
screen and damn near gave Arno heart attack as he scared him awake to say goodbye with his usual
affable smile. Arno didn't mention that it was partially cracked.

After that it was business as usual.

Only it wasn't entirely usual. People would stop by and reserve the dining hall or ask what the
prices were to have some sort of gathering or meeting in the Café. If this trend continued, Arno was
hoping the extra income could be diverted to other projects he'd been wanting to do. Like the
floors. He'd been waiting to get the floors repaired. But they didn't have the money to shut down
for that.

August remained hot and tempers remained heated. Arno celebrated his birthday busy about the
Café. He didn't really pay any attention to it, since Élise was the only one who paid attention to his
birthday. The Café had been full all week and Arno was running around doing all the duties of both
a steward and intendent, and it was a fair bit. He was often in bed late and up early the following
morning, to say nothing of all the duties of an Assassin. Augustin still used him to help teach
swordsmanship to various novices, ran errands, etc. The one duty that unassigned assassins had that
no one gave to Arno was watching Saint-Chappelle.

Arno was grateful, to say the least.

Unfortunately, two days after Arno's birthday, Paris was set aflame with news.

It was the Declaration of Pillnitz. Prussia and the Austrians had met and declared that matters in
France concerned all of Europe, the French monarchy needed to be strengthened and that the two
would act promptly "with the forces necessary for realizing the purpose of this communal goal. In
expectation, they will give suitable orders to their troops so that they will be ready to commence
activity."

Paris panicked. Troops? Was the Holy Roman Empire and Prussia going to declare war? Troops? If
tensions had been high after the King's flight to Varennes, that was nothing compared to the fear
that perpetuated every street corner and every political club meeting. Violence was once more
everywhere in the streets, but at this point, people were almost numb to it all.

Down in the Sanctuary letters were coming in from the Brotherhood branches in the Holy Roman
Empire and Prussia both. War wasn't going to be declared, but it was clear that the leaders were
very closely watching what was happening in France, and that Leopold II, the Holy Roman
Emperor was very concerned about his sister Marie-Antoinette and her safety. The Austrians were
just as concerned. The French Brotherhood needed to get their house in order, but that was damn
near impossible. This had been building for years. Decades. The Third Estate was finally making
legitimate changes and everything was chaos, but the Third Estate wasn't going to go back to not
having a voice.

And in all this chaos, Arno was called down to the Sanctuary.

He stood with Cosette, Fabre, Pontmercy, and Tissot. Tissot, unsurprisingly given his name, was a
weaver, and he was someone Arno grimaced upon seeing. Tissot had learned that Arno was raised
under M. de la Serre early on and had been very vocal in his dislike of the novice. Tissot had
challenged Arno to many a duel for "practice" but to really use it as a chance to beat Arno down. It
wasn't until Mirabeau's intervention that it had stopped.

Beylier was standing before them, and Arno blinked at seeing gray starting to creep into the
Maître's hair. Bags were dragging under his eyes and it was clear that the Revolution was starting
to age him. They had a mission. With the Austrians so unhappy with France, the Assassins were
going to have to start paying attention to some prominent Austrians that had ties both back to the
nobility of Austria or Prussia, but also had ties to Templars that the Austrian branch of Assassins
had forwarded.

They were going to look into a particular political club that four such interesting persons
frequented. Fabre had already started the legwork with his subjects in the streets, knowing the
comings and goings of the club, schedules, etc. By the end of the week, they were going to sneak
in and copy whatever they could to get a better picture of what the Austrian Templars were
planning.

"Particularly if the other Templar branches have any feelings on the overthrowing of the Templars
here in France," Beylier said heavily. "Anything we can use. Your job is copying, not killing or
going off on some damnfool personal quest. Keep each other safe. Fabre, the team is yours. I'm
needed back and I'll have to rush to get there on time."

"Oui, Maître," Fabre dipped his head. Beylier departed and Fabre sat them all down at a table to go
over everything he had been able to get thus far.

To say that Fabre had been thorough had been an understatement. His beggars, thieves, and rabble
had been stalking the place for the better part of a month. There was a clear routine about the huge
building. While the café downstairs was clearly where the bulk of the club's work was done, a
newspaper printed on the floor above, slanted to the club's views, and above that were rooms for
meetings. It was those rooms, with locked desks and shelves of ledgers, that would be the most
useful.

"Cosette, you'll be taking a job as a server at the café next week. You'll be able to get us in as a
result. Keep an ear open and your eagle watching. You'll have to warn us if something goes wrong
while we're upstairs. It will take hours even with all of us copying."

Cossette nodded, turning to Arno. "I'll start working at your café this week to get the basics. That
way I won't be spotted as inexperienced."
Arno nodded. "Yvette would likely be glad to see you. Célestine as well." She nodded.

Fabre continued, "I'll be outside. I'll be in charge of distractions as you need them. Light a candle in the window for me, I'll have my subjects do something appropriately grand." He gave a wry chuckle. "I can read plenty, but my writing is worse shit than horse shit." Arno blinked, looking to Fabre's hands, which he had seen for a long time now, before he realized what some of the scars might mean. Someone, years ago, had broken Fabre's hands. Badly. Enough that he probably couldn't write.

Arno's lips thinned as he thought of the man Fabre had killed at the Champs-de-Mars. Then he shook his head.

"I'll probably be the best scribe," Pontmercy puffed his chest. "I do run a bookshop and am a fine hand."

Arno chuckled. "Tell that to my staff. They think I must have been trained as a bookkeeper."

"Oho!" Pontmercy puffed further in more obvious fake pride. "I shall beg to differ Monsieur!" he declared grandly, twirling his mustache. The two of them laughed.

"Alright," Fabre cut in before banter could start building, "we'll be striking next week. You know what you're focusing on. Start preparing."

"Cosette," Arno gestured, "come with me. I'll give you over to Yvette."

Cosette beamed.

With one week to prepare, Arno worked diligently. With Cosette getting trained by Jacques, Yvette, and Célestine, Arno left the Café with Mme Gouze and Augustin and spent most of his days on the rooftops, observing as Fabre's cutthroats had. He kept pencil and paper handy and sketched out the building and most likely layout. He dined in there for lunches, listening to the flow of the people and observing, taking more notes, and occasionally getting "lost" in his cups and tottering to a room or floor he wasn't supposed to. He saw Pontmercy come by, using the ruse of looking for new newspapers for his bookshop, but the two never acknowledged each other. Cosette, unsurprisingly, got her job as a member of the wait-staff and Arno discreetly passed off the maps he had made to her thus far to give her a starting point as she took over getting layouts.

The night before they were to infiltrate, they all met at the Sanctuary.

"Bien," Fabre traced along the floor plans that Cosette had made. "That helps narrow it down. Focus on this study first," he pointed to the south facing wall. My eagle keeps calling me there. I expect that's where we'll find the most useful information. Tissot, you're most senior. You'll be in charge."

Arno carefully kept his face blank and held back his wince. Tissot would be a professional for this, surely. Everyone in this cult was a professional and could handle this. Of course.

Cosette was in position, starting her shift, Fabre was already trolling the streets and placing some of his subjects. Tissot had them waiting till dark before they started, so they sat on a roof across the street.

"By dark the club will be in full swing," Tissot explained, staring intently. "The print shop should be closed, that will give us an empty floor between us and the trouble. That will give us a grace period."
Arno rolled his eyes. That was all damn obvious, and he got the distinct impression that Tissot was being so wordy because he believed he had some sort of novice present. Arno didn't have to guess who the weaver thought was the novice. He was the most recent promotion of the three of them. But he had been doing this for two years now. A year and a half, almost, since his "graduation" of killing Sivert. He knew why they were waiting. It didn't need to be spelled out.

He bit out a sigh.

The sun was below the roofline, leaving the sky quickly darkening to a deep purple before it faded to a complete black. Tissot gestured and the three of them flowed over the roofs to get to the window Tissot had chosen as their entrance. Tissot jimmied the window open to the unused attic space and they all easily slid in to towers of boxes and covered furniture, useless bits of junk piled up there for storage. A quick, silent survey found a ladder and they descended.

"Pontmercy," Tissot hissed, gesturing to the locked door to the south-facing study.

The bookseller looked at the lock before stepping back. "Arno, you're the better lockpick."

Arno nodded, and knelt down. Three tumblers? Definitely information inside here for so complicated and expensive a lock. He kept his touch light, maneuvering the pieces for almost a minute before everything clicked into place and he carefully opened the door, listening for squeaks in hinges, but it opened easily and silently.

Tissot was frowning heavily, but he nodded, and quickly set up heavy velvet drapes in front of the windows. Once covered candles were lit. A quick glance around showed two walls with built-in shelves, books overflowing. Three ornate desks were clustered together, piled high with papers and books and ledgers, and an armoire had doors opened to reveal even more books and ledgers and paperwork.

"No wonder Fabre's eagle pointed this room out," Arno muttered. There was undoubtedly something here. Almost automatically, he reached for his eagle, thinking about Austrians and their intentions towards France. Immediately a headache bloomed and he hissed in a breath. Not only had he heard his usual crackle of fireworks and sparks of color drawing his eyes to the built-in shelves, he also had bright gold for three of the books at the armoire, his eyes were drawn papers on and inside the desks and three eagles screeching all at once with the distant crackle of fireworks.

It was too much.

Too much color, too much sound.

He cut off his eagle immediately and closed his eyes, trying to regain his equilibrium, hand going up to his head. He must have staggered, because suddenly Pontmercy was bracing him as Arno focused on breathing through the sudden migraine that wanted to split his head open with a clever.

"Arno?" Pontmercy hissed. "What happened?"

Arno groaned, opening his eyes and blinking and squinting. Tissot had come over with a candle, and Pontmercy had evidently helped him to a chair and was looking at him.

"Blew out his eagle," Tissot frowned.

"How?" Pontmercy grunted.

"Too much," Arno said between heavy breaths. "That was... more than my eagle usually does."
Tissot tilted his head, but it was Pontmercy that asked. "What do you mean?"

Arno thinned his lips. He remembered Fabre mentioning that weak eagles manifested as something other than an eagle, and he didn't want to admit that. "It was like—" he stumbled with the words when his head jabbed particularly harshly at him and he closed his eyes and buried them in his fists. "Merde," he grunted. "I saw what my eagle wanted, but there was... more. Three books in the armoire, papers on and in the desks, so many eagle cries..." He rubbed at his temples. "Too much...."

"Armoire?" Tissot asked pointedly. "What three books?"

Arno rubbed at his temples some more. "Drawer, bottom left. Top shelf, right hand side, near the middle. Bottom shelf, under five other books."

Tissot started muttering, but Arno couldn't make it out over the pounding of his head. It was finally starting to recede. Slightly. And he still had work to do. Merde!

"The desk?" Pontmercy asked gently.

"Center desk," Arno replied. "Still on top of it, all spread about, but a lot in the center drawer and top drawer on the left." He blinked up at them. He could certainly see better now, but the after-images of what he'd seen from the eagle were still there, drawing his eyes to different places automatically. It stung like hell so he dipped his head to rub at it again.

"Incroyable," Pontmercy muttered.

"What?" Arno growled. "There's nothing incredible about this putain de migraine."

"Hold your tongue," Tissot hissed loudly, voice cracking almost to speaking levels. "Focus on what your eagle pointed out. We'll handle our own areas."

Arno had no idea what that meant other than to mind his own damn business. Well fine. Working by the bookcase would let him keep his back to the various after-images and not get nauseous from the blow-out eagle.

Pontmercy patted Arno's shoulder, handing him a candle. Arno simply nodded and went to the bookcase, looking to the ledgers his eagle had pointed out, and pulled out the sheets and ink that he had brought to start copying. With his head throbbing so badly, he didn't bother asking his eagle what specifically to copy, and he doubted that it would be able to tell him at any rate. Specific books had been highlighted, not individual pages or words. So instead he trusted his own research and knowledge, and started to scan. The first book he had grabbed was a journal of meetings, what was discussed and strategies decided on. Arno checked dates, started at the most recent, and started working back, copying anything he found important. He was careful to copy quickly, but neatly, not dropping or spilling any of the ink he had brought for this.

Almost an hour later, his head was no longer throbbing, but the eye-strain of reading and copying by a single candle wasn't letting the headache go away completely. He had almost finished with the journal, having everything he thought pertinent, and probably extra since he didn't dare trust his eagle at the moment. He sat back with a sigh, put aside his writing utensils, and gently placed the book back exactly as he had found it, all the way down to how the papers had draped over it. He stood and stretched, needing to move for a few minutes before he got back to it.

Arno turned to look about the room and was happy that the after-images of whatever had happened before had faded. Tissot was still by the armoire, sitting on the floor for his copying. Pontmercy
was at the desk, but he was rubbing his hands, looking ready for a break as well. Arno came over. "How far?" he asked quietly.

"Halfway," Pontmercy replied, reaching up to straighten his already perfect mustache and beard. "If anything I'm actually absorbing is true, we're going to have our work cut out for us with the Austrians."

"I agree," Arno whispered back. He reached into his coat and pulled out some wedges of Cantal cheese, offering one to Pontmercy, who offered quiet thanks. Arno glanced at Tissot, frowned to himself, but walked over to offer some.

"Non," Tissot said, distracted as he kept copying. "Now move, you're blocking my light."

"Oui, oui," Arno muttered tiredly.

"How's the headache?" Pontmercy asked, also standing and stretching out his back.

"Dull, but not going away," Arno replied, popping another piece of Cantal into his mouth. "I'm not looking forward to explaining why my eyes are so red again."

"Then don't," Tissot offered neutrally. "You're the boss. Leave it at that." He turned another page.

Pontmercy offered a dry, almost silent chuckle. "You haven't met Arno's staff, apparently," he said softly. "They all mother him incessantly."

"Hmph," Tissot looked over, eyes flat in disbelief. "I wasn't aware an Assassin was a child that needed mothering."

Arno ignored the insult, mostly. "Hardly," Arno replied lightly. He couldn't explain. Not really. The staff of Café Théâtre held him in incredibly high regard. Yvette felt she owed him for plucking her from the slums, Célestine and Jacques felt indebted as the Café earned more and more money – attributing it to him – and Augustin and Mme Gouze... they looked after all the staff like they were their children. But explaining any of that would sound like he was glorifying himself and he didn't really need to explain himself.

Tissot replied with a look that was less than impressed.

Arno just sighed and turned back to Pontmercy. He was watching the clock on the desk and he was giving himself ten minutes before he got back to copying. Chatter, unsurprisingly, wasn't much of an option, but Arno just stood, his eyes closed to rest them, enjoying not being hunched over a book.

"Arno," Pontmercy asked quietly.

"Hm?"

"You said your eagle saw papers on and in the desk."

"Mm-hm," Arno replied. "Bright gold. My eagle doesn't usually work like that."

The silence from Pontmercy was unusually heavy, and Arno couldn't help but open his eyes to look at Pontmercy.

"What?"

Pontmercy shook his head. "It's just... that's what my eagle looks like."
Arno blinked. "Really?"

Pontmercy shrugged, pushing back his green hood enough to rub his fingers through his hair, then pull it back down. "We don't usually discuss eagles," he said softly, staring out into space. "There are some records. Ezio Auditore, of Italie, he saw the world in colors. Altair, the founder of our Brotherhood, they say his eagle was never asleep. So many Assassins have eagles, but we never talk about how they inform us."

"It's private," Tissot stated flatly, "Rooted to who we are individually. To share so much about ourselves would be folly."

Arno grudgingly agreed. His eagle was weak after all.

"Perhaps," Pontmercy acknowledged, "but the lack of knowledge leads to folly. We don't want Arno to suffer like this again, so we need to know more. But our lack of study of eagles is now hampering us. The medical community has started sharing knowledge in the past thirty years or so, publishing their journals. I have a few in my shop. There's a doctor who comes to my shop, he always buys the journals, saying that it helps him be a better doctor. Why don't we do something similar with eagles?"

"And leave works where Templars could find them?" Tissot hissed, turning to glare at them. Or rather at Arno.

Arno scowled back.

"Not in the open," Pontmercy quietly growled. "In the Sanctuary. It's been undiscovered for centuries. What place could be safer than—"

"The Sanctuary that was just disclosed to a Templar?" Tissot's hiss bordered up to speaking levels, glare firmly stuck on Arno, before he sucked in a breath sharply, holding it before releasing slowly.

Arno let out a long breath. "Élise will not disclose the Sanctuary," he kept as calm as he could with his temper roiling just under his skin. "She has been deposed as Grandmaître, her allies being cut down. She's trying to get the Templars back under control. She doesn't have time to go mounting an assault on us. If we help her, she wouldn't even have the inclination." He had already explained his reasons, several times, to the members of the Council. He was tired of repeating himself.

"You aren't a good judge of character, obviously," Tissot shot back, voice once more cracking into actual speaking levels. "Templar-raised, if I remember? he asked sarcastically. "Still have Templar leanings if you brought that Templar bitch to us."

Arno's nostrils flared, but he let out his breath slowly.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," he growled. "Germain has ousted Élise. Germain is planning something with the Templars and has no compunctions about setting us against Élise and her allies. Germain has been playing us and we need to stop falling for that. Instead we need to take his own subterfuge and use it against him."

"They're all Templars!" Tissot almost shouted.

That was enough to make them all freeze. They couldn't afford that level of volume.

"Get back to work," Tissot grunted, turning back to his armoire. "We've had enough of a break."
Arno didn't feel like he'd had a break. Still he went back to the built-in shelves and the next book his eagle had pointed out.

The copying was tedious, and almost an hour later, Pontmercy came over to help Arno with his stack. A half hour after that, Tissot came over, and Arno scowled bitterly as Tissot didn't bother copying what still needed copying, but instead went over what Arno had already done, clearly making sure that Arno hadn't missed anything and treating what Arno had copied as either sub-par or suspect.

Damn cult.

Another hour later and they were finally done. Everything had been put back properly so that nothing looked amiss, the velvet had been pulled down, the candles extinguished, and a check of the streets showed that the late night had left them almost empty.

Pontmercy checked the hall, and Arno could almost hear the eagle, see the faintest of colors, before he closed his eyes to prevent the headache from worsening. They all eased up to the attic, then out to the roofs.

"Scatter," Tissot ordered. "Meet back at the Sanctuary. We'll drop off the files there." He looked pointedly at Arno. "Unless you want to share them with your Templar bitch in an effort to gain her favor?"

"Back off," Pontmercy growled.

"He should never have come to the Brotherhood," Tissot replied. "He should have stayed lost."

Arno quickly had to grab Pontmercy's arm before the book-seller lunged at Tissot, anger and rage blocking out all reason on his face.

"Arretez! Marcel!" Arno barked. "He hasn't said anything I haven't heard before!"

Pontmercy still tried to pull free, fury radiating off of him. Arno thought he heard an eagle, and looked around. He could see Fabre below, gesturing wildly at them.

"Time to go," he insisted, forcefully tugging Pontmercy along. "Someone's coming."

Tissot only smiled smugly before taking off over the roofs. Arno dragged Pontmercy the other way.

"Connard!" Pontmercy growled once they were several few streets away. "Putain de connard! Of course we should have gone looking for you. Of course we should have found you. Of fucking course you belong with the Brotherhood."

Arno said nothing for a long while. Too many thoughts bouncing around in his head, feelings touched off from the heist, lingering headache. Just... too much. The whole night had been too much. Once they reached street level, they needed to separate. Before they did, Arno reached out a hand and placed it on Marcel's shoulder. "Je te remerci," he thanked him. Because Marcel... Urbain... Cosette... They stood by him. The same for Mme Gouze and Augustin.

It... meant the world to him.
This week's theme: support structures.

Arno is given a moment with each member of his core team where they can demonstrate healthy support structures and ways to help a friend through an ordeal. Cosette as the Best Friend gives support, a friendly ear, and deep friendship. Very few people actively listen to Arno and this is probably the most important thing for him - not that he realizes it yet. Fabre by accident lets on that he's an abuse victim as well - several years after his escape and able to function healthily and cope healthily right up until his old abuser is seen again. Then we see how Fabre might have acted out when he was a child. Pontmercy offers unconditional attachment, another thing Arno doesn't have a lot of experience with, and willingly comes to his defense at the end of the chapter. These three and Café Théâtre are all great examples for Arno on how to become a healthy person.

But fist he hast to want to be helped, and one letter from Élise completely wipes it all away. It's worth noting that the framing of Élise's letter if very important: "didn't part on the best of terms" reframes her total rejection of him, making something so damming seem softer. Arno doesn't recognize it - we didn't recognize it until it was pointed out to us - but this is a form of gaslighting, a way to erase Arno's feelings of that event as invalid and irrelevant. Doing this affects how Arno thinks about Élise - most especially thinking he still has a chance, which means he's trying to have his cake and eat it too. There are other phrases in that letter that manipulate how Arno is supposed to think of the Assassins. God, she's a bad influence.

We also get hints of de Molay, Arno does what he's best at and helps Cosette after her first assassination, and oh yeah. This tiny thing called the FLIGHT TO VARENNES happened. Geez, Ubisoft, we know the Revolution was a complicated mess, but seriously? Not even as a multiplayer? That's the start of the downward turn!

Having said that, we do use this to point out that as good as Assassins are, they can't shape EVERYTHING. Some things are going to sneak under the radar, or they don't have enough people to cover an event (remember that for later).

We also introduce Tissot and Beaumont, who act as the Brotherhood's view of Arno. We know Arno really well because we're in his head, but like with the two of us, a lot goes on in our head that isn't visible to others. They see someone who was raised a Templar, who snarks (without realizing it's a coping mechanism) and scoffs at traditions that are sacred and doesn't understand the Creed. They were encouraged to get into fights with him by Bellec and Arno never actively tried to go out and make friends. More on them individually later, but we also have the chance to give a bigger hint on Arno's eagle vision. Speaking of which:

Next chapter: Eagle Vision :)
Small Steps

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

September 27, 1791

The Sanctuary.

It was the definition of mixed feelings. He had spent just over two years in its midst, learning – or not learning as the Council dictated – under Bellec, being challenged by people who hated M. de la Serre, being judged by the maîtres. But... He had also met Cosette, and Fabre, and Pontmercy. He'd come into the Café Théâtre with Mme Gouze and Grizier. He'd found people who didn't demean him or belittle him or judge him. For the first time in his life he had friends outside of Élise. Never in his life had he had someone tell him he should have been looked for, or bend rules to allow him out into the field, or teach him a skill with a tender hand. It was the first time he could come home and not... well, not worry – not about standing in the household or place with the family or the future of the Third Estate.

But the Sanctuary was not where these best moments came from. No, underground were the memories of the challenges, people muttering under their breath or halting their conversation when he walked into a room. Raised Templar might as well be Templar. And after bringing Élise to the Sanctuary...

It was bad enough when he was summoned by Trenet for philosophical and esoteric studies where she stoically sat in judgement. It was bad enough when Beylier, in charge of mission assignment, told him repeatedly that he was banned from the Germain investigation. It was bad enough when Quemar, so thoroughly against the Templars, simply looked at him. But there were all the other things, too: Tissot and his snide comments, people blaming him for the death of Bellec because they weren't at Sainte Chapelle when it happened, comments about his sleeping with a Templar and the doubts about his loyalty. Café Théâtre may have been a safe haven, but the Sanctuary was simply... not safe.

Going underground meant his back was abnormally straight, his eyes were roving around the halls and galleries waiting for some kind of verbal or silent assault, his jaw so taught he would return home with a headache. Today he had been summoned by Quemar, who knew why, and Arno could only keep his ears open and his glare ready as he moved to the grand staircase and up the steps.

The library with the giant globe was full of Assassins, all patting each other on the back or congratulating Maître Quemar over... something.

"It's finally come," one of the Assassins said, smiling so brightly and with a faint accent. "I can't wait to tell my father."

"It's good news for all of us," Quemar was saying. "Not just the Sephardim like us, but now the Ashkenazim as well. Go spread the word, there's a printer in Les Invalides who prints in Yiddish, he's a friend."

"Oui, Monsieur."

The smile disappeared immediately upon seeing Arno, and he kept his face as blank as possible as a few others left.
"Dorian," Quemar said by way of greeting.

"Maître," he said. "Good news?"

"Oui," he said, and Arno blinked to see such a wide smile on the face of the conservative old maître. "The Assembly just passed a law saying all men in France are citoyens of France, regardless of color or creed, including we of Jewish descent. The immigrants from Eastern Europe will be especially pleased, given how they've been treated up to this point. I'd hoped to include Maître Beylier in the celebration, but he will wait until slavery ends in the Colonies. I can't say I blame him."

"Félicitations," Arno said, nodding his head. At least someone knew how to make things move forward, he thought bitterly. The same could not be said for cult. He closed his eyes and shook his head: bitterness towards the Council shouldn't soil good tidings for so many people. He would have to be better than that to prove himself to the Council and get back on the Germain investigation – assuming he didn't find a lead himself. He had to look at his fetch and carry missions as that: a chance to find a lead on Germain, pursue his goals no matter what the maîtres said. "Is my mission to do with the good tidings?"

"Non, unfortunately," Quemar said. "We've received word of a string of robberies targeting mail coaches in Les Invalides. Your friend Cosette has determined that someone in an official position is leading it, looking for information on valuable shipments. We want you to find a robbery and follow them back to the source, their leader. Report back here and someone else will handle investigating him or her and, if necessary, bringing them peace."

... And who would be the nursemaid?

"Tissot will be with you, as well as Beaumont."

Arno couldn't hide his wince.

"That," Quemar said suddenly, pointing to Arno and taking the effort to get to his feet on stiff legs. "That right there is why we always have to take a firm hand with you. Monsieur Dorian, I want you to understand why we are doing what we are with you, and I don't think you do. In Versailles your problems were paid to go away. Complaints were dismissed and you had free reign in the city, if you disliked someone you could just go to Monsieur de la Serre and the problem just vanished with no repercussion to you. You have been sheltered."

"I was a houseboy," Arno corrected. "There wasn't much protection I was afforded." Not from Olivier.

"And yet," Quemar said, unrelenting, "as a 'houseboy,' you do not follow the rules. We've had houseboys join our Brotherhood before, Dorian, and not one of them acted like you. The letter of the law must be followed in all things, even here in the shadows, and you've yet to understand that there are consequences when you fail to do so. This is a test: I know you do not get along with Tissot and Beaumont, but in spite of that you will have to learn to work with them. They can be professional with members they don't like, and I want to see if you can."

Arno begged to differ, but he kept that thought to himself. "What's my reward for playing by the rules?" he asked instead.

Quemar shook his head. "Nothing, Monsieur Dorian. That's what you don't understand. You have to have intrinsic value in what we do, not extrinsic. You must see the good for what it is: we're stopping robberies and routing corruption in a still-flowering government. That is its own reward.
Learning to deal with people you don't like, you should feel internal pride that you have become that much more capable."

Arno held in his reaction, simply bowed and took his leave.

… Pride that he had become more capable? After surviving a mission with two men who tried to kill him in the challenges? *What?*

The two in question were at the base of the grand staircase. Tissot as a weaver was in fine cloth, thin and wiry, hiding his true strength. Beaumont was bigger, having a good six inches on both of them, strong in the shoulders and arms. A fellow novice at the time of Arno's training, it had been Beaumont's challenge, the one Mirabeau had intervened and whisked him away to his estate to recover.

Mirabeau…

Arno held in his wince, simply walked up to them and nodded. "*Maître* Quemar told me the mission. What's Cosette discovered?"

"Les Invalides," Tissot said. "It's mail carriages exclusively, and one of our people in Hôtel de Ville sent word there'll be one this afternoon, three o'clock. We watch from the roofs, follow the thieves, and report back here. Nothing more, nothing less."

Arno nodded. Professional. "Why three of us?" he asked, "Wouldn't two be enough for a tail?"

Beaumont smiled. "Got to keep an eye on the killer."

"We're all killers here," Arno countered, gaze a little flat. "Which of us are you referring to, specifically?"

"Come on," Tissot said, "We've a lot of ground to cover."

They moved through the sewers until they crossed over to the Left Bank, crossing at Pont Saint-Michel and following the Seine until they reached Palais Bourbon, where they turned south and deeper into the narrow streets until they reached the hospital proper. Les Invalides, constructed on order of Louis XIV in 1670, *l'hôpital des invalides* was known simply as Les Invalides, a hospital for aging or wounded veterans of France's military, a project that, in typical royal fashion, ballooned to a complex with fifteen courtyards, an *esplanade* second only to the Champs de Mars, a chapel, and who knew what else. It, like the Bastilles, had been raided in '89 while Arno was making his escape for powder and cannon. So far, as a hospital, it was spared from most of the riots, but the military presence, especially after Lafayette's fool mistake of firing into a crowd of protesters not one mile from here, gave a heavy air to the location.

They set up on a roof overlooking the main square that led to the hospital, Arno crouching down and asking his eagle if it was time yet. There were no fireworks or crackles of noise, meaning the waiting would start. He grit his teeth and decided not to speak. Tissot seemed perfectly fine with the idea as well, sitting down and pulling out his pistol to do maintenance. Beaumont remained standing, arms crossed and directly behind Arno.

"Seen your bitch lately?" he asked, voice curiously high pitched for a man so large.

Arno didn't respond, closing his eyes and turning inward, reminding himself that Quemar said to be professional. He wouldn't rise to this bait. Beaumont was big but also clever, he would not start a fight in the middle of a mission. It was after that he had to worry about, and he reminded himself of that fact. Constantly.
Three o'clock came slowly, the three taking turns to sweep the main square either physically or with their eyes, keeping sharp and ready. Tissot was, in fact, professional, said nothing after cleaning his pistol, his phantom blade and hidden blade both. Beaumont just loomed over Arno, all dark energy. When the carriage came it was almost a relief.

"Remember," Tissot said, tone as if explaining to a child. "We don't intervene."

Arno pulled himself to a low crouch, ready to spring in whatever direction was necessary. To his surprise, the carriage stopped at the hospital itself, dropping off letters for les invalides, of course, but also collecting two bags worth of letters. Why hadn't the thieves struck before the delivery? They were waiting for the letters from Les Invalides, and that made Arno wonder who was in there that merited such a robbery.

"Who's in Les Invalides?" he asked. "Who would be important enough to rob them right under their nose?"

"Not our business," Tissot with the voice of infinite patience. "We follow orders, remember? Oh wait…"

Beaumont snickered.

Arno pursed his lips. "And you're okay with that? You don't mind intercepting something - you know not what - and dropping it off without even looking at it? You don't want to know anything about it whatsoever?"

"Don't be an idiot," Tissot hissed, but his words were cut off as the carriage started again, and they were all standing. They followed from the roofs, the three of them having enough mobility to branch to different turns and still follow if the other two were wrong. It was less than ten minutes later, the carriage navigating an alley almost too narrow for them, that the robbers struck, running up behind the carriage and climbing up and over the roof, holding a gun to the coachman's head and making their demands.

Arno extended his blade, ready to intervene before Tissot grabbed his wrist and shook his head. Right, following only. Professional. Arno nodded, working his jaw, and sheathed his weapon.

After the robbery the two thieves scattered. Tissot after one and Arno and Beaumont after the other - because of course the beautiful mountain of a man wanted to keep his eyes on the "killer" of the group. The tail was lanky, young, and filthy but also woefully inexperienced compared to all the training Arno and the cult had received. Beaumont was light on his feet despite his size, and the youth kept moving east… which faubourg would he end up in? They moved over the roofs at a steady but not fast clip, the young thief slowed by the one mailbag he carried. Arno could see Luxembourg to his right, south of where they were. That meant they had already passed the Cordeliers club and would eventually - yes, there was the Panthéon in the distance. Mirabeau was there...

He shook his head, forcing his head down to watch the tail link up with his partner and move for Sorbonne, a theological university no doubt seeing hard times because of the Revolution. Tissot was nowhere in sight, but he and Beaumont watched the pair enter the university.

"Good," Arno said, straightening. "We have what we came for."

He turned, but Beaumont didn't move, simply stared down his nose at him.

"... Of course, we should wait for Tissot," Arno corrected, and crouched down on the roof to wait.
The silence was incredibly awkward. Arno reminded himself: professional. Professional. Nobody had started anything, so there was no reason to worry whatsoever. He counted to ten in his head several times, wondering what the hell was taking the damn weaver before glancing at the late summer sun and realizing barely ten minutes had passed. He pursed his lips and closed his eyes. This was a test, Quemar said. He couldn't very well get the Germain investigation if he let his nerves rattle him. Beaumont kept standing tall, glaring down at him and just radiating intent. Arno just wanted the man to do something and get this anticipation over and done with. If he was going to be challenged, well, Arno had been trained under Grisier for almost a year.

Finally. "Was it good?"

Arno looked up. "What?"

"La baise. La foutre. Was it good?"

Arno winced at the vulgar language. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. That was a lie, of course, ever since Élise had come to the Sanctuary that was all anyone wanted to know: was the hair red everywhere or was it a wig, how pliant was she - or instead was he the one who was pliant, who sucked who off, who conquered who, which fuck, which foutre was the best? It wasn't masculine curiosity of the fairer sex; it was a power play and Arno damn well knew it and damn well wasn't going to play along. He never answered these questions, and he wasn't going to start now. "How long before Tissot gets here?" he asked, standing and asking his eagle for help.

A meaty hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around, he was forced to look at Beaumont's chest because the man was so tall, and he wasn't going to meet that smug, hateful gaze.

"I asked you a question," Beaumont said. "Are you being insubordinate?"

Arno worked his jaw. "The question has nothing to do with the objective," he said. "I don't have to answer it."

"Yes you do, petit chatte," Beaumont said, his soft voice lowering in register. "I'm more senior than you, and more trustworthy besides. I want to know what two chattes like you did to foutre, so I know what I should do when I finally show you your place."

.... Arno grimaced. "I'm sorry," he said, turning green at the thought. "You're implying you want to do... what exactly?"

"Whatever it takes to show you where you belong."

"There you are," said a new voice, Tissot climbing up to the roof. "Been looking for you for half an hour. You saw them go into Sorbonne?"

"Yes," Arno said quickly, turning from Beaumont. "We report back now, n'est-ce pas?"

"Yes," Tissot said, nodding.

They moved to the streets and walked back to Île de la Cité, underground and to the Sanctuary. They made their reports verbally to Maître Quemar, Tissot as the senior Assassin saying the most.

"Textbook," Quemar said, nodding. "Does anyone have anything to add?"

"Only that Monsieur Dorian was insubordinate." Beaumont said.

Quemar did not react immediately, simply stared at Beaumont for several beats. Arno sighed.
through his nose, having been waiting for the shoe to drop. "If I may," he started to say.

"You may not." Tissot said, voice low and cutting.

Nom de dieu, him, too? So much for being professional.

"I asked him a question about the mission," Beaumont said, his soft voice even. "He refused to answer."

"You asked if la foutre was good," Arno corrected, "So you would know what to do when you 'put me in my place.'"

"He is lying, Maître," Beaumont said. "I would never use such vulgar language."

"No, of course, nor would you insinuate me not being-"

"Silence," Quemar said, raising a hand. "Tissot, did you witness this?"

"I did not, Maître, as I said it took me some time to find them; but Dorian lying would not surprise me, given his dubious loyalties." Tissot took a breath, as if to say more, but fell silent. Arno knew what that meant.

"Well then," Quemar said, squinting at them. "You have all of you failed this test."

Everyone stiffened.

"Tissot, given the challenges last year and your actions after, we had hoped that you had put your opinions behind in order to better serve the Brotherhood - you have not, instead choosing to cover for Beaumont because your doubt in Dorian clouds your vision. You have compromised the Brotherhood." Tissot lost all color, Arno didn't understand why. "Beaumont, you forget that we read up on you during your Death, and we know exactly the kind of language you use and how you weaponize your perceived assets to assert power over others - something that we have apparently not yet cured you of. Left unchecked you will use the power you have to harm an innocent and not even realize you have done so. You have broken the Creed." Beaumont, too, reacted with a visible gulp, and Arno was reminded how highly everyone in the cult held those words. "Madame Trenet will take great delight in showing you how much power you actually have and how to practice restraint. And Dorian," he added, turning his narrow gaze, "yours is perhaps the worst offense. After six months, you have done nothing to demonstrate to the Brotherhood where your loyalties lie. You know why you are so distrusted in these halls and yet you don't even try to correct their opinions of you."

Arno balked. "So I have to justify why I'm here to every novice and apprentice and assassin here? Should we hold a public tribunal where I explain myself to get it over with in one go?"

Quemar shook his head. "You do not understand, yet," he said, frustration in his voice. "You broke the Brotherhood's laws with your actions, and you have yet to feel that you need to pay any restitution. You are resentful of the distrust of others yet do nothing to earn the trust you think you are owed. This is why you are restricted as you are, and you haven't even realized the lesson."

Arno worked his jaw. "I didn't realize being ten minutes late was a criminal offense."

Quemar would not budge. "That is not what I said. It is not your actions at Sainte Chapelle, but rather those before it."
"What was I to do?" Arno countered. "Let Élise be killed by Germain and the renegade Templars? She needed help! You could give it to her!"

"Yes, we could have," Quemar said without missing a beat, subverting Arno's expectations of the conservative council member. "But there were a hundred other ways to offer it, and none of them even entered into your brain. You did not think."

You don't think, merdeux!

Arno couldn't listen to more of this, stormed out of the Sanctuary and out of the sewers. Célestine squeaked upon seeing him roll into the Café, he stomped to the kitchens and grabbed a bottle of wine. Yvette was irate, following him to the intendent's study to demand it back, but Arno, no longer lost with grief or sensitive to their care, slammed the door in her face, uncorked the bottle, and guzzled. He was too angry, he needed to dull the rage before he drew his weapon on the staff, he needed to be numb. He paced around the study, eyes tracing the familiar lines of the office, growling when the anger bubbled up and drinking when it did. A pleasant buzz eventually started to settle over him, and he collapsed into his seat, putting his head in his hands as the energy finally seeped out of him.

He didn't know how long he sat there, but he could dimly hear the dinner crowd on the other side of the café. Diable he didn't want to work. Bon sang. He just wanted to sit at his desk and do nothing, but that wasn't professional, that didn't earn trust, and eventually he got up and got to work, pulling out the account ledger and starting the tedious task of digging through receipts to add to the accounts. After that was payroll, and after that was tallying yesterday's income for delivery to the bank. The numbers washed over him, filling his mind and helping ease his high emotions. By the time he was finished it was the height of the dinner rush, and he left the Café to make his deposits at the bank. When he came back he had another glass of wine, more to finish the bottle than any real need, and stepped into the café proper.

The theater troupe was giving a skit about the queen, one of the players in a wig held up by a different player, a nearly cartoon depiction of fancy dress and excessive style. Arno remembered the frightened woman he had led to the King's chambers and... the skit ended as Jacques gave him his café au lait, and a different player came up to read about the proclamation of men being equal in France, including the Jewish immigrants from the east. Nobody was interested, because they were still worried about Austria's declaration and if war was coming. Arno snorted as he watched Mme Gouze work her magic with the patrons.

As the dinner crowd ebbed, the sword practice began, and Arno looked forward to working through the anger he had felt earlier. Almost no one in the class was from the Brotherhood, and Arno taught by himself, Augustin curiously absent. He kept the class to drills, fixing form and footing, making the students be as perfect as he had to be.

They left by nine at night, and after wiping the sweat off of his face he went down to the kitchens, finally feeling like he could eat something.

Yvette hit him with a wooden spoon.

"Don't ever do that to me again!"

Arno blinked, at first confused, before he remembered the bottle of wine. He winced. "Desolé," he said, rubbing his knuckles. "Yvette I'm very sorry. I was just so angry and-

"Monsieur, that does not excuse you ignoring human decency! Imagine! Slamming the door in a woman's face like that! And don't think I don't smell the wine on your breath - you had the entire
bottle, didn't you?"

"... oui, Madame."

She hit his knuckles again. "Do you have any idea the worry you've caused me today? I was afraid you'd leave the study and jump into the Seine! I thought you'd go looking for a riot! Oh Monsieur!" Two fat tears rolled down her cheeks, Yvette quickly grabbing her apron to hide them, taking a shuddering breath. "I've never seen you so mad before…"

Arno pursed his lips, at a loss for what to say, simply put a hand on her shoulder in silent comfort. Mme Gouze, looking on in the doorway, gave a silent nod of approval.

"Je suis vraiment désolé," he said sincerely. "I had no idea."

"You think so much about others in some ways," Yvette said behind her apron, taking a shaky breath. "But in some ways, you do not think at all…"

Think, merdeux!

Arno winced, put his arm around her shoulders to try and do better.

He spent the next two months making it up to Yvette, and the rest of the staff. In the morning meeting he admitted his indiscretion, saying only that he had received some bad news of a personal nature, and had acted unprofessionally, apologizing to all of them. He spent the better part of a week in the attic, cleaning out unused boxes and sorting through a series of old letters, some of which were Assassin business. He gave them to Mme Gouze to send underground. He wasn't welcome there, and damn Quemar he wasn't going to deliberately go where he wasn't wanted. Arno took all of Yvette's cast iron cookware and re-seasoned them himself, something he had to do once a year for M. de la Serre, and he restocked her cooking wine with his personal finances, along with an expensive three-tumbler lock and giving her the sole key.

… He could pick the lock if he needed a drink, but that would be time consuming and not done while Yvette was in the kitchen.

The day before the National Constituent Assembly ended and the Legislative Assembly started, they passed a law limiting National Guard enlistment based on tax bracket, meaning only the bourgeois and above could serve and eliminating the working class that the Revolution was supposed to be for, and in the next breath absolved anyone arrested for illegal political activity for the last three years.

Give with one hand, take with the other.

Augustin was still away on assignment, what no one knew, not even Mme Gouze, and she could be seen looking out the window in slow periods, mind clearly on her beloved. As the weather cooled into November the Assembly created a Committee of Surveillance to oversee the government, and everyone was still talking about Austria and if there would be war and what the Assembly would do with it. Nobody knew what or how Austria was watching the revolution - what if someone was a spy? - anyone of Austrian descent was automatically met with suspicion, and Arno very quietly started spelling his name Arnaud to prevent people from even thinking that he was half-Austrian.

Fabre grabbed him almost once a week for some kind of heist or infiltration, the King of Rats explaining a revelation that the maîtres had had.

"You wouldn't believe it," he said, "but we actually do have some research about eagles. We more
than anyone else - even Templars from what we can find - have high concentrations of people with the other sight. Altaïr talked about it vaguely, but we found one of his great grandsons or some other wrote of it extensively, and there were a few in China who explored how tied to the spirit it is. You, Arno, have an eagle that is extremely rare."

"A weak one," Arno corrected.

"No, a valuable one. You can see other eagles!"

Arno blinked. "I don't understand."

"Arno, you can unite with other eagles," Fabre explained. "Pontmercy was explaining it to me, and Maître Beylier started doing research. We could only find documentation of three other people in all of history who had an eagle that could see other eagles. The most recent we could find was two hundred years ago, a sister in Scandinavia. The translation was poorly done, we've sent word to the branches there to ask for new copies, but we got enough. Arno that night at the club, everyone had called their eagles, and you saw all of them! We're sneaking into a palais just outside of Paris tonight, and everyone there has an eagle. I want to see what happens."

"A migraine," Arno said flatly. "What happens is a migraine, red eyes, and another explanation to the staff."

Fabre's enthusiasm finally paused, blinking. "Oh," he said. "Pontmercy didn't go into detail on that." He fingered his chin, shifting his weight. "It'll be an experiment then," he said. "I wonder if it's possible to ease you in. One eagle at a time, that sort of thing. If we had better translations from Scandinavia we might be able to better help you, but for now we can only do what we can. Come see me at the usual place after closing. We'll all be there."

"Who will be there?"

"Cosette, myself, and Beaumont."

Arno said nothing, but his face must have given it away, because Fabre softened and put a hand on his shoulder. "You can't hide from them forever," he said. "Show them you're better than they, and the important ones will come around."

Just after midnight he escorted Mme Gouze to her quarters next to the Café, seeing her worry over Augustin and moving to the right bank and rue Sainte Antoine. Fabre was there in a cart, Cosette and Beaumont on the back. His best friend was of course excited to see him.

"Fabre just told me!" she said, "You have a rare eagle, and that we are to experiment. How does your eagle speak to you? Color? Sound? Emotion? Clarity? Details? I never knew eagles looked different to different people. I must tell you, mine is clarity. I never struggle to see at night with my eagle, and in the day, everything is in sharp focus. Is yours like that?"

Arno glanced at Beaumont, wary, but couldn't resist Cosette's enthusiasm. "Fireworks," he said. "Pops of color and a crackle of sound."

"I heard your eagle is weak," Beaumont said, soft voice for all the world like he was making conversation.

"Hardly," Fabre said. "We don't know how far an eagle like his can go. Uniting with other eagles probably takes mountains of energy, there's no way to tell. Until we get better translations we have to learn what it can do. So, for now, Arno, we'll try one at a time. Cosette will call her eagle, and you will call yours, and tell us what you see."
Arno was uncomfortable doing this with Beaumont there, he could still remember the bruises on his ribs, the ache in Mirabeau's home, but he took a breath and did as he was told, asking for his fireworks. When he heard the crackle he opened his eyes and saw a world saturated with color, the sky painted with stars through all the chimney smoke and there was Cosette, a bright green, and Fabre driving the cart in a similar color. He closed his eyes after a few moments, afraid to see more, and let out a breath. "So much detail," he said. "I only ever saw that many stars in Strasbourg. And you see people in color?"

Cosette nodded her head eagerly. "Yes! I can always know when someone will help me or hurt me. Can you?"

Arno almost answered no, but he remembered seeing colors before. When…?

"... Bellec..." he said, eyes on memory: sitting by a well, leaping from… Sainte Chapelle. He shuddered at the memory, he still felt raw from it even seven months later. "Bellec could see people in colors."

A pause drew out, Arno falling into the memory of Sainte Chapelle, finding Bellec at the top of the watchtower, muscles twitching as he remembered the fight, the sensation of a hidden blade plunging into his arm. He shuddered again before he heard a vulgar curse.

"The more I learn about that man the more I want to kill him," Fabre said. "Did he ever train you on how to use an eagle?"

"... no."

"My eagle next. Tell us what you see."

Arno worked to shut down his emotions, taking a slow, deep breath and calling up his other sight. "I know this sensation," he said, seeing clearly in the dark. "Champ de Mars."

"What does that mean?" Cosette asked.

"... I saw a man," Fabre said brightly. "Connard I knew from the slums. We had a long talk, and it ended just like I knew it would." He quickly changed topics. "Beaumont, you're up."

Arno shifted, uncomfortable with the idea of uniting with the brute, but did as he was told and asked for the pop of fireworks. Instead of the hyper detail of Cosette, everything around him muted, color and sound fading away until he could only see what he needed to. He couldn't quite find the words to describe it, how dull everything became except for the details of the wagon and the sound of the horse.

"That is the opposite of mine," Cosette said, frowning. "What would happen if both of us used our eagles?"

"Not yet," Fabre said quickly. "Using his eagle takes a lot, we don't want him to blow it out before we even get to the heist."

"Of course," Beaumont said, soft and endearing. "Who are we robbing?"

"It's an old bolt hole," Fabre said, pulling out of the city. "The palais was a known Templar safehouse over a century ago, and the Lévesque family still own it. They live in the city now, god knows where after everything that's been done to the Marais, but if Austrian Templars are going to start their machinations against the French Rite we have to start somewhere."
Arno immediately perked. "The Austrians supported Lafrenière, which means they supported Élise. Should we really be going after them when it's Germain that's leading the uprising?"

"Afraid the putain de chatte won't want you if you kill another one of her allies?"

Arno glared, so did Cosette.

"It's not a take down," Fabre corrected. "It's information gathering. Personally I'm happy to let Templars kill Templars, makes our work easier as we try and keep this Revolution clean - or at least nominally less bloody - but Templars have the curious habit of making everything a production. Better to have the script in advance and know our lines, n'est-ce pas? And Beaumont," he added. "Make another comment like that again and you get to sit the entire heist out, and that's before I report you for breaking the Creed again."

Beaumont worked his jaw, but said nothing, leaving the rest of the ride uneasily silent.

An hour east of the city was the Lévesque estate, not quite big enough to be considered a palais but certainly an hôtel particulier. Fabre guided them in, saying his eagle was active but for Arno to wait until they were inside. After picking two locks they had full run of the building, and they did a sweep floor by floor to make certain no one was there or, if they were, that they wouldn't be a bother.

"No one's here," Cosette said, nearly invisible in the dark. "There might be nothing here."

"Have to start somewhere," Fabre said. He ran a finger along a mantle, examining the dust and frowning. "Bien, first: eagles. Arno, unite with us one at a time and tell us if there are any major points of interest in this room. We'll do that room by room until we find something. If we do find something, eagles out so Arno can rest."

The first floor had nothing, Arno keeping his eagle restricted only to short bursts for this endurance run. The second floor was almost entirely empty, until they got to what must have been an office, and when he asked his eagle he heard not just Cosette's but Beaumont's as well. Even with careful management, a headache bloomed in the back of his skull and he cursed.

"What?" Fabre asked.

"Nothing," Arno said, suspecting (well, knowing, really) that Beaumont had done that on purpose. He glared at the giant Assassin but he in turn looked politely confused.

The next room had a hidden wall, Arno didn't need another eagle to see that, but with Fabre and Beaumont's eagles both there was another jolt of pain in his head and he couldn't hide a hand shooting up. "False wall," he said, pointing, "There. Mechanism in the wall sconce."

"Good," Fabre said. "No eagles, now, let me get us in that wall."

Fabre moved to the sconce, Cosette staying close to Arno with a hand at his shoulder. Beaumont gave nothing away, and Arno wasn't going to sabotage himself by pointing out the bastard was making things difficult - that was admitting how weak his eagle was and that was what Beaumont wanted. He wasn't going to do that. He rubbed his temples, the back of his head, trying to ease the ache. "How long does your eagle last?" he asked Cosette, trying for conversation.

"An hour," she said, "I can go longer, but like you I get a headache. You, Beaumont?"

"About an hour."
"I see," Cosette said.

"Mirabeau said milk helps," Arno said.

"Really? I'll have to try that next time. Oh, we should have brought some."

"How long does yours last?" Beaumont asked, question genial.

Arno pursed his lips, didn't answer. Fabre opened the wall, and the four spilled into the hidden room, only to find it empty.

"Hidden compartment in the floor," Cosette said, moving to it.

But there was nothing in there, and nothing else to find in the property. The heist was a bust, and they all left sullen and a little frustrated - except Fabre of course, who was always genial. It was three in the morning when they returned to their meeting place on rue Sainte Antoine, and Fabre stood in the cart to look around. "Another group was supposed to meet here," he said quietly. "We'd all go back together. They knew to wait for us."

Beaumont straightened, as did Cosette.

"Do you know where they were going?"

"No. Let's wait a little."

Weight settled over them as the wait started. Cosette was very still, her breathing shallow while Beaumont bounced his foot against the edge of the cart. Fabre disappeared to the roofs for a better look, and Arno took his place on the driver's seat, rubbing his eyes and head, forcing his headache to go away in case a fight broke out. Cosette announced the time every ten minutes, all of them waiting tensely, before there was a low, distant pop of sound, followed by the barks of dogs.

"Gunshot," Beaumont said, getting off the cart. "North, maybe a little east."

"Fabre's signaling," Cosette said, pointing. "Let's go."

They scurried up the facade of the nearest building, following the master thief as they moved east and then north. Without the canyons of streets and alleys the next shot was much clearer, as was the plume of smoke that rose from somewhere to their east.

"Eagles!" Fabre said. "If there's a smoke bomb we need to know who's friend and foe!"

They were running full tilt now, Arno taking a breath and begging for this to go well. He called his eagle and heard one, three, five, eight separate eagles shriek in his skull and he staggered with the noise, bumping into a chimney and just... waiting for the vision to fade. Air was suddenly hard to come by, sound was a high pitched ring like he's just stood next to cannon fire and his skull was threatening to explode for all the sensory input that flooded him. He could see further than he ever saw before with his sight, knew exactly what was going on in the courtyard, where the fighting was, smoke bomb or not. He grunted, trying to keep his balance as he moved to the edge of the roof.

"Arno!" someone was saying, but he could barely hear it for all the other noise in his ears. Fabre was there, bright green and so powerful to someone's eagle. "Arno! Get the wounded out of here!"

He nodded, not trusting himself to talk, and backtracked to an alley to climb down. He could barely concentrate to find the right handholds, had to fall more than anything else and landed hard on his
feet when he finally touched the ground. He extended his hidden blade and moved into the cacophony of information in the courtyard. His eyes watered, but he managed to aim and fire his phantom blade once to an angry red, ducking under a friendly's sword swing and moving to the two bodies on the ground, both green and one very weak.

"Come on," he hissed, grabbing the arm of one that he could tell was movable and struggling to feel out the weak one. The eagles were starting to fade, he could see a little more but his head was on fire and he was half blind with the pain as he finally shrugged the body of whoever it was over his shoulder. Fabre and Cosette were somewhere to his left, someone was cursing and surrounded by red, and Arno finally staggered out of the alley. "We have a cart," he said. "Meeting point. Help me get there."

"Here," said the injured eagle, said Tissot, "I'll carry her."

Arno distributed the weight and they quickly darted down the alley and then out to a wider boulevard. The cart was where Arno and the others left it, and he and Tissot took the weak eagle, the woman, and hoisted her in. "I've burned out my eagle," he said quickly, getting into the driver's seat. "Is anyone following us?"

"Two: cobbler's roof and alley to the left."

Arno reloaded his phantom blade, brazenly standing in the cart, begging his eagle didn't hurt him more. He could barely make out a hint of color and blindly fired at it. "Did I get him?" he asked, sitting back down.

"Yes, hold on: got the other."

"Good. Let's get out of here." Arno flicked the reins and moved down the road as Tissot hid the sister under a blanket before joining her.

"They didn't see you," he explained. "Don't rush, just get us to the sewers."

"No, if they knew to attack so close to the meeting place they might know where we'll scatter. I've a better idea."

Arno lead the team to the back of a café, one of the sisters of the Café Théâtre after Mirabeau's final function. After that they put the woman in a blanket and carried her over the Seine to Île de la Cité and, eventually, to the Café. It was after four in the morning, Arno had been up all night, and he knew Yvette would be in soon to start cooking for the day. Cursing, he let them in through the banquet hall, down the hall and then up the grand staircase to his quarters.

"Isn't there an entrance to the Sanctuary from here?" Tissot demanded.

"Do you want to leave it open for the cook to find in twenty minutes?" Arno countered. "Here, the bed."

They stretched out the wounded assassin, a woman, completely insensate and with an uncomfortably large red stain in her side.

"Bullet," Tissot explained as they started ripping off layers. Arno lit a fire and several candles, and he could see one of his old challengers was holding his arm delicately. "She was the first. None of us saw it coming."

"How? You all have eagles."
Tissot shook his head. "It's not precognitive, Dorian."

"Fine," Arno said, not wanting to fight with that much blood on the woman. "I'll get some towels, needle and thread. You go below and see if the doctor on call is awake."

"If he isn't he damn well will be," Tissot said darkly, and Arno paused for a moment, looked at the other Assassin, and wondered if the woman... but that wasn't his concern. He climbed up to the third floor, moved through his recently organized boxes and pulled out the old linens he had been planning to sell or donate, tossing them down to his room before all but jumping down, moving to the library where Mme Gouze often did small sewing and needlepoint work on slow days, dropping it off and then out to the madame's quarters, giving a coded knock on the door to let her know something had happened and going back up to his room.

The woman was stirring, and he leaned into her field of vision, hoping to check her eyes. She tried to swat the hand away. "Easy, easy," he said, "I'm a friend. I know Tissot."

She didn't respond, and Arno saw how red her cheeks were. Pursing his lips he started to go to the kitchen for a bottle of wine to clean the bullet wound but he heard Yvette come in to the Café. Cursing, he paced the upstairs, trying to figure out if he should let her know he'd found a stray or not. He needed the wine but she wouldn't give it to him. He pulled off his surcoat and waistcoat, trying to figure out what to do.

"... Jérôme..."

Arno spun around and put himself in the woman's line of sight. "Don't worry," he said gently. "Jérôme will be here soon. You need to rest; the doctor is coming."

Her eyes were glassy, and Arno went back to pulling at her layers, the sturdy cotton and silk sticky from all the blood.

"Jérôme... where is Jérôme?" she asked, volume lifting her voice.

"He's on his way," Arno said gently, trying to keep her calm.

A bell rang, Arno looked up and saw it was from the main entry. He prayed that was Tissot with the brotherhood's doctor. He went downstairs, Yvette sticking her head out upon hearing him, but he recognized the silhouettes and opened the door immediately. Neither said a word, sweeping in and upstairs, Arno following and explaining that the woman was awake and asking for Jérôme.

"Camille!" Tissot said, "Camille, I'm here!"

"Jérôme..."

"Give me room," the doctor said. "That's a lot of blood."

Arno backed out of his room, knowing he couldn't do anymore. He moved back downstairs, outside and to Mme Gouze's home, he gave another coded knock, waited several minutes, and gave up, going around back where he could climb up to the attics where Yvette wouldn't be able to see. His head was still splitting, but at least he could see enough to find the right handholds. He snuck in through a window with a broken latch and moved down bedrooms, giving his coded knock to the madame's room.

She opened it immediately, dressed only in petticoats and stomacher, hair up but feathered hat not yet pinned. "Who?" she asked, voice tight.
"Tissot and a sister, Camille."

"Nom de dieu, his wife," she muttered. Arno had suspected as much.

"Yvette is here. She came right before Tissot returned with the doctor. I haven't said anything yet. They were attacked north of the meeting place, Fabre and Cosette and Beaumont and I went to help; Fabre told me to get the wounded out of there. I don't know how things turned out after."

Mme Gouze nodded, shrugging on her green gown and lacing it up. "Jérôme will have already reported to whoever's on duty," she said, "things will wrap up quickly if they haven't already. The only thing we can do now is give Dominique time to his work, and that means not being underfoot. I was saving this until later, but you, Yvette, and I are about to interview someone."

Arno blinked, trying to put together the sudden jump in topics. "Interview?"

"Paul Mercier," she said, pinning her hat and leaving her room, Arno quick to follow. "As a possible intendant."

… What? Arno blinked, stopping at the top of the stairs as the words sank in. Intendant…? But… he was the steward… was his work unsatisfactory?

"You'll end up with a fever before the end of the year if they keep pulling you for every heist they can think of while expecting you to turn this place around and run our network through here," she continued, not noticing his sudden stop. "Best we can do is give you enough free time to catch up on your sleep for when you're up at all hours, and we used to have both anyway so it was bound to happen. We'll take Yvette with us to keep her from being underfoot with Jérôme and Dominique. Oh, their children will be devastated if anything happens to her…"

Arno shook his head, taking the stairs again and following the madame. She was… trying to help him? By getting an intendant…? He needed time to figure that out, he wasn't sure how he felt yet but it wasn't like he was being given time. Damn Tissot and his team and whatever happened to them. He rubbed his eyes and then his temples, hoping his damn headache would just go away.

They breezed into Café Théâtre like life-or-death-surgery wasn't happening upstairs and Arno followed Mme Gouze to the kitchen.

"Oh, Yvette! Good, you're here," she said. "Monsieur Dorian and I were going to do some shopping and I was hoping you would come with us. Monsieur Dorian found a market north of the old Bastilles that has fresh meat and I wanted your opinion since you're the one who uses it. There's a second item on our list as well, if you wouldn't mind. I remember you saying most of the work today was letting the fires do their work, and we're still looking for a new place to supply flour since the last one was forced to close that isn't overpriced. Grab your shawl, it's very cold out. Monsieur Dorian, I know there's a meeting up there but I think you can sneak in for a coat without interrupting them."

"Uh…" Arno shook his head at such an intelligent response, darting upstairs and sneaking into his room. Two other people had arrived, likely through the balcony, and were working over the woman, Camille. Arno gave them as much privacy as he could, not even looking at the blood or bare skin as he quietly picked up his outer layers, checking for blood from the fight and shrugging them on. He glanced at the clock on the landing, saw it was just after five, the sun wouldn't be up for a while yet. Taking a breath, he moved downstairs and joined the women, the three of them leaving and crossing over to the right bank and then north towards the site of the old Bastilles.

Arno felt uncomfortable when they passed the square and it's monument, remembering Bellec and
how it all fell apart, his arm aching at the memory. Did the man ever really see Arno as himself, or just an imperfect copy of his father? He shook his head, too tired to think about things like this.

He recognized the alley Mme Gouze lead them through, and when they came out his eyes automatically traced the lines of the marketplace, the roofs, the harried escape from Hôtel Voysin and the snipers. Élise...

"Well, I can see why you found this place interesting," Mme Gouze said before leaning over to Yvette. "There, do you see the raised platform? And oh, they're bringing a steer up now, we'll have first pick!" Yvette moved up to examine the animal as the streets slowly started to fill with people. Without the pressure of the escape, Arno was able to take in the variety of stands and wares on display. Beef as well as pork, chicken, eggs, duck, pheasant for meat; spices from Italy and Spain and India and the Americas; bundles of cotton, burlap, and silk; being on the edge of the Marais it was also the edge of affordable, and Arno just… watched as everyone made their purchases. He leaned against a stand selling cookware and just drifted… watching the people as the morning brightened…

"Monsieur?"

Arno blinked, straightening. "Oui?" he asked, fixing his gaze on Yvette.

"Your eyes are red again; did you not sleep?"

Arno blinked again, processing the question.

"Oh, Monsieur," Yvette said. "You work too hard, you need to take time for yourself to grieve. It hasn't even been a year yet, and a loss like that doesn't just go away."

"... but it should," Arno said. "I should be better than this."

"Better than human?" Mme Gouze asked gently, joining the conversation. "You can't be perfect, Monsieur Dorian, and let me assure you: no one is expecting you to be. You're allowed to make mistakes."

Arno shook his head. "My mistakes get people ki…" he stopped himself before he could complete the thought.

"You're overtired," Yvette said, nodding to herself. "When we get back I'll make you something warm, if the coq au vin isn't ready yet."

"Still no grain sellers," Mme Gouze said, deftly steering the conversation. "But we made some very good purchases, I'm glad you suggested it, Monsieur Dorian."

"Madame, to be perfectly honest I don't even remember suggesting it," Arno admitted.

Mme Gouze smiled. "Now for the next item on our agenda. It's a little out of our way."

They slowly backtracked to the Seine, following the Right Bank further west, past the isles and closer to the Tuileries. Yvette's eyes looked ready to burst from her face as she saw all the fine silks and high fashion. "You would never know those men with the daggers were here to see the King," she whispered.

"... Yes you would," Arno said, eyeing the chips in the façades of the buildings right about where violence would be.
"Do you hear that?" Mme Gouze asked, cupping one of her ears. They paused, listening, and the telltale sound of screaming and shouting could be heard. "Riot," she said. "Best be careful - that goes especially for you, Monsieur Dorian. I know you'll want to run off and see if you can help but we've a job to do."

"Oui, exactement," Yvette said. "We can't have you coming home all scratched up again."

Arno said nothing to contradict the cover, simply let himself be led to a side street and then to a well maintained alley where a cracked glass window advertised secretarial work.

"Here we are," Mme Gouze said, adjusting her hat and feathers to better hide her burn scar, already almost invisible. "Monsieur Dorian, until we have this man hired you'll have to do most of the talking as the steward. You'll have to work your magic."

"You've yet to tell me who this would-be intendant is," Arno replied, emotionally and physically tired with a headache and no sleep.

Mme Gouze smile. "Oh. You'll know him."

They entered a narrow space of a room with an oversized desk overflowing with papers and letters, candle down to almost nothing and a bookshelf too big for the space filled to overflowing with books. The space felt cramped, there was only one chair to sit at, and the man using it was tall - Arno could tell even from the seated position - grey hair, not powdered, and a surcoat that was the perfect middle of blue and grey. The man was in his late forties, possibly fifties, and he sat perfectly straight as he wrote something out with quill and inkwell, signing off with a flourish before looking up. Brown eyes, thin cheeks but strong jaw. The madame was right, Arno did know him.

"May I help you?" he asked, and there was a faint strangeness to his words.

"Café noir," Arno said. "Eight o'clock every day but Sunday, with coq au vin if it's available."

The man stood with a frown. "Do I know you?" he asked.

Arno smiled. "You'll forgive me," he said genially, "If I'm not reading the papers Jacques is making me café au lait while the Madame's theater troupe is putting on a skit."

The man's eyes widened. "You're at the counter," he said, leaning forward and offering a hand. "Paul Mercier. Enchanté."

"Arno Dorian."

"Please, sit," he said, getting up and offering his chair. Arno declined. "What can I do for you?"

"The question is what can we do for you," Arno said, gesturing to Mme Gouze and Yvette behind them. "This is Madame Gouze, proprietor of the Café Théâtre, and our cook, Madame Thibault."

"Enchanté."

"Enchantée." Mme Gouze stepped forward. "It's an honor to finally see you formally," she said. "We'll let Monsieur Dorian explain the position, but we'll look forward to your favorable reply."

Arno had never seen either woman scurry outside so fast, he was a little breathless as how quickly he was suddenly alone with a near-perfect stranger, somehow expected to hire him as intendant to... possibly replace him? Help him? Well, Mme Gouze and Augustin had certainly done a lot for
him, the least he could do was make sure he hired the best. He gestured for Mercier to sit and Arno
clered a spot on the desk to approximate a similar feat. "You've come since almost the beginning,"
he said as an opener.

"Yes, just about," Mercier said, his vowels just slightly off. "I was doing work for the Hôtel de
Villes, delivering some documents when le comte de Mirabeau swept us all to your establishment
for dinner. I've never had café so good in all my life."

Arno smiled. "That's Jacques, he is a miracle worker."

"You know, I was there at the dinner you had honoring him," Mercier said. "It was a marvelous
affair. I come for the café, of course, but that dinner was a sight to behold. If I may be frank, I
hadn't expected your establishment accomplish something so artfully respectful. Who made the
arrangements?"

"One of Monsieur Mirabeau's people rented out the building, if that's what you mean."

"No, I mean who planned all of that."

Arno shifted on the desk. "That would be me."

Mercier nodded. "Magnificent planning. I'm surprised you're working there when you clearly
belong somewhere that would pay you better."

Arno shrugged. "Pay isn't everything," he said. "The people are."

Mercier didn't reply, gaze drifting off. The pause drew out almost uncomfortably before he said,
"Yes, that's quite true."

Arno frowned a moment, sensing something and wondering if he should pursue it. He put it aside.
"What kind of secretarial work do you do?" he asked instead.

"Oh, a little bit of everything," Mercier said. "I used to work for the Second Estate, planning
banquets and soirées, going over finances and being utterly ignored when I suggested more
practical matters."

Arno smiled. "Because image is everything," he said.

"Exactly right," Mercier said with a smile, his slight accent still lurking about. "After the assault on
the Bastille I saw the writing on the wall: the Estate system was finished, and by then there was
nothing left for me there..."

"Struck out on your own? Found personal success?"

"If you call this 'success.'" Mercier said, gesturing to his overstuffed office. "You would think a
secretary to be highly valued, but I'm spurned by the Seconds for having left them and hated by the
Thirds for having worked for them."

Arno shrugged, shifting his weight. "Better then, to work with people who value what you do,"
Arno said. He tilted his head to the door where Mme Gouze and Yvette had left. "They value their
people," he said. "The day after the banquet, the staff arranged to give me my own desk. Not as
lavish as this," he added, gesturing to the finely crafted wood he was sitting on, "but with only the
advance of the banquet they made a point of making sure they showed me I was appreciated. That
didn't happen in Versailles."
Mercier raised a brow. "You were in Versailles?"

Arno shifted his weight, trying to look casual. "Houseboy," he said. "The steward, Olivier, he loved making life miserable."

Mercier openly laughed. "They do indeed!" he said. "I would watch André terrorize the laundresses and the cooks, always finding something wrong with what they did even when it was perfect. We had one stable boy, Jean-Paul I think his name was, and André would deliberately think up ways to make him work. I would watch him unlatch the stables and then yell at Jean-Paul for being derelict in his duties."

Arno chuckled at the story, knowing the tenor and tone all too well. "Tell me," he said. "How long were you in England?"

Mercier's brows lifted in surprise. "I'm surprised you noticed," he said. "I've been told I have almost no accent. My mother was Welsh and my father worked for her family when they toured Europe. She passed when I was eleven, and my father came to London to bring me here."

"And do you have a family?" Arno asked. "They're never with you, and you don't talk about them at the Café."


"Oh," Arno said, "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Mercier said, rubbing his forehead. "I don't think I've any tears left."

Arno was starting to see why Mme Gouze wanted Mercier, at least in terms of personality. His language was almost painfully formal but he was of a similar disposition to Arno: a foot in a higher society but rejected by it and the estate he was born into - or in Arno's case, the Brotherhood he was born into. He shifted his weight again, turning the problem over in his mind before deciding how to make the sell. "We're small," he said, "at the Café Théâtre. When we first started I would read the local papers to the patrons because quite a few of them couldn't read well enough to understand them. There's an elderly couple, they're there every lunch and dinner, and they tell me they love the sound of my voice. That's fallen away now that we have a theater troupe, and now we're starting to get some regular patrons from Hôtel de Ville. We're moving up in the world."

"I've noticed," Mercier said, nodding his head.

"Moving up is a help and a hindrance," Arno said. "Getting better clientele means more money, of course, but there is a period of time when the finances have not yet caught up with the income. We're still paying off the plaster work, and ordering new rugs is expensive and heaven knows I've wanted to strip and fix the floors since the first day I started. Money is spent almost as fast as it's earned, and I spend most of my days out about town trying to find better markets with better deals, hunt down carpenters who are affordable or getting caught in the latest food riot. I'm having a hard time going over accounts, finances, orders and purchases while doing all of that, let alone dealing with the patrons and the theater troupe and the staff. I need help. Madame Gouze says that when her father first ran the business they had two positions: steward and intendant. If I only have to take care of supplies and staff, you, then, would handle customers and entertainment."

Mercier leaned back in his chair. Arno wasn't sure if that was a good sign, so he tried to press the point.

"At Versailles," he said, standing and shifting his weight. "They didn't pay me. I didn't even know I
was supposed to be paid, I grew up there and didn't think of things like that. After… I'd walked through the soles of my shoes and was three days starved before I could find a place to stay. Madame Gouze…” He turned to hide his frown, trying to pick the best words. "There's something in her I can't explain," he said. "She's seen me at my worst and hasn't chased me away yet. She didn't blink when I suggested hiring Madame Thibault, and even when things are their darkest she's still in that Café giving people smiles and solace."

The words were easier now, he was speaking a truth he was realizing as he said it, thoughts that happened in small disjointed breezes were coalescing to something he had known all along, deep inside him. "Monsieur Grisier is the same," he realized. "He took one look at me and knew exactly what I needed, he has an energy and a love for what he does that cannot compare. Those two, they have turned Café Théâtre into a family."

Family. The word both terrified and awed Arno in equal parts. Café Théâtre was home, and a home unlike he had known at the de la Serre estate: it was safe there, he did not have to worry about Olivier's footsteps or fearing M. de la Serre walking in when he was... with Élise. He knew his place, he knew his job, and he was happy to do it. Watching Célestine do the floors correctly, tasting Jacques delicious café, hanging laundry out to dry, there were good memories there, there was no taint of superiority or contempt or arrogance. He loved that place, and replacement or not he would see that they got the best.

He turned to Mercier. "We're offering you to be a part of that family."

Mercier lost all color, sagging back into his seat and sucking in a breathe. He pulled out a kerchief to cover his mouth and hide the emotion, and Arno looked down at his shoes, trying to give him privacy.

"... you make a generous offer," he said finally, voice a little wet.

Arno nodded, looking the other man in the eye. "Come see us later this week," he said, "And we can discuss the details."

They shook hands, and Arno left the tiny office and exited the dim alleyway. Mme Gouze and Yvette all but pounced on him to ask how the interview went. "I wouldn't call it an interview," he said, "More of a conversation."

"Ah, très bien," Yvette said. "My interview with you, it was a conversation. This is a good sign."

They walked back to the Café, dissecting the entire conversation and Mme Gouze flushing at the praise Arno had given her and debating how the duties would be divided if Mercier said yes. Arno was on his second wind by now, but his head still ached and he was so tired, he'd been up for thirty-six hours at least, and he knew he'd be sleeping in the library if Tissot's wife was still in surgery.

The thought brought back images of the fight last night, listening to so many eagles and the staggering pain of too much information. He wondered how Fabre and Cosette and the others were - he didn't relish going underground to ask after them, but it was light enough now that they needed to start on the lunch rush. Jacques and Célestine no doubt wondered where they were and Arno was struggling to remember what he had planned to do today. They saw a carriage in the driveway of the Café, and all three of them shared a look before moving inside.

"We'll take care of whoever it is," Mme Gouze said, "You worry about your stews and the meat delivery that's sure to come."
"Bien sûr," Yvette said, disappearing to the kitchens.

"I know that coach," the madame said, "Jérôme's children are here. That's a bad sign."

The children were in the Café being entertained by Jacques, teaching them how to sweep. Arno nodded to him, and he pointed upstairs, nodding back. Arno acknowledged it and he and Mme Gouze moved upstairs.

"Dominique," Mme Gouze said cautiously. "Dominique?"

A brother stepped out, one Arno didn't immediately recognize, as did Cosette of all people. "Arno!"

"Cosette! Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes," she said quietly, eyes flitting downstairs where the staff was. "We were able to defeat them: two are captured and are in safehouses, but one got away. We'll interrogate them later, but Tissot didn't say where you were and we thought…"

Arno shook his head. "No, we were getting the staff out of the way," he said quickly, "Nothing rash, I promise."

Cosette was so relieved she kissed both of his cheeks. "Tissot will be fine," she said, "He needed eight stitches on his arm but they say he'll be able to keep it. Camille is harder to say. It's a miracle she's lasted this long, we're trying to find someone for Last Rites just in case. They were able to pull the bullet out but there was a lot of damage. The next two days will be critical. If her fever doesn't break…"

"Merde," he cursed. "Can she be moved? Get her underground?"

"The doctor said yes," Cosette replied. "But we know you have staff who aren't part of the Brotherhood, we're going to wait until after closing."

Arno nodded. "Of course."

Cosette put a hand on his arm. "You haven't slept either," she said. "Do they need you for a few hours? We can nap in the library."

"We'll be fine," Mme Gouze said, nodding. "Lunch rush won't be for two hours yet, get some sleep, and I'll wake you when it's time."

Chapter End Notes

A few small things first: Quemar's test. While Arno doesn't realize it, it was important for us to show that the Council if focusing on more than just Arno, they've been shown a major flaw with Bellec's betrayal and they're working to fix the pieces that they can. It's also worth noting that the Council does not blame Arno for Sainte Chapelle like they imply in the game, but rather for bringing Élise into the Sanctuary when there were a zillion other ways they could have met to talk terms.

Arno fails the test because he's avoiding his problems. He "knows" that the Brotherhood doesn't like him, that Bellec sent people to challenge and possibly kill him for his split loyalties, and he avoids going below ground. He's not wrong to do it
but like Fabre and Quemar said: you have to learn work with people you don't like, and the smart ones will learn the truth.

We've stated several times in the fic and in the notes that Arn is a romantic, he makes decisions based off of emotions rather than reason, and his impulses are sometimes self-destructive, and this chapter he finally realizes some of his decisions have negative effects on others. The last thing he wants to do is hurt Café Théâtre, and yet Yvette is in tears from his coping decisions. But there are signs of a bright mind in there: he asked some very good questions during the tail job and did an artful sell of the job for Mercier - also, Hi Mercier! We'll get to you later!

But the big thing to talk about is the Eagle. This particular idea has been in Mirror's head for forever, and I was utterly tickled when she explained it to me. You know how in Multiplayer when you pulse your eagle you can see all your allies? That's Arno UNIFYING the eagles. Like the title of the game. Like the theming they were trying (and failing) to pull off. It's such a brilliant idea and why didn't you play with that Ubisoft? Between that hand Arno having a weaker eagle we now have a lot to play with compared to Ezio and Altaïr and Ratonhnhaké:ton who just pulse and find whatever they need. Mental health is our theme for this fic so it doesn't fit in as nicely but we wanted to nod to it as we could, and it makes for some interesting challenges for Arno, like what happens next.

And while Arno doesn't actively try to earn peoples trust he did just save a sister's life. Wonder if that will change any opinions...

Next Chapter: Women in Paris. Guesses on who's about to show up?
February 1, 1792

Camille Tissot had six children, ages from seven months to seventeen, and all living in the Sanctuary while she recovered from her ordeal. Tissot became a near daily patron of the Café, drinking to numb his worry or soaking up café to stay awake long enough to keep his children occupied. Arno told Jacques to keep a steady eye on him when he was doing the former and ask every time if he needed help with the latter. Whatever his opinions of Tissot, his former challenger was going through a trial and Arno was not going to be so shallow as to refuse him aide. Mirabeau hadn't refused him aide, not even Bellec, and he had to repay that kindness.

Mercier started work at the end of the month, and all but took over the intendent's office with his oversized desk. It took the better part of a month to get used to working around each other. Mercier was stiff and formal even in private conversation, making him an acquired taste to the staff, but he had significantly more contacts than Arno or even Mme Gouze for getting suppliers and by the end of the year they had somehow cut their food budget in half and were making almost triple the number of livres they had been. He stood at the door and greeted patrons every evening, something Arno didn't have time to do unless it was a formal function, reorganized the library by author and title, and participated in the sword lessons Arno was forced to take over while Augustin was still away on a mission.

With him handling customers, Arno pulled the staff aside, Jacques, Célestine, Yvette, the theater troupe, and broke down how the duties would be broken up and how they reported to either of them. Mostly they were to report to Arno or Mme Gouze, but Mercier would run interference with customers if there was a complaint. Mercier was a stoic man, not prone to frivolous conversation, but he somehow found a way to increase everyone's wages by ten percent without cutting into profits. Arno read through the ledger in awe, talking to him for several hours on how he'd managed it.

"You said you were a houseboy before, without pay? It's not a surprise, really, they didn't train you for the real world - the longer you were kept ignorant and dependent on them the longer they could afford to not pay you. The biggest thing they didn't show you was inflation and how to account for it..."

Arno spend most of December relearning everything he ever thought he knew about finances, humbled almost every day over some new thing that he'd never heard of or thought of. By the end of the month he felt woefully inadequate and tried to compensate for it by helping Célestine clean the floors and cookware - something he knew he could do competently before Mme Gouze pulled him aside.

"I didn't have you hire him to make you question your value," she said in the stairwell by the kitchens.

"Madame," he said, running a hand through his hair, "Clearly I had no idea what I was doing."

"Oh, Arno, you still don't see what you do," she chastised. "Do you think Yvette doubts your skill? Or Célestine, who should have been married years ago? Or Jacques when he keeps trying to fix something? They, like you, are overqualified for what they do here, but they stay because of you:
because they know they have the finest steward in all of France and they know that they would be poorer for working anywhere else."

Arno shook his head, unwilling to accept the pity. One of Tissot's children ran pell mell between them, two others giving chase, and Arno took a breath to catch them and sling the smaller one over his shoulder. "All right," he said, back to the cellar with you," he said. They giggled as he walked down the hall and to the "cellar," to the Sanctuary for Tissot to haggardly take them back.

"I'm sorry," he said, face flushed with drink. "It's hard to keep track of them here. All the Novices don't help."

"Then find one who will," Arno said gently. "Your children need you at your best while your wife recovers, and if you can't be at your best then someone else does."

Tissot gave him a long look, but took his children back underground to his wife Camille's recovery.

As the year ended the Assembly voted to have a volunteer army to protect France's borders from Austrian threats. The Pillnitz Declaration was still heavy on everyone's mind, and three armies were created: Lafayette's Army of the Centre, Rochambeau's Army of the North and Luckner's Army of the Rhine. War was coming, and by god France was going to be prepared.

The clergy were once again required to take an oath of fealty to the government, only this time the consequence was being considered suspects or spies. The fear reached a fever pitch when the headlines changed:

*The Return of a Heroine!*

_Théroigne de Méricourt Escapes Austrian Captivity!_

Arno read through the article to the entire staff during the morning meeting, the paper detailing that Théroigne de Méricourt was in fact *not* the Patriot Whore and Female War Chief, but rather a hero of the Revolution that had been captured by the Austrians and interrogated all the way in Kufstein Fortress, wherever that was. All the papers talked about her moral efficacy and her innocent demeanor and how the Austrians had brutally ripped her innocence from her to learn about the Revolution, but that she would not yield.

"*Nom de Dieu*," Yvette said, needing to sit down. "I believed every story they ever wrote about her! How could I have been so blind?"

"This is why we are so careful which papers we read," Arno said, reaching over and touching her hand briefly. "Facts are very hard to come by in this day and age when people are more interested in opinions rather than truth."

"Words are the most dangerous weapon we have," Mme Gouze said, "Anger without a cause is given a name and a face, fear without a person is given a country and a culture, all with the efficient stroke of a pen. Emotions are weaponized with words, but our hearts are our strongest defenders. It says here that she'll speak at the Jacobin Club today."

"I would like to go," Yvette said, rubbing her dark hands. "I want to apologize to her."

The Jacobin club was on the Right Bank, headquartered on Rue Sainte-Honoré, in a simple structure north of Tuileries. The Jacobins had extraordinary numbers of members, all rich, comfortable bourgeois that spoke for the people. The conservatives had all left to form their own club, the Feuillants, as they rallied to keep the king while the Jacobins wanted Louis replaced after his escape to Varennes. Their motto hung on the door: *Vivre libre ou mourir*: Live free or die. The
women were only allowed to watch from the galleries, where Yvette hesitantly departed as Arno was escorted into the hall proper. He saw that politician that sometimes came to Café Théâtre with Mirabeau, Robespierre, in the crowds as well as other big names in the club. The hall was utterly packed, the upper galleries, too. Arno couldn't see Yvette, meaning she probably was hiding in back. The latest sheets from the club were aggressively arguing for war with Austria, making Arno purse his lips as he thought of Élise's Austrian Templar friends and what they were doing to make that war happen. If it got Germain… He shook his head.

Somebody introduced Théroigne de Méricourt, and the woman who got up to speak reminded Arno strongly of the Queen on a rainy October, frightened of a massacre happening in her own home and being chased to the King's chambers. De Méricourt was small, and thin, in a dress and not the pants the papers had described her. Her eyes were dark and her hair seemingly windswept. She held herself delicately, eyeing the crowd with something echoing fear - the same look the Queen had had, and Arno felt something swell in his heart.

"Bonjour," she said, voice cracking and forcing her to try again. "Bonjour," she said, "I hope everyone is well."

The crowd stilled, several surprised to hear such a shaky voice. Arno, however, was starting to put some pieces together in his mind, some of the articles coalescing into a picture.

"I am here to tell you my story," de Méricourt said, giving a nervous smile. "I'm… I'm not sure where to start exactly, but perhaps it is best to start with the start of the Revolution. I remember l'Hôtel de Ville, the King wearing a cockade and how good it felt to know that he supported the Revolution. I spent the summer in Versailles, watching the Assembly and trying to learn everything I could about politics. Many of us, I think did the same."

There was a low chuckle, nodding in agreement.

"I remember watching the women march into Versailles, seeing so many people trudging in the rain to make their voices heard. It was so powerful to me, I knew it meant that there was a chance for things to change, to stop people from being swindled out of money, to prevent people like me from being taken advantage of. So many things went wrong with my life, things that I did not have control over, and I knew somehow, deep down, that it could be better.

"I followed the Assembly to Paris. I founded a political club to help patriotic work in the provinces. It… didn't last long," she said after a pause, looking down. Arno heard an untold story there.

"I tried the Cordeliers next. That didn't work as I wanted either. I wanted so badly to play my part, I wanted to help the Revolution, I wanted to make the world a better place - I knew I could contribute, I just needed to be given a chance!"

"And who would let a woman speak her mind?" Arno quoted under his breath, remembering his time with Cosette when they were both still novices. Intelligent women who could do anything they could put their minds to: Cosette had taught herself to read in a year's time; Mme Gouze who ran an entire spy network in her café, Élise who would be Grandmaître of the Templars if only Germain hadn't interfered.

"I stood on the terraces of the National Assembly, I tried everything I could think of to support the revolution - but by then the papers had stolen my name: Théroigne de Méricourt." She paused, and even from sitting in the back of the hall Arno could see her face change, something dark creeping along her features and coloring her with fear. He remembered two men asking him to read a paper, wanting to hear about de Méricourt for lascivious reasons.
What must a woman have gone through? Having her reputation so thoroughly ruined by news sheets?

"Men would approach me with... expectations," she said. "People would spit and curse as I walked by. Clubs would shut the door in my face!" she shouted, emotion overtaking her. The building was in utter silence, and Arno wondered if the men in the hall realized just what they had done, or even just what they were witnessing. "I could do nothing!" she said. "All opportunities were denied me, helping the revolution was usurped from me - no one wanted to listen to me! Nobody thought what I said had any value! I was forced to leave. That was when they took me.

"They took me while I was eating," she said, voice shaky but still carried. "They were from Austria, they somehow thought I was planning to murder Marie Antoinette, they believed everything the papers ever said about me. They thought I was in bed - literally and figuratively - with every political club and member of the Assembly and knew everything there was to know about anything for the Revolution. They beat me, they badgered me, they tried to rape me!"

She was shouting now, the fear turning to anger, and it was like night and day. The fire inside her now lit, de Méricourt stood tall and proud, her feet were spread evenly to hold her weight, and she looked like she could take on the world. She described her ordeal in lurid detail, the dark nights and insomnia, headaches and constant fear, the Germanic sounds of another language she didn't understand. She talked about how the guards looked at her, the sounds at night, the hands constantly trying to touch her, the vulgar language and the overwhelming conviction that she was going to die. "They kidnapped a citizen of France and thought they could do whatever they wanted to her! They thought me Pythia, accused me of corrupting soldiers and threatening the royal family - they thought I was behind the October Days! None of it was true!

"But still I had to answer for all of it! For an entire year they demanded that I tell them everything, and all I could say was that doors were shut in my face! I was nothing to the Revolution, and I became nothing to the Austrians!

"But now I am something!" she said, cheeks bright pink. "My voice can no longer be denied! My words will be listened to, and I am here to tell you: let us be heard! We have just as much a stake in the Revolution as you! Even more so, for we are servants in our own homes! Austria is not the first to take advantage of a woman and think she a possession to do whatever comes to mind, nor will Austria be the last!"

Everyone stood and cheered, whistling and shouting, and de Méricourt was lead - not to the women's gallery, but to sit with the men. She was an equal in the Club, a Jacobin and a hero.

"Messieurs et Mesdames, the first Amazon of Liberty!"

Yvette had been moved to tears, sobbing behind her apron by the time it was all said and done, and Arno carefully escorted her to de Méricourt after the meeting, watching as she confessed her initial thoughts of the Amazon of Liberty and how wrong she had been, apologizing for ever thinking so ill of the activist.

De Méricourt was full of energy, but still gentle as she took Yvette's hands in hers. "I understand," she said softly, smiling. "We have been too long denied the right to be anything other than a wife or courtesan, and it's easy to assign those roles with the blink of an eye. But now we have a voice, and we can make the Revolution work for more than just the men."

Yvette nodded and de Méricourt moved on to the next person who wanted to speak to her. Arno helped Yvette leave the hall and escorted her back to Café Théâtre. "Do you feel better?" he asked.
"Her ideas are so grand," Yvette said, wiping her face with a handkerchief. "I don't think a woman will ever have the same voice as a man, but when you listen to her for a moment you can believe… I judged her wrongly in the past. I will not judge her again. Perhaps I will join her next club."

Arno nodded. "It might do you good," he said. "You might realize how much value you have, or at least how much value I see in you."

Yvette turned, surprised. "Value in me?"

Arno smiled. "Madame, I would not be sober now if it weren't for you, and Monsieur Mercier would be more than just the intendent."

Yvette covered her face again, but the rest of the walk back to the Café was comfortable. She moved immediately to the kitchens while Arno checked in with Célestine and Jacques. They needed another order of coffee, and Arno saw Mercier talking with the theater troupe and taking some firm words.

He couldn't help but smile.

Family indeed.

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February, 1792

Élise opened her eyes to the gray lights of dawn.

It was a fitting time. Gray. No color, no vibrancy.

No feeling.

It had been her constant state since her father died. She had been like this for years. Nothing seemed to help. The only spark of feeling she had was reserved entirely for Germain. But things had been stagnant for years. She needed to be doing something, but after two brushes with near death, she didn't relish facing a third that might be more final. She wanted to spend all her time and resources hunting that dual-eyed man, but she didn't have resources. Weatherall was right about that, but she sent him out to go hunting for Germain, and he never did what she asked. He spoke to other Templars, set about building a powerbase for her, and while she saw the value in it, it wasn't what she wanted. It didn't spark feeling.

The arm around her waist squeezed and she heard the deep breath of one waking up.

Élise was at a loss. She didn't know what to do. Germain had hidden himself in layers, behind hordes of sycophants. Every single time Weatherall found and cornered one; every single time Élise went out with her sword to get answers, there was another person to find who wasn't Germain. And she would be numb all over again.

The covers were pulled down, exposing her naked chest to the cold February as a hot mouth engulfed a suddenly peaked nipple and started licking and suckling.

Even those chances were drying up. Weatherall didn't let her leave out of terrified fear for her safety, and focused so damn much on contacting other Templars and pleading her case, hobbling off on his single leg to get support for her. She was trapped. Trapped at the school she loathed, trapped in a world without her father, trapped in a world where Arno's negligence was no longer cute but had consequences, a word where there was no feeling. The world was as grey as the dawn.
There was a touch of teeth along her nipple, and the hand not holding him up started to massage her other breast. The covers were back up over them and a sigh escaped her.

At first, she had thought something like this might spark feeling. Poor, pitiable Jean had sparked something in her. She had taken him to bed and while it had felt pleasurable, she couldn't hold that feeling. Arno had sparked in her. He had offered help from the Assassins. He had held to that, been injured trying to ensure that from a man she believed had been her mentor. He had been whisked away to be treated and the Assassins took that opportunity to make sure it was abundantly clear she wasn't welcome.

Fine. She knew when she wasn't wanted. So she left. The Assassins wouldn't help so there was no point in staying. Once Weatherall was convinced they didn't have a tail and she had settled into her current prison, she'd made sure to send a letter to Arno. Her father had always insisted on courtesy after all.

The heat was pooling in her body. She let out a moan and produced enough energy to take his hand from her breast and put it where it was supposed to be, between her legs. Her brow was getting damp as the cocoon of the blanket held in the building warmth.

Poor Jean. His one moment to shine had been what lead to his death. Nearly a year afterwards, something Weatherall had ordered had been delivered. From Spain came a sword. Spanish steel always was the best, despite what other French might say. Weatherall hadn't been there when it was delivered, instead being in Italy talking to other Templars. Élise had taken one look at the delivery man and seen beauty personified. Chemistry flared and for a moment, she had thought she had feeling. Rough, wild, quick, ferocious. It was more battle than pleasure, but the climax had been stupendous.

But it wasn't feeling.

Élise felt a pool of sweat caught between the small of her back and the bedding. A tongue was reaching as deep into her as it could and she felt every hot breath along her womanhood as hands slid along her sweaty legs.

The delivery man had left and she was back to being cold and trapped. It seemed the world was losing colors with every passing day and month. She was a bird in a gilded cage, and she couldn't even muster feeling angry about it, because she just didn't feel. Instead she just waited for the days to pass. Waited for word. Waited for Weatherall. Waited for something to feel.

A tongue coated in her own taste came to her lips. She didn't care for it, pushed it to her neck instead, and focused on getting the damn cock inside to deal with the pooling heat that needed friction. This man had reminded her of Arno. Looked like him. She dug her fingers into his long brown locks, felt a drip of sweat fall from his nose to her cheek, ran her hands down his sweaty back, felt the rhythm and sway. But he looked like the Arno she had grown with. Handsome, skinny, adorable. Not the Arno she had seen. The Arno who had become an Assassin. Who had trained. Whose shoulders were broader, hips narrower, face scarred across the nose. The young-Arno above her moved a hand to her breast again, hands clammy with sweat as he continued to thrust, tongue on the pulse of her neck, and the pleasure along her body finally reached a crescendo. She shuddered violently, orgasm seeming to go from her toes to the roots of her hair, but the not-Arno wasn't done yet, hadn't met his own needs. Élise was quick to pull off of him, grab his pulsing cock, and do a pull squeeze just right that suddenly their sweaty cocoon had a new liquid spurting between them. Not-Arno pulled her close and did a very Arno thing. He cuddled. He whispered to her. He cared for her after the fucking.

But Élise did not feel.
This would be the last time she went to bed with someone. Her body might feel pleasure, her body might be in ecstasy, but her soul was a withered husk. All that release meant nothing. She had spread her legs for nothing. And she would not do so again. She wanted to feel. Fucking didn't create feeling. It just mimicked it for a short time. Élisée would accept no more substitution. Not-Arno caressed and massaged her, so like the real-Arno, making sure she was alright before he fell back asleep. If any of the fucking had meant anything, perhaps she would leave a note. But the fucking had been meaningless. So once he was asleep, she slid out of the sweaty, messy cocoon of blankets to the frigid air that immediately made her skin itch and feel tacky. She put on her clothes and left.

After all, she had only met not-Arno by visiting and wandering town. None would recognize her as the reclusive shut-away at the school. She needed to go after Germain. She needed to put her Spanish steel into his stomach, watch him bleed and burn and never get the relief of death. She needed his suffering to make her feel anything. So she needed to reassess what she had and start focusing on finding Germain. No matter what Weatherall said.

Because she was tired of winter and the cold numbness that would never go away.

Arno shrugged out of his overcoat as he entered the Café. He and Mercier, Paul, had, over the past two months, worked out who did which duties. By definition, a steward managed domestic concerns, like staff, accounts, records, etc, and an intendant handled larger concerns across several of the same business. Paul should be looking over not just the Café, but a chain of cafés, to ensure consistency of quality and the like, broader ideas, etc. But they were only one café. Paul had stated, quite emphatically and formally, that he did not care for doing accounts. Arno had countered that he clearly didn't have the skills for accounts. Then Paul had smiled and calmly explained that such a deficiency could be easily rectified. Thus, since Paul's hiring, Arno had had more numbers and figures pounded into his head that he'd thought possible. Thankfully most of what Arno learned were simple account maintenance that he hadn't known when he'd been forced by Olivier to handle accounts to earn back whatever Arno had messed up, and a lot of the skills he'd made doing Olivier's dirty work were easy to transfer over to what Paul was teaching.

Paul had the connections for getting supplies at decent prices, but he spent the better part of December taking Arno around to all of his contacts and introducing him as his representative. This set up Arno for handling the stewardship as he was supposed to. Getting supplies, keeping accounts, handling the staff. Paul, however, was left with all the planning and organizing for people who wanted to rent out the Café. That was becoming more and more frequent, keeping Paul very, very busy. He hired servers and staff as needed for larger bookings, and the two of them were thinking of hiring Claudette, hired for the memorial of Mirabeau, permanently as their pastry chef if the bookings kept happening.

Arno put his coat in the servant's coat closet, and checked in with Paul in the intendant's office. "Bonjour. How have things been this morning?"

"The usual bustle," Paul replied with his usual dry voice. "Madame Yvette has been making me hungry all day with the delicious smells from the kitchens and Madame Charlotte is a wonder with the lunch patrons." He turned more serious. "I know I'm still new here, but I'm uncertain how much longer we can keep that theater troupe here."

Arno actually paused. "Oh?"

"We're getting a higher class of citizens coming and going and that troupe is rather... bawdy."

Arno nodded. Another thing on the to-do list. "Madame Gouze will handle that. Neither of us have
a hope for finding theater people."

Paul chuckled. "Quite so. Célestine hasn't come in yet."

Arno frowned. "That's the third time this week."

"Oui."

"I'll speak to her."

"Merci."

Arno nodded then pulled over a chair and went over the deliveries he had just secured for the upcoming booking. By the time they finished, the lunch rush would be winding down, and Arno hadn't eaten anything since that morning, so he stretched and headed down the hall to see what Yvette had left over.

"Ah, bonjour," Yvette greeted, bustling about the kitchen, already getting out ingredients for the dinner rush. The speed with which she was running around convinced Arno that hiring Claudette permanently would need to be a sooner rather than later. "You are looking pale," she observed, grabbing a clean plate. "Not eaten since this morning I'd wager."

"You'd win that," Arno replied lightly. "I've been visiting vendors all morning and just sat with Monsieur Mercier to go over what's happening for the rest of the week."

"You need to take better care of yourself, Monsieur."

Arno chuckled. "Isn't that why you're here?"

Yvette smiled, a plate overflowing with far too much food was quickly handed to him.

A childish shriek was the only warning Arno had before a pair of children rammed into him from behind, almost having him upend his plate of lunch. He swiftly placed it on the table, reached down, and lifted up both pint-sized terrors.

Yvette was frowning severely at the children, but she had stepped back to her fires to let Arno handle it.

"Well," Arno said to the little hellions under each arm. "If it's isn't Jean-Paul and Bridgette. Where's your father?"

"Still having lunch!" Bridgette giggled. "We snuck away like when you snuck away all the time!"

Jean-Paul giggled back, "Snuck! Snuck! Snuck up on you!"

Vaguely Arno wondered if this is what he would have been like if he was raised an Assassin.

"Well you've done your sneaking, it's time you stayed with your father and let my staff do what they need to do."

Both children groaned. "But we were hoping for Claudette and sweets!"

"And you won't be getting any," Arno stated firmly, heading out of the kitchen. "Nor will you when you run wild like this."

Tissot was at a booth, his youngest sitting on his lap as Tissot carefully fed him some mushy bread
that had been soaked in milk, since the child didn't have teeth to chew yet. The next booth over had his oldest, seventeen-year-old Odette with three of her siblings and keeping some sort of hissing match from erupting into a shouting match that would be quite the scene. Arno glanced over to the counter, and nodded his head to Jacques. Jacques nodded and got to work.

"Monsieur," Arno greeted, both terrors still under his arms. "I believe I found something of yours."

Tissot looked up, saw his children, then let out an explosive sigh. "You have my thanks again, Monsieur," he replied, keeping up the pretense that they barely knew each other. Which was true in a way.

Arno gently set down the two little hellions and guided them into the booth, then deliberately sat down next to them across from Tissot, effectively trapping them. Jacques came over with café au lait that was perfect as always, and the plate that Yvette had prepared for him. That was perfect for Arno, since he was starving. Tissot was still feeding his youngest, Odette now hissing at the arguing siblings firmly. The two hellions had food placed in front of them (not sweets) and settled in to eat.

They stayed that way for a while. Arno caught the eye of Mme Gouze and nodded that he would take care of it, and she smiled gently back.

Arno was about halfway through his plate when he finally settled back to look at Tissot.

There was no denying that Tissot didn't care for him. But Tissot at least was professional when they were out together. He did the job without comment. Beaumont just tried to intimidate and harass Arno, so given a choice between the two, he'd always choose Tissot. So perhaps it was time for some professional advice.

"Whatever you're doing to watch your children isn't going well," he said with as much gentleness as such a statement could handle.

"I know," Tissot said softly. "Camille usually handles the youngest. I'm working with the oldest."

"Training?"

"Yes." Neither of them needed to say what sort of training. "Odette is doing what she can..."

"But she's still young."

Young in the way Arno was young before the Estates-General.

"How have you been handling it?"

"Some of the novices have been helping. But with all the chaos going around, there isn't always one available."

Arno leaned back and sipped his café au lait. "Family? Friends?"

"All a part of the... political club."

Arno actually raised his brows at that. "Contacts with your weaver friends," he suggested. "They must have noticed you've been closed for two months now."

Tissot grimaced. "They know my wife is ill."

"But have they offered?"
Tissot shook his head, setting aside the bread and milk and readjusting the grip of his youngest. "All my children know that their father does extraordinary things. I can't trust that they won't mention something odd."

Arno actually struggled to hold back either frowning or rolling his eyes. "Monsieur, correct me if I'm wrong, but when I joined our little 'political club', I was told that what we do was for them. The average person who doesn't even know what we do. We struggle so that France has a hope of being better, of everyone being able to do anything they set their minds to. We work towards a community where everyone is a part of it."

"Yes," Tissot looked up from the youngest for the first time, meeting Arno's eye.

"Then shouldn't we trust that everyone is a part of our community? My staff might not know every little thing I do on their behalf, but they still support me and help as they can. Even if I don't want their help."

"Don't you put them in danger by doing so?"

Arno nodded. "I am very aware of that." He looked down to his food, suddenly not overly hungry. "I know that what I do is dangerous and that I need to be careful. These fancy hoods of ours do have a purpose. We have the tunnels. But my staff will always help. And yes, it can be a nightmare trying to come up with reasonings and maneuvering around them, but Madame Gouze helps with that. You and your wife work at your shop?"

Tissot's lips twitched up. "Bien sûr. As if she'd have it any other way. Or I'd want it any other way."

"Then you have two people brainstorming reasons the way I do here. Trust your associates. Certainly someone's been pestering you to make sure you're well."

"A neighbor down the street," Tissot said softly. "Comes over every Sunday with a meal for all of us."

"Then let them look after the youngest. Or the oldest. Split them so that you don't have to worry and that you have less to look after when you're visiting your wife."

"I will think on it tonight."

Arno nodded. Then he gently stuck out his leg to prevent Jean-Paul from sneaking away under the table, getting a soft, "awwww," underneath them.

Tissot actually chuckled.

Once Arno was certain Tissot had his children managed, he found Célestine in the main entryway, mopping the floor. Right. Another thing to deal with. He walked by for now with a quiet greeting to check in with Yvette, then with Paul, and finally with Mme Gouze. He mentioned the concerns about the theater troupe and she agreed that the clientele was getting less appreciative of the baser nature of some of the skits. She would talk to the troupe, but if they didn't improve, they were going to have to start searching again.

"Célestine," Arno found her in the kitchens, sweeping out soot that always accumulated everywhere from the fires. "May I have a word?"

"Bien sûr, Monsieur," she chirped.
Paul was still in his office, going over papers, so Arno pulled Célestine to the servant's entrance. He was certain Paul would be listening.

"Célestine," Arno started, "this is the third time this week you've been late. Today you are so late that you won't be able to finish all your jobs today."

Célestine looked down, guilty. "I'm sorry, Monsieur."

"I'm sure you are," Arno said softly. And waited.

She stayed still, looking down. When it got longer, she started to fidget.

"And?" Arno prompted.

She looked up surprised, looking around to find inspiration what it was that Arno wanted. (That it wouldn't happen again? Was that so hard to say?) And when she turned her head, Arno's eyes narrowed. Just peeking out from under her dress was a bruise. A bite-shaped bruise. 

Merde.

"Will this happen again?" he prompted.

"Oh! Non, Monsieur, it will not."

"Then you'll be on-time tomorrow?"

"Oui, Monsieur."

Arno measured as best he could, with this new information. "You'll be staying late tonight finishing your tasks. Since you came in so late, you'll have to stay late."

"Monsieur!"

"Unless you have somewhere to be?"

"Ahhhh, non, Monsieur," she blushed brightly.

"Good. Madame Gouze will have a room set up for you."

"Ah, oui."

Arno nodded. "You've a lot of work to do."

She nodded and scurried away.

With a heavy sigh, Arno stepped in to the Café long enough to catch Mme Gouze's eye and gesture for her, then waited in Paul's office.

Mme Gouze came in and both she and Paul looked to Arno.

With a heavy sigh, Arno ran a hand up through his hair, untying the ribbon to retie it. "It seems our little cleaning girl has a beau."

No one smiled.

"Not the good sort of beau," Paul stated. "He's keeping her from work and responsibilities."
"Not a good sign," Mme Gouze agreed. "I remember being that young and sneaking around, but never for the amount of time that Célestine is gone."

Paul let out a low chuckle. "I'm sure we all remember sneaking around. But she didn't come in till after two this afternoon."

Arno nodded. "Madame, I've told her she's staying late tonight to finish all her work and that she'll stay with you. She'll be here on time this morning."

"Assuming she doesn't sneak away tonight," Paul shook his head.

"She won't," Arno and Mme Gouze said firmly in unison. They'd both be watching with their eagles.

"I'll let the rest of the staff know that she's working late, but I won't get into details," Arno said. "If she wants her beau to be a secret, fine, but they also need to see that her behavior is being addressed."

Paul let out a heavy sigh. "By all rights, we'd be able to just let her go."

"We will not," Mme Gouze said firmly. "She's been here since she was thirteen. Growing pains are expected. If her behavior gets worse, we will revisit."

"I agree," Paul nodded. "She's a sweet child, but she is still a child."

Arno agreed. "Right. Time to keep a closer eye."

As it turned out, that night, neither Mme Gouze nor Arno were able to keep a close eye on Célestine. The teenager had gone to Mme Gouze's just past one o'clock in the morning, having finally finished all her chores and work, and Arno was, unsurprisingly, burning the midnight oil. He had been neglecting the accounts for the week since Fabre had been pulling him for a heist and he needed to stay on top of things so that Paul didn't catch on that Arno basically had two jobs. He was working in the rotunda, partially to have more moonlight and partially to keep an eye on the courtyard for Célestine. Granted, he doubted she'd leave after how hard she'd worked, but a beau that kept her that late, that often couldn't be a good match for her.

So, when three a.m. came along, and Arno tiredly noticed motion in the courtyard, he'd assumed it would be their young cleaning girl sneaking out to go see her beau.

This wasn't the case.

"Augustin!"

Arno hadn't bothered with stairs, he climbed right out the window and down the façade, because Augustin had the arm of someone around his shoulder and they were both stumbling toward Mme Gouze's house.

He raced forward on silent feet, ignoring just how damn cold the February night was without a proper overcoat. Or boots.

"Augustin," he hissed, already trying to help the wounded brother and take some of the weight off of the dark-skinned man.

"Ah, Arno," Augustin replied tiredly. "I should have known you'd be awake at such a god-forsaken
hour."

"You've been gone for months. What happened?"

"Might we have questions after I've slept for about a week?"

Right. "Of course," he said. "And our guest?"

"One of us. He was my assignment. I needed to find and extract him."

That had even more questions, but Arno didn't voice them. He hefted the man off of Augustin's shoulders to let the man totter to the door of Mme Gouze. "My room might be better. Quicker access to the Sanctuary and the doctor."

"More discreet here," Augustin replied as he let them in. He took a breath to call out, but Arno shushed him.

"Célestine is staying over tonight," he said softly. "We don't want her seeing all this."

Augustin grimaced, but nodded. "I don't feel much like secrecy, but I suppose we'll have to. Célestine will be in the guest room. We'll put Claude here in the drawing room."

It was not a surprise to see a candle appear in the hallway and to see Mme Gouze covered in a shawl, hair under a bonnet come to see what everything was about. Her eagle had likely called to her the same way Arno's had.

She gasped upon seeing Augustin, and ran to him to wrap her arms around him tightly. There were no words, but the way they held each other so closely, Augustin nuzzling her neck, Mme Gouze running her free hand up into his hair, there was something so intimate about it that Arno felt like he was intruding. As silently as he could, he hefted the Assassin, Claude to the drawing room, laying him out on a couch and pulling off his boots before disappearing to get a blanket and more pillows. One of those feet looked... bad. Swollen and twisted in a bad way. Arno focused on getting that foot as elevated and comfortable as possible. The man barely reacted.

"Merci, Arno," Augustin said softly.

Arno whirled to see Augustin and Mme Gouze at the door, neither showing any sign of leaving each other's side.

"If you could fetch the doctor, I'm sure Claude will appreciate it when he wakes up. Probably."

"Don't forget yourself, dearest," Mme Gouze said with soft firmness. Arno held up a candle and saw a nasty gash along Augustin's bicep, bandage a dull brownish-red of dried blood.

"I won't, love," he replied softly, squeezing and pulling her closer.

Arno nodded. "I won't be long."

Naturally, in the commotion, no matter how quiet, Célestine was able to sneak out.

Augustin stayed at Mme Gouze's, saying he would return to the Café the following week. Arno didn't question him as it was clear he wanted time with Mme Gouze first. Dominique grumpily informed them that Claude would never walk right again. Claude, once he woke up from the exhausted trek (apparently across France, he'd been fetched from the Mediterranean coast) across the countryside ducking from Royalists that did not care for how Paris was changing everything as
fast as possible and where the clergy still had a firm hold on the people (and apparently weren't of the greedy, power-hungry variety... mostly) and from Templars who only saw hoods and neither knew if they were Élise's Templar allies or Germain's coup, well Claude didn't care for the news.

Arno kept his lips firmly sealed to a thin line. He was tempted to ride out to the provinces and hamlets the two had encountered Templars and start asking questions, but he knew disappearing would make things worse than they already where.

Having not slept because of this, he was rather testy when Célestine came in an hour late.

"You're late," he said without preamble.

"Oui, Monsieur."

Arno tightened his jaw. She was being far too meek. Where was the inquisitive mind that had been interested to learn that there was a proper way to clean floors? He let out a long, drawn-out sigh. "Célestine, whatever you do on your time is your business. Not mine. But you have responsibilities here. Laundry, windows, floors, dishes, they are all your responsibility. That means that you have to value them, because that's what gives you your pay, if nothing else."

"I do, Monsieur," she said emphatically. "I love being here, I love the job. You've made this place more successful than I ever thought possible! I make good money here."

"You being late all the time is a strange way of showing it."

She blushed brightly, before she scowled. "You just said that what I do on my time is mine. It's not any of your business."

"Your time is eating into my time," he replied calmly. "The steward I was under would assign me the worst and most filthy jobs when I wasn't where I was supposed to be. I'm asking you to stay an hour after closing to finish your work."

"I'll be done by the end of the day."

"You're still staying an hour after closing to make up for the hour late you are. We'll add another half hour on for this little conversation." Arno let out a soft sigh. "Take the job seriously."

"I am," she muttered, but put away her heavy coat and grabbed a dust rag to get to work.

"Teenage rebellion," Paul said behind him.

Arno turned. "I didn't think she'd rebel with us."

Paul actually laughed. "Why do you think parents always get their children apprenticeships? So they don't have to deal with all that rebellion."

Arno actually reflected. Had he been like that? He hadn't thought himself rebellious when he knew Olivier would make his life miserable. But he did follow Élise's rebellions and got into trouble as a result.

Paul sighed sadly. "You've provided her a safe and stable home here, so she's going to choose the most despicable young man to see what it's like. Rather like my daughter."

There was a story there. Something painful, but Arno didn't press at it. Paul had lost his family to consumption. That was enough pain.
The staff was going to have to watch out for Célestine.

March dawned cold. Claude had been from Marseilles and complained constantly about the weather. He stayed with Augustin and Mme Gouze at their home, and worked the gardens only begrudgingly, not at all pleased with the inability to walk. Arno made him part of the staff meetings, but he just sat there grumpily, his southern accent almost impossible to understand, and did what he was told.

The staff welcomed Augustin back warmly, and Arno noted that Yvette had many of Augustin's favorites out for the next week easily. Célestine still tended towards late and her attitude soured immediately whenever it was pointed out. Yvette, her preferred gossip friend, was starting to send her out of the kitchen to remove the negativity and dourness. After almost two weeks of being kept late to finish her hours, Célestine started showing up mostly on time, only ever late by minutes instead of hours, but it seemed showing up required a great deal of complaining and grousing.

Yvette remained steadfast in her belief in Théroigne de Méricourt. She didn't think anything that Théroigne proposed would come to pass, but she firmly believed in what de Méricourt was trying to do. Paris was clearly in love with de Méricourt, it didn't take much to see that given how often she was invited to several political clubs to speak. Yvette would go wherever de Méricourt went to speak, and Arno would often accompany her. He enjoyed listening to her, and he imagined that Élise would agree with many of her sentiments as well, if not necessarily the precise proposals. De Méricourt was currently making the rounds about Paris calling for a female battalion to join the four armies that had been created in defense against whatever the hell Austria was going to do. There was support, from what Arno could tell. Yvette liked the idea, and others did as well, but no one actually wanted to join. Many of the men tended to laugh the idea off, claiming no woman could ever best a man in combat.

Arno ignored those idiots. Guns didn't care about your gender and Élise would easily wipe the floor with all of them.

The Jacobins started saying that de Méricourt was causing unrest and starting to denounce her. But she was still very much a darling of the revolution, the first Amazon, and her popularity wasn't inhibited. She was still invited to speak at various clubs.

One evening, when Arno was escorting Yvette to such a club to observe from the gallery, He was surprised to see a fellow hood in the crowd. He slid through the crowds to greet her.

"Bon soir," he said softly. "Assignment or desire?"

The woman actually smiled. She glanced at him, the streaks of white in her hair shining in the candlelight. "Both," she replied. "I am Lisette. You?"

"Arno. Café Théâtre."

"Hmm. Seamstress." She continued to listen quietly. "How about you. Assignment or desire?"

"Desire," he replied. "My cook likes listening to her and I make sure she's safe."

"She wouldn't be?"

"Even with all men free, a black woman is not."

That actually had Lisette turn again. "Your cook is a black woman?"
"It's not the most important part of her, but it's the part everyone sees first." He looked at her and arched a brow. "We serve Haitian food with traditional French fare. People enjoy our flavor and keep coming back."

"Hmmm, I might have to visit," she replied lightly.

"We're easy to find," he replied. "We have access to the tunnels," he whispered into her ear.

"Good to know."

They sat and listened to the speech for another ten minutes. Then Lisette leaned over. "I think I'd like to join you and your cook."

"Of course."

Yvette was nodding her head emphatically with many of the things de Méricourt was saying, muttering an occasional, "that's right!" or "Amen!" Pauses were met with everyone turning to discuss whatever point was being made and Arno did what he usually did. He spoke with Yvette.

"Monsieur," she said, eyes glittering, "it does my heart well to see this." Her accent was getting thick again, with all the difficulty she had getting through her emotion. "We won't ever achieve the goals Madame de Méricourt sets out, but that someone can actually dream of it! Praise be."

Arno smiled and nodded. "Her dreams may well happen. You know that the young lady of the house I worked at could use swords and rode and did many things most women never dream of. Who's to say that what she accomplished should be limited to just her?"

"But she is a noblewoman, Monsieur," Yvette replied. "Nobles can do whatever they want."

"Not always," Arno replied. "Noble women are sometimes even more bound than the Third-Estate. Arranged marriages, formal functions and etiquette, what can and can't be said. Third-Estate ladies can speak their minds in some corners. Noblewomen almost never get that chance. My young lady had me to be free with and her father was very doting. If she had entered into an arranged marriage, what do you think would happen to her? Isn't that part of the Revolution? Making sure that such restrictions are only on being safe instead of binding our citizens?"

"Oh, that may be the goal, Monsieur, but I don't think those men will give women that courtesy the way you do."

"Indeed," Lisette said. "I have attended several of Madame de Méricourt's speeches and I have noticed a very sad pattern."

Arno and Yvette both blinked, looking over.

Lisette gave a sad smile, running a hand up to her gray-streaked hair to slip more strands under her bonnet. "Her speeches may be about empowering women, but have you noticed what always gets the loudest applause?"

Yvette frowned. "The fact that a woman gets any applause is worth celebration."

"True," Lisette nodded, eyes tired, "but the applause is loudest when she talks of her treatment by the Austrians. These political clubs are using her for war-mongering. They're making everyone angry at Austria so that we can plead to the Assembly for war. We haven't even settled into the new Assembly, things are still changing everywhere, there's no stability in France yet. And these political clubs are already deciding we need to go to war and are pushing it with any means they
can." She let out a long, slow sigh. "They're using Madame de Méricourt as a prop. A mouthpiece. Nothing more. Whether she's aware of that or not, I can't say, but I'm just trying to take heart in the fact that her ideas are being heard and spread. Maybe we can actually reach that, as Monsieur Dorian hopes."

Arno frowned, unsettled with Lisette's thoughts on an upcoming war. Surely the Assembly wouldn't do that. Paris still in unrest, chaos every day in the streets, a war would be the worst thing to happen. The thought left him cold the whole way home.

April dawned with news that had much rejoicing in the Brotherhood and in the Café. The Assembly granted freedom to all the slaves in Haiti. Yvette cried happy tears for most of the week, Cosette came to celebrate, and Arno went around the city to invite Haitians to the Café for one night of celebration. The conservative theology university at Sorbonne was closed, a new paper started circulating decrying against the Girondists, arguing economics and defending a man called Robespierre.

With spring warming, Arno and the Café were busy, but on April twentieth, Arno stopped when he saw the news sheets and had to sit down.

War was declared by the Assembly against Austria.

Just over a week later, on the twenty-eighth, Rochambeau invaded the Austrian Netherlands.

Arno let out a heavy sigh. It was the middle of May and he was arguing, again, with Célestine. She was refusing the scrub and reseason some of the iron skillets that Yvette used so regularly. Her attitude had been getting worse and worse, always finding something to argue about, and now that the weather was warmer, it was harder to hide the love-bites she clearly had. Neither Mme Gouze, nor Yvette were able to get her to speak of her beau, despite how much of a gossip that Célestine tended to be.

To make matters worse, she was getting incredibly friendly with Odette, Tissot's oldest. Tissot's wife was better, but recovery was taking time still. They were able to move her back home and Tissot had a neighbor who was helping with the children, but Odette visited the Café regularly to see Célestine. Apparently Célestine's bad attitude was spreading to Odette as well, who was questioning why she couldn't start getting back to her life instead of still caring for the children.

"Célestine," Arno struggled to remain calm to the girls’ insults and screeches, "you have a job to do. If you can't do it, or won't do it, get out."

"Monsieur, I'm only trying to say—"

"Get out."

"Merde," she swore, "you never listen to me."

"Parenting struggles?" Arno turned, surprised to see Lisette again. She had visited the Café on occasion, but he rarely saw her.

"Not parenting," Arno replied, rubbing at the budding headache. "Just growing up, it seems."

"Hmm?"

Arno gave a wan smile. "She has a beau. I don't think he's being a good influence on her. She's
getting argumentative, late, slacking at her work, nothing good. And she's getting Tissot's daughter into trouble as well."

"Hmmm." Lisette tapped a cheek. "Have you met her beau?"

"No," Arno shook his head. "Her time is her time. I don't want to intrude on that."

"You'll have to. She's treating you like a father, not a boss. That's why I thought it was a parenting struggle."

Arno balked. "I've known her, what, two years? How can I be a father? Augustin would have been more of a father, he's known her longer and has worked here longer." And he was basically the father to Mme Gouze's mother of the Café.

Lisette shrugged. "We don't choose who our parents are when we need them."

... That struck far too close to Arno.

But he shook it off. "So what brings you here?"

"Business, of course."

"Of course."

Arno made his usual excuses to Paul, knowing it would be passed on to the staff, and found Lisette with Mme Gouze and Cosette outside.

"Madame?" he asked softly.

She gave a small, if tight smile. "I'll be coming this time."

"Does Monsieur Grizier know—"

"No," she said tightly. "I was not informed when he disappeared to fetch Claude. I can afford to not inform him of this." But her face showed worry.

He walked over and placed a hand slowly and gently on her shoulder. "Madame?"

Mme Gouze puffed out a sigh. "I left the field over ten years ago," she said softly. "I don't want to go back."

Arno looked to Lisette, whose face was sorrowful. "Désolé, Charlotte," she said softly. "Not many lady Assassins are available at the moment. The only reason I chose Arno is because he's been seen about, so no one will question him."

Arno didn't know how to react to that. Did that mean she didn't want him because he was a man or didn't want him because he was Templar-raised, as so many liked to remind him?

Cosette gave a warm smile. "You couldn't have chosen a better person," she offered. "Arno is perhaps the best person to have with us."

"Hmmm, that uniting-eagles rumor?" Lisette scoffed. "I don't put much stock in such fanciful notions."

"But he can—"
Arno shook his head. "It's alright, Cosette." He looked to Lisette. She wasn't wearing a bonnet this day, instead her gray-streaked hair was pinned up under a fanciful hat, much like Mme Gouze. Cosette was still dressed as a maid, appearing to be serving Lisette for whatever the well-off woman would need. Good cover. Mme Gouze was clearly a good friend coming along for whatever adventure the two women would be off to. Arno adjusted his stance, appearing more like the houseboy he had once been, another servant. Perhaps a bit too well-dressed for one, but someone a husband was sending along to make sure the women didn't cause too much damage.

"Hmmm," Lisette hummed approvingly. "Very good."

Arno gave a polite bow more in keeping with the role he was to play. "The mission?" he asked quietly.

Lisette's face fell into bleak seriousness. "Austrian Templars."

"Merde," Cosette hissed.

"The Austrians hate Théroigne de Méricourt. They believe she is the sole perpetrator of the revolution, and all the other awful things you've been hearing in her speeches. The Austrian Templars don't give a whit about that, they're worried about the Templar politics going on. But they've rationalized that Théroigne is an Assassin because so much of what she espouses aligns with our own philosophies." Her frown tightened. "So they've deluded a few people and offered to kill her. It's the excuse they need to see what's going on here in the French Rite."

Diable.

"De Méricourt is planning on speaking to the public, another plea to women to form a battalion." Lisette offered a cold smile. "It's the best place for Templars to make it look like an accident or a riot. Good thing we're all interested citizens heading out to listen."

"Indeed," Arno agreed.

Together they headed out. They trekked south of the Seine, to one of the poorer districts. Already, a crowd had gathered, listening to de Méricourt's rousing speech.

"We need to get higher up," Mme Gouze suggested quietly.

"Hmm. We won't get to the roofs in these petticoats," Lisette replied. "There." There was an abandoned home, partially boarded up, and it was easy for Arno to pull down boards and let them in. The inside was a hovel, stains and rot in places, but the main structure was sound. They headed up to the third floor to observe.

"Crowd's getting bigger," Cosette observed almost an hour later.

"Hmmm."

Arno had out a sheet of paper and had sketched the layout of the square. There were easily two thousand people there, but Arno had seen much larger crowds. It appeared de Méricourt, though popular in political clubs, couldn't draw enough on her own. The people listening and cheering were invested, but Paris didn't bat an eye at two-thousand, when riots often had upwards of five-thousand. He called on his eagle a few times, but there was never a spark of fireworks to draw his eye.

Yet.
After another hour, Arno called for his eagle and squinted. His eyes went to the sparks of color that his eagle had pointed out, but there was also a cloud of butterflies around someone else.

"Cosette," he said quietly. "Eagle."

Arno had to squint again, but Cosette's eagle was always clear. Her eagle had spotted what Arno had seen as well as another that he marked out on his sketches.

"Madame Gouze," he asked softly, studying the crowd, "your eagle."

She touched his shoulder lightly and he didn't see anything, but he felt. Fear and anxiety to be on the mission, worry over Arno and his struggles and so much protectiveness his eyes watered. He called off his eagle quickly.

"Madame," he grunted, "how do you focus that?"

"Oh?"

"Your eagle. It's... feelings, right? Emotions?"

Surprise flickered in her eye. "I hadn't thought of it," she replied demurely, reaching up to her burn scar. "My eagle has never been strong, but I've always had feelings about people."

"What do you focus on for something like this? For finding someone in a crowd?"

"... Memories."

Arno nodded. Tissot had once said that asking about eagles was far too personal. He could see why. He turned to Lisette. "Butterflies?"

She looked sharply at him. "Hmmmm," she hummed affirmatively. "It seems your unity ability is true. Yes."

Arno looked at his sketch. "I can't follow Madame Gouze, but I count three we need to handle."

"What I saw matches," Mme Gouze stated, studying the sketch.

"Hm," Lisette leaned over the sketch, studying it closely. "They're expecting us. They're spread out in such a way to see if another falls. Merde, a riot would actually be good right about now. The chaos would help us hide the work. As it stands someone will notice if someone falls over."

"Not necessarily," Cosette said, studying the crowds. "We can draw them into the alleys."

"They'll likely notice if one of the others are disappearing. Hmmmm, they are watching each other as closely as de Méricourt."

"It would have to be all at once," Mme Gouze said softly.

"Does anyone speak German," Lisette asked.

"A few words," Cosette said.

"None," Mme Gouze said.

"I remember a little," Arno stated.
Lisette was still staring at the crowds and the sketch.

"Charlotte, you'll have to work with Arno. You two will go for this gentleman with the butcher's apron. Cosette, this man in the center of the crowd. I'll handle the pompous idiot in the feathered tricorn." She glanced at them. "Try and use Germain to appeal to their Austrian heritage. Just enough that they'll want to follow you."

"How will we know when to strike?" Cosette asked, already staring out the window to her assigned target.

Lisette actually chuckled. "Hmm. Trust your eagles."

Arno switched his stance from beleaguered servant to good friend and offered his arm to Mme Gouze. "Shall we?"

Her shoulders were still tense, but she smiled warmly. "My thanks, kind sir."

"Bien," Lisette smiled. "We'll meet at the market two streets over that we passed through."

They left and Arno kept his arm around Mme Gouze's.

"Are you certain you're alright?" he asked softly.

Mme Gouze stayed silent for a long time as they maneuvered through the crowds. "I promised myself that I wouldn't do this again."

"This?"

"The field. I'm best suited for the work we do at the Café, keeping an eye on how Paris feels." She turned her head and offered a wan smile, the feather of her hat still obscuring part of her face. "I understand why Lisette called on me. She was my teacher a lifetime ago. Théroigne tends to have a lot of women at her rallies, so of course she'd grab every one of us that she could."

"Mais?" But?

Her smile twisted. "She knew I never wanted to return to the field. She understood why. And she came to the Café today knowing all that. She knows enough to not call on me again after this, but the precedent has been set. Others may do so as well."

Arno frowned. There was history there, a story that Arno doubted he'd ever learn. "Well," he said lightly, yet seriously, "they'd have to go through me." She gave him an amused smile. "Assuming Augustin didn't get to them first."

She actually tittered at that. "I suppose you are correct."

"Now, what does your eagle say about our target?"

"Cruelty," she said darkly. "The others are dedicated or loyal, but this one... He's cruel."

"Good to know," Arno slipped through the crowd that was rising to another cheer.

They approached quietly, and Arno turned to Mme Gouze with a bright, fake smile. "Was denkst du über diese Menge?"

She giggled lightly and leaned in to whisper in his ear. Not that she actually said anything. It was all about projection now.
"We have his attention," she murmured.

"Mir ist augefallen." He had indeed noticed, the crackle of fireworks sounding closer than before. "Was halten Sie von dieser Sprecherin?"

She leaned in closer. "He's following us."

Arno nodded. "Glaubst du, was sie über sie sagen, ist wahr?"

"Down that alley."

"Ja, Fraulein."

They were almost to the end of the alley when they heard the man they were luring. "Warten!"

Arno leaned over to translate. "He told us to wait," he whispered.

Mme Gouze, the picture of a bored high-born lady, let out a small sigh. "At least he asked politely," she murmured.

The man with the butcher's apron came jogging down the alley, splashing some of the mud that Arno and Mme Gouze had been avoiding up high into the air. He came up to them and Arno could see why Mme Gouze's instincts said, cruel. His face was scarred, eyes beady and narrowed. A butcher's knife was hanging from his belt, easily grasped. He looked vindictive and cruel, and Arno raised a haughty brow at him.

"Ja?"

"Bist du..." the cruel man hesitated. "Bist du österreicher? Warum bist du hier?"

Arno smiled genially and turned to Mme Gouze. "Why, Madame, this man wishes to know if we're Austrian. And why we're here?"

Mme Gouze let out a high, contemptuous laugh. "Oh dear, what a terrible joke. And such a guttural language. However can the Austrians stand to hurt their throats so badly every day!"

"Well, at least it's not English!" Arno continued to play the part of high-born hanger-on, watching as the not-butcher got redder and redder in the face.

"Zeitverschwwendung," the Templar growled, turning.

"You or I," Arno asked, holding up his phantom blade.

But Mme Gouze was faster, rolling back a sleeve to pull out a small knife before it disappeared from her hand to go flying into the Templar's back.

"I suppose that answers that," Arno replied lightly.

"The others?" she asked. Arno reached for his eagle and immediately regretted it. A headache blossomed along the back of his skull, skittering under his hair until it settled around his eyes. He sucked in a sharp breath, but looked back to the crowd around de Méricourt.

"Cosette took hers down," he grunted, then swept across the crowd. "Lisette is still guiding hers."

"Enough, Arno, don't strain your eyes."
"Oui, Madame."

Mme Gouze giggled as they headed to the market. "You could call me by my given name. I wouldn't mind."

Arno smirked. "You've mentioned that before."

Mme Gouze nodded. "As you wish."

"I believe that's my line for you," Arno grinned, despite the headache. "Now, I did notice that the market also had a candlemaker. Maybe we can find something at a better price."

"Or at least someone who has some milk available."

Returning to the Café took time, as Lisette wanted to make sure no one was following. Arno doubted it, as the one glance he did with his eagle that his headache allowed showed no one, but the old Assassin had a point to be cautious. Particularly for Mme Gouze who was still trying to unwind after doing fieldwork for the first time in over a decade, apparently. Arno tried to keep her distracted with plans for Célestine, Lisette adding her own thoughts about seeing the girl's beau and getting a better measure of him, and Cosette offered ideas as well.

Naturally, nothing was settled when they returned to the Café, well into the dinner hour. Paul greeted them at the door, telling Mme Gouze that several patrons had missed her during lunch and that many were asking about her now.

"It seems a lady can't take time to herself these days," she said lightly. "I'll just freshen up and be right back." She showed no sign of the strain she'd been under through the day save a tightness in her shoulders.

"Take your time, Madame," Arno insisted. "You've had the day to yourself, you can have the evening as well."

Her eyes twinkled, since they both knew Augustin was probably at her home waiting for her.

Arno turned back to Paul. It had been a long day and he wanted to unwind and get rid of his headache. "How was Célestine today after our talk?"

The lightness of Paul's face disappeared. "She left and didn't come back."

Arno groaned. "Diable, I don't have time for this."

"Quite so."

Arno first went to Célestine's home, since he'd walked her home several times when riots were too close to safely traverse the streets. She wasn't there, but her landlord was. "You're looking for the slut?"

Arno grit his teeth. "I'm looking for my cleaning girl. She left work earlier today and has not returned. I want to make sure she's okay."

The man looked down to Arno. "She cleans your cock for you?"

Arno took a deep breath. Célestine had mentioned she'd gotten a new landlord with the turn of the year. Her new landlord was clearly an asshole. "Either you know where she is, or you don't."
"She doesn't stay here. She comes by every morning to change clothes, but she doesn't stay here. She won't stay here much longer unless she's willing to start cleaning my cock."

Arno thinned his lips. Everything in him wanted to punch this man senseless, but that would get Célestine evicted so punching would have to come later. Arno spun around and stomped down the stairs.

"Try a couple streets over," the landlord called. "She cleans another cock over there."

Arno just kept walking.

A few streets over he did find people who knew Célestine, and knew her as the whore of a young man named Marcel, a clerk at a lawyer only three streets away. Everyone said that Marcel had a good heart, but was reckless in spending, riding, dealings... just reckless in everything.

Arno already had strong opinions about the young man.

Still, he took a deep sigh and reminded himself that despite how tired he was, his anger was currently (mostly) at the landlord and not Célestine and her little reckless beau. It was getting on to evening, so he hoped that this Marcel character would be home.

He found the residence and knocked politely on the door.

No response.

He knocked again, louder this time.

He risked his headache worsening to look with his eagle and ow, yes, they were in there.

Deep breath. He pounded on the door. "Monsieur Marcel Moreau? Are you at home?"

"Coming!"

Arno waited patiently. Or impatiently as the case may be. The young man who opened the door was tall. Taller than Arno by a scant few centimeters, black hair hastily tied back, shirt loose and vest loose, face red and...

Arno closed his eyes and thinned his lips. The loose shirt was attempting to hide it, but clearly, Arno had interrupted this Marcel and Célestine in the middle of an amorous encounter. Too much information!

"Oui, Monsieur," Marcel said with far too much energy. "How may I assist?" The unstated, as quickly as possible was obviously hanging in the air.

Right.

So Arno plastered on a large smile and strode right into the apartment. "It's nice to finally meet you," he said warmly. "I understand that you are a dear, dear friend of a member of my staff."

Marcel was clearly caught off guard. "Oh! Er, uh—"

"The maid of the café that I'm steward of. A very kind and sweet young lady named Célestine."

Oh yes, that was a very feminine squeak coming from the bedroom.

Marcel's red face reddened further. "Ah, oui, I know of the young lady."
Arno chose not to mention that it was very clear that Marcel knew her *intimately* well. "I was hoping you could help me."

"Er, oui?"

*Teenagers, Arno, these are teenagers without sense.* Arno gave a soft smile he didn't feel. "Yes. She left work earlier today without any sort of word. I've been looking for her to make sure she's okay. There were riots earlier and I'm praying she wasn't caught up in one."

"Ahhhh, er—"

"I also met her new landlord. He's a despicable *connard* and now that I've met him I want to make sure that Célestine gets away from him as fast as possible. I want to help her find a new place to live, even if it's at the Café while we're looking so that she doesn't have to deal with that vile lout anymore."

"Oh. Um, well, yes, that's very good, er-

"Have you seen Célestine?"

"Ahhhhhh..."

How far did Arno wish to go to embarrass this reckless idiot? Should he point out the love-bites that his loose shirt wasn't hiding? Or the love-bites that Célestine came in to work with? Or how everyone he spoke with when finding Marcel said that Célestine was his whore? Or should he not embarrass and just keep being the stern adult.

"I'm here, *Monsieur.*"

Arno turned and it was clear that Célestine had been hastily getting dressed. She looked at him angrily. "You followed me?"

"No, I went out looking for you an hour ago to make sure you were alright and met that *cul* of a landlord."

"I'm handling it."

"You are ignoring it."

"Fine," she growled, crossing her arms, "I'm ignoring it. I only have to put up with it for another year at most."

"You don't have to put up with anything. You know that we would help you. *Madame* Gouze would let you stay with her while we find you a better apartment or landlord. I'll take a room somewhere and you can have mine, you could stay with Yvette, there are other options than dealing with that *cul.*"

Anger sparked in Célestine's eyes. "I'm not some child to shuffle around," she hissed. "I'm a woman full grown. I'm seventeen. I can make my own decisions. I can decide what to do."

Arno counted, very slowly, in his head, through his headache, so that he didn't shout. "Your decisions include continuously being late for work," he replied softly. "Arguing with your colleagues. Arguing with either me or *Monsieur* Mercier. Are those the decisions you're talking about?"
"None of you ever listen to me! I bring up ideas and it's always, some variation of, 'how cute, the maid had a thought!' or something!" She stomped over to Marcel, who had been staring stupidly at the building confrontation. She grabbed his arm and put it around her shoulder. "I'm in love, Monsieur. Nothing is more important than love."

_Idiotic, romantic, teenager!_

"Love has nothing to do with the responsibilities you have, Célestine," Arno replied with a calm he didn't feel. "I haven't said anything about how you have love-bites covering you all the time, or how you missing over half-a day of work, I'm guessing, because you're lounging in bed with Monsieur Moreau here. I've just been telling you to hold to the responsibilities you have."

Both turned bright red and sputtered.

"Monsieur Dorian!"

Arno turned a baleful look to Marcel. "The loose shirt doesn't hide it as well as you think," he said bluntly. "You might want to go a different room and finish off before being a part of this conversation."

"He's staying right here," Célestine said firmly.

Long, beleaguered sigh.

"Let's discuss this one issue at a time," Arno started.

"Yes," Célestine said. "Let's start with how no one ever listens to me."

Arno raised a brow. "I wanted to start with how you need a place to live that's not controlled by an asshole. I thought that took priority."

"I said I'm handling it. You see, you're still not listening to me!"

Very deep breath.

"I was unaware you felt that way."

"I've said it enough times," she grumbled.

Arno grit his teeth. "You have said it and then stormed off without explaining or providing context."

"Isn't it obvious?!"

"No."

Célestine took a deep breath, as Arno had been doing, and let it out slowly. "I have ideas. Ways to improve things. But whenever I suggest something, I'm told that's not how it's done, or that I don't know what I'm talking about."

Arno nodded. "It could be because of experience," he replied. "And if you feel strongly enough, you could have come to me or Monsieur Mercier."

The teenager looked down and away. "It's not like you're ever there," she grumbled.

_Be patient. Be patient. Don't yell and scream. Yell and scream later._
"I am at every staff meeting in the morning. You are always late. My responsibilities have me out in the city often. But even if I'm at the ledgers, you haven't come to me."

She didn't have a response for that.

"Bring up your ideas at the next staff meeting. We'll discuss them thoroughly. Your ideas still might not be implemented, but they will be discussed."

"Merci, Monsieur."

"Now," Arno shifted topics and kept ignoring the massive headache. "I don't want you living under such a disgusting landlord. My suggestion is that we go, together, to him, collect your things, and you stay at the café until we can find a new apartment for you."

"She can stay here," Marcel said firmly. "I love Célestine. I want to marry her someday. She can stay here."

And Célestine's eyes lit up and she turned and kissed him soundly.

Idiot children! Are they even thinking?

"Tell, me, Monsieur Moreau, can your salary pay for two people?"

"Er, what?" Marcel barely pulled away from the kiss to ask.

Arno's jaw tightened. "Can you afford to have two people here? With food, supplies and such?"

"Ah... I'm just making ends meet."

"And do you realize you already have a reputation of keeping a whore?"

"What?" they both shouted.

"I assume you'll have Célestine still working at the Café to make ends meet?"

"But—"

"That you'll be marrying her swiftly so that her reputation for, how did that scummy landlord put it, her reputation for 'cleaning cocks' doesn't spread around any further?"

"What?"

"You have thought about this, correct?"

Célestine was shaking. "It's true love, Monsieur!"

Arno shrugged. "Yes. I'm not saying no to the relationship at all. I'm just asking both of you to think of responsibilities and budgets and the future on how it will work." He looked Célestine in the eye. "Your time is your time. I won't intrude on that. If you want to marry him, fine. I won't stop you. It's not my place to. But we do want you to be okay. So ask me or Monsieur Mercier about how to plan this out. We'll support your decisions."

Arno headed to the door. "I imagine you two have a lot to think about. Will you come back to the Café Célestine, or are you staying here?"

"Monsieur, you're not letting me have any time to think!"
"The world never does," he said.

The month of May ended with the Assembly ordering the deportation of any priests who did not swear an oath of loyalty to France. Louis vetoed it, to the shock of Paris, and also vetoed a volunteer army to reside outside of Paris to protect it from Austrians and the border that was less than two days ride away. Given all the upheaval that had happened in the last three years, it was completely understandable, to Arno, why Paris would want an army between them and Austria. In the papers, Robespierre was already calling for the end of the monarchy. With tensions high, Parisians ended up storming Tuileries Palace, where the Louis resided, making him wear a red liberty-cap and drink to the health of the nation. Naturally the Assembly banned gatherings of armed men in the city limits the very next day.

Lafayette returned to Paris from his army and spoke to the assembly, denouncing the Jacobins and other radicals that were stirring the flames of Paris too far and not calling for calm. He proposed a review of the National Guard, but the mayor of Paris annulled it. Lafayette's good will had disappeared after firing into the crowds at the Champs-de-Mars and he returned to his army shortly thereafter.

July heated up and tensions and fears heated up as well. The unadulterated fear of the Austrians could not be handled by anyone. No resolution or suggestion seemed to stop the mounting anxieties. The Cordeliers Club, a close ally of the Jacobins and led by Danton demanded a Convention to replace the Assembly, as the Assembly was too closely aligned with Royalists who wanted to undo all the progress made thus far. And in that heated rhetoric and debate came word.

The Brunswick Manifesto was posted and circulated around Paris, stating that if the royal family was harmed in any way, an "exemplary and eternally memorable revenge" would follow.

Paris panicked, anger was directly firmly at the King, more demands were made for something to block Austrians from just riding calmly over the border and razing Paris to the ground. July ended with volunteers from Marseilles arriving to help, and then fighting with the National Guard that was so loyal to Lafayette, despite his horrendous image.

It was a nightmare. Every day news had more fear stoking the public, more anger, more... everything.

Chapter End Notes

Théroigne de Méricourt. I don't really know WHAT Ubisoft was thinking other than forcing her into the Multiplayer just because she's so noteworthy during the Revolution, but they kinda used her the way the men of the time used her.

It's kinda funny that de Méricourt tried so hard to have her voice heard and was laughed at, publicly ridiculed and slandered to the point where the Austrians believed all the garbage and kidnapper her for information only to realize she was "just a woman" and one with very poor mental health after all the abuse she suffered in Paris. The parallels here to the modern day are a little scary: Woman says a thing mildly controversial in a public forum, everyone judges her on if she smiled or sounded shrill or seemed too emotional, (compared to back then when they just assumed she was sleeping with everyone. And don't think we don't notice when it still happens today) and - effectively - weaponize her femininity to invalidate the thing that she said.
Articles said de Méricourt would never know the father of a child if she ever had one because she lay with so many men of the Revolution. And, like women of today, the online/newspaper vitriol took their mental toll and drove her to just leave the abuse. And in de Méricourt's case, that's when the Austrians kidnapped her for believing all the abuse that was said about her.

And then she was used again. This time as war propaganda to get France ready for a fight they were in no ways ready to start. We wish we could have done more with her in the fic, but we decided early on that there were going to be some events in the Revolution that neither the Assassins nor the Templars will have control over. And something "small" like the media degradation of de Méricourt is one such thing. The Council just doesn't have the time or manpower to save everyone, and Germain is too busy solidifying his power base.

In between all of that we have a few more small steps: Tissot is slowly becoming aware of what kind of person Arno is. Keep an eye out for the things he says in later chapters. We also check in on Élise - it's a big jump until we next see her and we have to make sure readers understand that her depression isn't going away any time soon, even when she tries to reach for something.

Also: TEENAGERS ARE IDIOTS. But it gives us some laughs because it's all downhill from here.

Next chapter: Tuileries
August 10, 1792

"Allons enfants de la Patrie,

"Le jour de gloire est arrivé !

"Contre nous de la tyrannie

"L'étendard sanglant est levé,

"Entendez-vous dans les campagnes

"Mugir ces féroces soldats?

"Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras

"Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes!"

Arno woke to the song from the Marseillais volunteers again. Rolling out of bed he rubbed his face and stumbled out to the balcony, the music worming into his ears. "Arise, children of the Fatherland," they sang. "The day of glory has arrived! Against us, tyranny's/ bloody standard is raised./Do you hear, in the countryside/ the roar of those ferocious soldiers?/ They're coming right into your arms/ To cut the throats of your sons, your women!"

The song bespoke of fighting tyranny, yes, but it was for the volunteers of the Army of the Rhine, for the war with Austria, not the tyranny of Louis and the First Estate and the King's betrayal. It was a war song, not a song of the Revolution. Arno doubted it would catch on. He was much more partial to Ça Ira regardless.

Mirabeau...

Grumpy that he had been woken after only - he glanced at the clock - four hours sleep, he started dressing for the day. He'd just done four heists in rapid succession with Fabre, and the new King of Rats assured him that would be the end for a while as he blackmailed all the people Arno and Tissot and Cosette and whoever else was paired with him were robbed. Yawning, he pulled his hair back to finish dressing and moved downstairs, praying Jacques had made it in early for his café au lait - he needed to wake up. Célestine was no doubt going to suggest something again - her ideas were grand but without proper understanding of finance - and Paul was going to shoot her down in his curt way, making her angry and then prone to running off to her beau or Tissot's daughter Odette for more proper understanding. Yvette was already here, he could smell her latest soup on the fire - that meant Claudette was here, too, getting the bread ready. Maybe a croissant with jam…

Arno exited his room to see Cosette climbing the stairs. "Oh, good," she said, "You're up."

He blinked, still waking up. "What's happened?" he asked.

"The Council," she said, "Everyone available is to report down below. They've been gathering for
the last three hours. Something big's just happened."

Arno followed her, taking the back stairs by the dance hall, passed the dining hall and to the stairs that led down to the Sanctuary, none of the staff the wiser.

The main hall of the Sanctuary was filled with Assassins, including Mme Gouze and Augustin, Lisette, Tissot, Beaumont, Pontmercy, and Fabre, yawning as badly as Arno, everyone Arno had ever seen before, Novices all at the main stairwell that rose up to the inner sanctum of the Council. There were dozens of questions, nobody knew what was going on, everyone wondering what had happened.

Then,

"Ce putain de fanfaronnade indiscrète et débile de merde!"

Everyone gasped to hear the ever flat-toned Maître Trenet evoke such emotion, or such vulgarity. Her curse burned through all ears, and everyone, even Arno, wondered who could possibly have made her so mad. An Assassin darted downstairs, not one Arno recognized, face white with terror, but Arno and Cosette were too far away to hear what he was saying. Instead, Maîtres Quemar and Beylier came out.

"We have a lot of ground to cover," Beylier said. "We've just had a ship arrive from the Americas, so not all of you are caught up: Four months ago, the Girondist Assembly declared war on Austria after Pillnitz. The war has been going badly, and the Assembly doesn't understand that untrained farmers emboldened by the Revolution won't take orders from Generals, and the generals we have think live combat is excellent training. Marat and his paper have been fanning the flames, telling the soldiers to fight their generals, and some have defected as a result. Rochambeau has resigned and Lafayette told the Austrians that if they stopped he would set his armies to the Jacobins. Last week we got word of the Brunswick Manifesto: saying that if anything happened to Louis or his family there would be dire consequences. That same day we got word that Austrian and Prussian armies are on French soil."

There was a low murmur from one side of the body, Arno assumed it was the Assassins just off the boat, the panic the city had been feeling flooding them all in one turn instead of the slow burn that had been ignited just over a week ago.

Quemar continued. "On top of all of that," he said, "The Assembly itself has been losing power. The Girondins are too centrist for the people now - they're willing to work with the King but the people are fed up with Louis. He lost all goodwill with his escape to Varennes, and he's been humiliated by the people too many times to be anything other than contemptuous. With him refusing to recall his vetoes and the Girondins in power the people want a change. And now they've got one.

"Six days ago, the Assembly was given an ultimatum: indict Lafayette by the ninth."

"That was yesterday," someone muttered.

"The Assembly refused," Beylier said. "Last night the Paris Commune declared itself in open insurrection against the King. As we speak, twenty thousand armed revolutionaries are laying siege to Tuileries. Even the National Guard are on the brink. Some of them have thrown in with the revolutionaries. France is splitting at the seams."

"And this doesn't please us?" Arno muttered under his breath. "The people are fighting for what is owed them. Liberté, égalité-"
"You're right," a voice to his left said. Arno turned to see Tissot, standing by his wife, up for the first time in months. "But it's dangerous, too. These people are untested, mostly unknown except for Robespierre and a few others. The Girondins are bad, but they're a devil we know. This might hurt more than help."

"But wouldn't it-"

"No, Dorian," Tissot said. "All men might be equal, but not all men are smart."

"Don't bother explaining it to him," Beaumont said, his soft voice coming up from behind. "As you said not all men are smart."

"Tais-toi, Beaumont," Tissot said. "You're not as smart as you think."

Both Arno and Beaumont stared at Tissot's words, so unlike him, but Arno quickly turned back to the Council, not ready to acknowledge that someone in the Brotherhood had actually defended him.

"We'll be giving out the assignments," Beylier was saying, "But it must be understood that under no circumstances is there to be any killing if it can be avoided. This is going to be another bloodbath, and the last thing we need is yet another hot-blooded political reaction to make Europe even angrier at us as we try to clean our own house. You'll be in teams of four, either on the Swiss or the sans-culottes side, to act as voices of reason."

Trenet stepped out onto the balcony. "Dorian, Fabre, Cosette, Pontmercy," she said, "We'll start with you."

Arno and Cosette shared a look, moving upstairs and seeing Fabre and Pontmercy doing the same.

"... You summoned?" Fabre asked as they fanned out in the inner sanctum.

"Monsieur Fabre," Trenet said. "We have a task for you."

"More fetch and carry work, I imagine," Arno asked. "Since I'm also here?"

"We don't have time for this now," Quemar said, limping back and forth. "We've already gone over this."

"And Germain?" Cosette asked defending her friend, "The man who murdered Arno's… Patron?"

"None of your concern," Beylier said, giving his student a hard look. "And as we've just outlined, we have bigger problems on our hands."

"We've just had word from one of our spies in Tuileries," Trenet said. "He said this is just what he could carry." She slid several letters over the semi-circle table. Arno and the others leaned over, all of them recognizing Mirabeau's distinct handwriting and signature. And the Royal Seal in wax.

"Well," Fabre said, voice serious. "Now I know who you were swearing at."

"Mirabeau was in contact with the King?" Pontmercy whispered, picking up one of the letters.

"And he was rather less discreet than he should have been," Trenet replied, voice once again flat but with an edge to it. "If the King's copies of these letters were made public, the Templars would be in a position to expose and purge our agents across France, leaving her wide open for their agenda."
"And we're to slip in and find them first?" Cosette asked.

"And quickly," Beylier said. "The Swiss Guard are badly outnumbered. It's likely they'll be overwhelmed before nightfall."

A deadline. How wonderful.

They all nodded and left, Arno muttering under his breath: "Won't be the first palace I've broken into."

"Chin up, Dorian," Fabre said. "They're trusting you with this. That's big."

"That's nothing," Arno said. "They still won't let me in on the Germain investigation."

"One thing at a time," Pontmercy said, pulling at the lapel of his green coat. "Nom de dieu, I can't believe Maître Mirabeau would betray us like this. The King?"

"I have to assume he had a good reason," Cosette said, worrying her hands.

"He told me once," Arno said, tightening his hidden blade, "That he would never outright overthrow the King, because he didn't even want to hint a whiff at the idea he was an Assassin."

"But he was in the perfect position to affect positive change," Pontmercy said. "He compromised the Creed."

"Later," Fabre said. "Mission first. We can all get drunk together after this and lament what might have been. We'll take the Saint-Honoré tunnel, come up a few blocks from the palace. If you don't have lockpicks now, go get them now."

They moved quickly through the sewers, half jogging until they reached the ladder up they needed. They came up into a crowd, thousands of people pushing west towards Tuileries. Moving through the throbbing mass of people was impossible, it took twenty minutes just to get to a building to get to a roof. From there they ran, Arno and Cosette the fastest and Pontmercy lagging behind, still uncomfortable with heights.

"Que veut cette horde d'esclaves,

"De traîtres, de rois conjurés?

"Pour qui ces ignobles entraves,

"Ces fers dès longtemps préparés?

"Français, pour nous, ah! Quel outrage

"Quels transports il doit exciter!

"C'est nous qu'on ose méditer

"De rendre à l'antique esclavage!"

Arno listened to the lyrics: What does this horde of slaves, / of traitors and conspiring kings want? / For whom have these vile chains, / these irons, been long prepared? / Frenchmen, for us, ah! What outrage/ what furious action it must arouse! It is to us they dare plan/ A return to the old slavery!

Mixed amongst the singing were other shouts and curses: "Long live the nation! Long live the
Revolution! *Vive la Révolution!*

"Bring out the tyrant!"

"Death to the king!"

"Find the king!"

… "Honestly, the quality of rhetoric among bloodthirsty rioters these days."

"I hear your sarcasm, Dorian," Fabre said, crouching down. "What's on your mind? What's your question?"

Arno frowned, crouching down with Fabre and looking out at the swells of people. He glanced at Pontmercy and Cosette, the only people outside the Café Théâtre who proved, over and over, that they listened. Cosette was his best friend, Fabre his favorite teacher, Pontmercy his equal. He pursed his lips, shifted his weight. "It's just… why blood?" he asked. "Overthrow the monarchy, not trusting Louis after he fled, making laws better suited to the people, those things make sense, but blood… What good came of killing *Monsieur* de la Serre? Mirabeau?" he winced at his two failures, also thinking of his father. Ten minutes late. "Did any real change come from their deaths? Did killing Bellec fix any problems? Wanting blood is wanting…"

"Anarchy," Pontmercy said. "Blood begets blood, real grievances turn to overblown vengeances, and it turns into a cycle."

"Death is not the best answer," Cosette said. "Only a final answer."

"Spoken like true Assassins," Fabre said. He pulled his eyes from the crowd and looked to Arno. "This is part of the Creed, one of the riddles we spend our entire lives trying to solve. These," he flicked out his hidden blade, "give a final answer, but not an end to the conflict, but it is the greatest tool we have in fixing the wrongs of the world. These help us and hurt us in equal parts. You have a good instinct, Dorian. That's what we're trying to cultivate. Now, everyone, eagles - you'll see a lot of ours out there, ignore them. We're looking for ways in. Trenet didn't tell us how the spy got out, we have to assume it's compromised."

Everyone looked out to the palace, and Arno took a deep breath and asked for a quick burst from his eagle. The crackle of fireworks and the hum of three other eagles flew through his brain like wildfire, but his eyes gravitated to several options before he closed his eyes and dimmed his eagle. "Four open windows," he said, "but I don't see how we'll get there without that crowd seeing us."

"Agreed," Fabre said, standing. "What time is it?"

"A little after eight," Pontmercy said.

"Do we even know where to find the letters?" Cosette asked. "I doubt the King has an *armoire de fer* under his bed."

"Actually," Fabre said, crossing his arms. "He does have an *armoire de fer*. I've seen it."

Everyone turned to Fabre and balked. "*When?*" they demanded.

He gave them a cheeky grin. "I trained here," he said. "When I was an apprentice."

"*Merde*, is there anywhere you haven't been?"
"In Paris? Nowhere."

"Wait," Cosette said. "Do you see that?"

Someone walked away from the crowd, flag waving on a pole and waving his arms. One of the Swiss guards leaned out a window, hand to his ear.

"Who can hear across distances?" Fabre asked.

"Me," Cosette set, closing her eyes briefly and cupping her ears. "'Surrender the nation,'" she quoted.

"Reply: 'We should think ourselves dishonored. We are Swiss. The Swiss do not part with their arms but with our lives. We think that we do not merit such an insult. If the regiment is no longer wanted, then let it be legally discharged. But we will not leave our post, nor will we let our arms be taken from us.'"

"Clever," Fabre said. "They're at a stalemate, now. Nobody wants to draw first blood."

"... That might be our way in," Pontmercy said. "If they're going to be amicable, they might let people in."

"I'm not sure," Cosette said, pulling her hands from her ears. "We need to get in. If they are distracted by each other this is our perfect time to slip in. We should try the other side of the palais."

"Agreed," Fabre said. "Let's get down to street level. That standoff isn't going to last forever, and we'd better be inside before someone starts to fire."

It was a crawl to backpedal to Rue Saint Honoré, away from the Place du Carousel, moving west almost to the Jacobins and Place Vendôme - it must have been a short walk to the insurrection, Arno mused - before cutting south and climbing the fence to the Tuileries Gardens. Les Jardins des Tuileries was massive; lush green everywhere, trees trimmed into elegant, unnatural shapes that bespoke of ego and arrogance. The King couldn't even let a tree be a tree, had to shape everything to suit his purposes. All the attention was at the Carousel, Arno and the others kept between shadows to be safe before getting closer to the palais. "Eagles," Fabre whispered, all business.

Arno asked for another short burst, his eyes being drawn to several windows open to the heat.

"Okay," Fabre said, pulling out a scrap of paper and a pencil. "Speed and stealth, that means we each take a different window. On this side of the palace we're looking for this room. On this side of the palace we're looking for this room." He sketched out a rough outline of the palace. "It will be on the second floor, in the north west corner. The room is an office, and there'll be a wall with wood paneling, looking ordinary as can be. Your eagle will see it, plain as day, and the latch for it is hidden in an armoire - yes, an armoire hides the latch to an armoire, I see your sarcasm, Dorian, so don't even bother - Louis'armoire de fer is quite large.

Let your eagles figure out what's important. If we're lucky, we meet up there and throw everything into a fire. If we're not lucky… well, don't wait. This is going to turn to chaos in a matter of-"

A roar sounded from the other side of the palais, the citizens shrieking over… something, and then came the sound of gunfire.

"Merde," Fabre cursed. "Move!"

The four of them ran to the palais, splitting off to their different points of entry and attacking the walls to get up as fast as possible. Pontmercy and Fabre fell from Arno's line of sight quickly,
Cosette to his left as they climbed before disappearing as well. After that it was all brick and
groove and glass, making his way to the open window. His entrance was on the southern face, the
Seine behind him and out of view. He came in to a landing of some kind, white stairs winding
down to the first floor of the palais. Everything was cornices and chair rails and rich paneling and
trim. Gold was used as decoration, the austerity as absurd here as in Versailles.

It was quiet, sort of. Arno could hear the shouting and pops of gunfire, but it was dulled between
several walls and on the opposite side of the palais. The room Fabre had pointed out was the
northwest corner, Arno was now in the southwest. He had the least likely possibility of getting
there first, but he dutifully adjusted his surcoat and gait, looking like one of the staff. He grabbed
an empty tray as a prop, widened his eyes and kept his steps nervous.

The floors were all dark parquet, door frames and thresholds ensconced in marble; the walls had
paintings bigger than the stage of the Café Théâtre. He expected to see the red coats of the Swiss
Guard, but there was none in sight. Arno prowled through the lush red carpets and ornate furniture,
slowly moving north from room to room; he kept one eye to the windows, making sure the gardens
were on his left to keep himself oriented. Halfway through the palais was a grand staircase, and
here was obviously where the fighting had started. Blood and bodies littered the floor and
splattered the walls. Arno paused on the landing, eyes darting about and putting the scene together.
The standoff, still ongoing when Arno and the others were moving around to the far side of the
palais; it had obviously made it here to the vestibule, and it was most likely here that the fight had
started. The Swiss had the high ground, firing down would have been like shooting fish in a barrel,
the litter of bodies below attesting to that, and then everything degenerated from there.

Arno could hear the fighting more clearly now, a door was open somewhere, the gunshots
peppered the air, shouts and curses lingering like a foul scent. Arno was nearly afraid to cross to
the other side of the vestibule, to step over all those bodies while the fighting was so heated and so
close. Pursing his lips, he put the fear away and forced himself to move. As he did so he looked out
over the Place de Carousel; saw the Swiss grabbing cannons, the people scattered and running for
cover. Bong sang, nom de dieu would they fire into fleeing people?

He pulled back from the window, pressing a knuckle into his mouth to stop from reacting. The
whole Brotherhood was out there, fighting to keep the bloodshed to whatever minimum could be
had in this… this insanity. Biting back a growl, he moved to the other side of the palais, facing the
gardens again to prevent the temptation of looking out and then joining the fight. Tables were
turned, bodies were everywhere, red of the Swiss Guard mixing with the blood splattered on the
floors and walls from whatever citizens had fired up into the vestibule. He could still hear gunfire
and the omnipresent moan of thousands of people shouting. Don't think on it, don't think on it, find
the damned armoire de fer and save Mirabeau's reputation.

Mirabeau…

Why tell the King about the Assassins? Why trust a man so against his own people? Arno wasn't
sure what he was supposed to feel, Mirabeau had taken him in when the rest of the Brotherhood
would have turned him out or killed him for being raised by M. de la Serre, he was one of the
greatest men Arno ever knew, but he couldn't process the Mentor making such a… such a
dangerous decision. Whatever happened about not even hinting at a whiff of the thought that he
was an Assassin? That thought would have included Louis himself, and yet… and yet…

His muddled mind made him careless.

Arno had come across a locked door, roughly where Fabre had said the armoire de fer would be,
and was picking the lock. He opened the door without checking to see if someone was behind it,
and when a hand grabbed his shoulder and shoved him to a wall he was caught completely unawares. Instinct took over, he extracted his hidden blade, dropping his tray and his cover to defend himself.

"Ah-ah," a voice said, breaking though Arno's reaction.

Long, straight nose; dark hair that covered his ears; and piercing, oddly soulful eyes. The two stared at each other, Arno with his hidden blade extended, the barrel of a gun pressed painfully into his abdomen. A standoff? The man withdrew his pistol. "You certainly don't look like a blood-crazed revolutionary," the man said, removing his firearm. "The hood is a bit sinister, though, if you don't mind my saying."

What the hell kind of accent was that?

"I thought Austria's spies all spoke German," Arno countered, sheathing his blade with a flick of the wrist and straightening. "Don't tell me they're lowering themselves to sending Italians with poor fitting military jackets?"

The other man snorted. "Corsican, if you must know, though now I'm not even that."

An expatriate? "And serving the rear guard?" Arno asked, still not trusting this man with such a thick accent. He wasn't stupid. "Convenient how that puts several locked doors between you and the fighting."

"Oh, I'm not here at all," the Corsican said, tugging at his jacket. "Not officially anyway."

"Then whose uniform is that?"

"Oh, rest assured, it's mine. It got me in the door, that's all. How often does one find the opportunity to poke about a king's private study?"

Arno studied the man, tried to size him up. He'd been running with the Assassins long enough and had lied often enough - to his own staff no less - to recognize how useful a weapon it was. Arno didn't know much about Corsica - an island off of Italy, he assumed. Almost any story could be used to explain the accent, but what was interesting was the honesty: the man - officer? - openly admitted to sneaking in here, admitted he wasn't planning on being seen here … Why?

"Looking for anything in particular?"


Broad words, nothing specific. That kept Arno on edge. The man could be looking for literally anything. Templar? Not likely, he would have killed Arno and been done with it - unless it was one of Élise's foreign allies, but Arno didn't know how many - if any - she had and what she had told them. He would have to play this carefully, either lure him away for one of the others to take Mirabeau's letters or somehow trick him into thinking something else.

Arno moved to the side, tense but trying to look casual. The shouting outside was punctuated with cannon fire again, things were going badly outside, and they were going badly inside, he needed to get to the armoire. "I do hope we're not eyeing the same prize," he said, trying to play it casual. He deliberately turned away, saw the officer reach for his pistol again out of the corner of his eyes - thinking Arno was turning his back; but the officer couldn't see Arno open his phantom blade.

"Name it," the officer said calmly. Carefully.
"Certain letters written to the King. Ripe for…" Arno frowned for a word, "... misunderstanding should the wrong men find them." Yes, nice and ambiguous. Arno could be talking about anyone. He turned and the officer lowered his hand almost instantaneously, thinking Arno hadn't seen him move for his weapon. Arno didn't react, silently closed his phantom blade, instead watched the man put his hands behind his back and, also, try to be casual.

"I see," the Corsican said. "Well, then, perhaps we can help each other."

"By all means," Arno said, gesturing. The man with the soulful eyes moved to an ornate desk. Arno closed his eyes and thought of fireworks, asking his eagle for help. Fabre had said a wooden armoire-merde, the other Assassins, they had their eagles awake! Arno grit his teeth as an incalculable number of eagle cries filled his head, eyes watering almost immediately with all the noise. He couldn't make a sound with someone of dubious intent here with him, he turned to hide his wince as a hand calmly moved up to his head to rub it. Bon sang how was he supposed to function like this when his eagle was so maudit weak? He took a deep breath silently through his nose, exhaling, mentally working through all the extrasensory information to find the one piece he needed. Think Arno, think merdeux, before that officer spy realized you've just incapacitated yourself. Merde!

"Are you just going to let me do all the work?" the young officer said, Arno could hear him straightening.

He forced himself to turn and smile. "Oh, no, do keep looking," he said, hoping his face was smooth and not twisted into a grimace. "I'm enjoying the show."

The false officer raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you know where the treasure is?"

There, the muted sound of fireworks, nearly lost in all the noise outside - it sounded so loud now - but Arno followed the sound to the wood armoire. He opened the door and glanced inside, the dark wood making his hyper-sensitive eyes happier. There, behind the books, was a handle. He twisted one way, felt resistance, and turned the other, hearing a soft click, followed immediately by a louder, heavier click to the other side of the room. The officer's head snapped around just in time to see a wood panel pop out, and he moved to it and pulled it aside to see shelves of papers and boxes and bags.

Through the headache, Arno smirked. "You were saying?"

The returning smile was smooth and impressed. "Very nicely done, mon ami."

Arno hid his wince at the Corsican accent and the throb of his head. His eagle burst had already told him what piles to look for, and he pulled them out - four different stacks of papers - and started to rifle through them. Gunfire again - this time definitely inside the palais, he overworked eagle could hear the difference. There wasn't much time left.

There, the Assassin's seal and the King's seal, exactly like what he'd seen in the Sanctuary with the others. That made finding the right letters easy - mon dieu, there were so many, he couldn't hide all of them in his waistcoat, something would fall out during the escape. He glanced to the fireplace, quickly pulling out a match and lighting it. The tinder caught fire quickly, and then he was dumping paper after paper, utterly focused on his task as he rifled through so many letters. He could sense the false officer at his shoulder, perusing the hidden armoire de fer, but couldn't pay much more attention through his headache and his need to destroy as many papers as he could.

"Incredible…"
Arno looked up, seeing the Corsican officer stuff something into his waistband. "Find your prize?" he asked.

"A cornucopia, yes. You?"

Arno glanced back at the letters in front of him. He risked the smallest possible burst of his eagle, utterly *flooded* with information beyond the empty room he was in but none of the papers in front of him. "Everything seems to be in order," he said.

"Then let us depart."

"No," Arno corrected. "Not yet." Standing, he grabbed the empty box the officer had been holding, putting it back in the *armoire*, as well as the papers, and closed the hidden *armoire*, feeling it lock into place automatically. "Wouldn't want someone to think someone had already been there, *n'est-ce pas?*

"Clever," the false Corsican said. "Then may I suggest we leave?"

A gunshot right outside the door.

"Quickly," the officer said, gesturing. Arno moved to follow, crossing to the other side of the room and to an open door the other man had presumably entered.

Beyond the room was bedlam. The halls were filled with revolutionaries, the Marseillais volunteers and the *sans-culottes* and the Jacobins, roaring and raging, red jackets falling under violent hatred and retribution. "They're taking the *palais,*" Arno said, disbelieving. So many people, so angry and resentful, and so much red… so much *blood… "This is a massacre! We have to stop this!"

"It will be everything we can do to get *out* of this mess," the Corsican said, his thick accent cutting through Arno's reaction. "Can you fight?"

Arno drew his sword, survival starting to wake in him, and he moved down the hall, putting aside his staff gate and taking more aggressive steps. "Stay behind me," he told the officer, spinning his sword in his fist to build up the heat in his blood. A rifle was pointed at him but he knocked it aside, ramming the hilt of his sword into the face of the would-be attacker, and after that was a downward thrust into the shoulder of the man behind him, and again and again as the blind rage tried to meet him and Arno cut it down. There was little thought, only muscle memory and automatic reaction, staying alive from one second to the next. They made it to the vestibule and if Arno thought there were too many bodies before, that *paled* in comparison to the numbers there now. The floors were slippery with blood, the stench was outrageous and under all the shouts and curses and gunfire there were groans of men who were *still alive*, unable to escape from the cadavers they were piled under and knowing this would be the last thing they saw. Arno cut down another idiot with a rifle and shoved him down the stairs.

"Where *did* you learn to fight?" the accent asked, and Arno turned an angry face to the false officer, furious that he was being forced to kill people who were supposed to be fighting for *liberté,* *égalité,* and *fraternité* but seemed to be little more than bloodthirsty *savages.* The officer, for his part, was reloading his pistol and firing, also killing his way to freedom. *Bon Dieu* how was this a part of creating positive change?

"Search everything! We want every document we can find!"

That voice… Arno turned. Red hair…
"Now here's the thing. I can go on like this all day. But you... You've got an hour left in you. Two at most. Half that if I bring out more sharp bits."

"Rouille? Clean up your mess. It's time. We're due in the kitchens."

Hôtel de Beauvais, a dark and windy night, Arno learning that he had killed the wrong man, LaFrenière, the only face that stood out in the crowd of conspirators. That was him. He had found him! He had found him! "Him!" he shouted, turning mid-swing as he saw the redhead with a menagerie of Jacobins, all with red caps or red feathers in their hats, moving up the stairs. That was one of Arno's mistakes, that was one of the people he needed to kill to redeem himself, that man was one of the people after Élise! The officer grabbed his surcoat and shoved him further down the stairs. "Damn!" he shouted, trying to turn around.

"Yes," the false officer said, shoving him further downstairs. "Captain Rouille has that effect on people, but not now..."

"What?" Arno demanded, ducking under another insurgent. "Friend of yours?"

"A persistent thorn I haven't quite managed to pluck out," the Corsican said, aiming and firing, forcing Arno to defend him against another swell of fighters.

"He has information I need!" Arno growled. "I need to get back up there!"

"In this mess?" the officer countered, sliding on a streak of blood and nearly falling down the stairs. "You'll never find him again."

They cleared Tuileries, exiting out onto the battleground of Place du Carousel, the expanse filled with yet more bodies, smoke, overturned cannon, the stench of death and streaks of blood. The fight was twenty thousand to a mere nine hundred at best, and the savagery was on open display. Arno starred, not wounded but somehow hurting to see it had all come to this, that reason had failed, that... there was no way he could fix this. There was no way he could find Rouille and undo his mistake, there was no way he could go back, there was no way... no way...

"You are a demon with a blade," the false officer said, touching Arno's arm. He turned, saw the soulful eyes, saw something akin to understanding. Respect. "Let's go."

The two men walked away from the carnage and the violence, away from the fallen idea of reasoned change. Away from the redhead, the first lead he'd had in over a year, to the men who had orchestrated the death of M. de la Serre. The men who had tricked him into killing Élise's ally. The men who had broken everything good in his life. Energy seeped out of him, his steps slowing. The Corsican officer also seemed to feel the post-battle fatigue. They walked the streets slowly, silent for a time, following the quai with the Seine on their right.

"You handled yourself well back there," the officer finally said, the pair slowing to a natural stop. "You're a demon with that blade. I don't suppose you've ever considered military service?"

Arno looked at the Corsican, eyes flat. "I'm not much for following orders," he said, repeating what the maîtres had said often enough in his tenure with the cult.

"Ah," the officer said, nodding. "The bane of generals and statesmen everywhere: an individualist. I know the feeling." The soulful eyes turned away, looking out over the river, leaning against the half wall. "I've been on personal leave for two years, now; but my time is up. I failed at home. But I won't fail here."

Arno looked over to the officer. "Failed?"
The man shrugged his shoulders. "Growing pains, I suppose," he said. "Corsica was perishing as I
was born. Thirty thousand Frenchmen were vomited onto our shores and we were awash with
blood. When the Revolution started, I thought the changes in Paris could be felt at home, too. I
thought I knew what I was doing... I thought wrong."

Ten minutes late…

Safe and sound and only slightly delayed…

This man had made mistakes, too. This officer knew something of the pain Arno knew. It prickled
over his heart, poking at the bleeding scabs and making it… Arno didn't have a word for it.

"And now?" he asked.

The accented man glanced down at his hands, fanning them out and closing them again. "And
now," he said, "I work to prove them all wrong. They can ridicule and ostracize me all they want,
label me an outsider and call me whatever they will, but I will show all of them that I am better
than what they say. I will show them just how wrong they still are." He turned, those deep eyes
boring into Arno. "Men like us have a great advantage over most. You see: we can think for
ourselves." He smiled. "If you joined the military, you'd be a Marshall in ten years. Guaranteed."

Arno pursed his lips. "A generous offer. But no."

The man straightened, smiled. "Of course," he said, nodding, amiable. "Where the heart leads, a
man must follow. But look me up if you ever change your mind. Where I'm going, I could use a
man of your skill set."

"And where are you going?" Arno asked.

"As high as I can," he said, utterly serious. He offered a hand. "Bonaparte is my name. Napoléon
Bonaparte. Second Lieutenant of Artillery. For now."

"Arno Dorian," Arno replied, shaking his hand. "No lofty title, unfortunately. Just a humble citizen
of France."

"Citoyen of France," Bonaparte repeated. "A dubious title in this day and age."

"Is that a reflection of your thoughts on the Revolution?"

Bonaparte snorted. "When you get right down to it," he said, "The crowd is hardly worth the effort
it takes to curry its favor." He gestured behind them to the Tuileries. "One can admire their lofty
ambitions and ideals, but one can hardly call their actions equally idealistic. That, over there, that is
a mob, and a mob cannot be expected to make rational decisions. If Louis had just climbed a horse,
victory would have been his."

"Such a high opinion of the people," Arno said, sarcasm bleeding into his voice.

"Not at all," Bonaparte said. "Just pragmatism. Men can only make decisions when they can think
for themselves, and for whatever reason men don't want to think for themselves. They're just as
happy to be told something by someone else and believe it. Men like us, we know better. We can
see past the illusion and form our own conclusions, and therefore it's up to men like us to tell them
what to think."

"A very interesting personal philosophy."
"I suppose," Bonaparte said. "And you? What's your opinion on the Revolution?"

Arno blinked. Had anyone ever asked him his opinion on the Revolution? He couldn't recall… "I was at the Estates General by accident," he said, carefully touching that painful day. "It was the first time I realized that things could change." It was also the day he would want to change for the rest of his life, and to dismiss the changes out of hand… to say that it was up to the few... "I still think things can change. We can fix it, all of it. We can redeem ourselves and erase the mistakes." He could redeem himself and erase the mistakes he'd made. He could go back to those simpler times, when it was he and Élise, cavorting about, M. de la Serre alive and nothing wrong at all in his life. One mistake, the one with his father, was enough, he didn't need all the others he had made, he just needed to get there, to be given the chance to save himself, save Élise. He wanted that redhead - he wanted it so badly, and he didn't know why the Maîtres kept him from it.

The anger flared up but he shoved it back down. The Corsican officer, Bonaparte, couldn't see that.

"And idealist and an individualist," the man was saying. "Your life must be very hard."

Flat stare. "Thank you for pointing that out."

Bonaparte spread his hands in supplication. "Terribly sorry," he said. "Idealist or not, your work was remarkable. Pity I'll never be able to share the story, since I was never there."

A little clumsy, but Arno respected the change in topic. "Neither of us were," he said.

"Then I'd better find a friend to corroborate the tale. And, as a personal favor: if anyone asks…"

"A face in the crowd," Arno said, eyes narrowing. "Of course. For a man of such lofty ambition nothing as scandalous as being in the middle of an insurrection should come up in casual conversation."

"You understand."

"Yes," Arno said, leaning forward. "I understand, perhaps better than you. I will grant you this favor, but in turn you must grant me a favor."

The eyes were less soulful now, narrowing and calculating. "... Being?"

"You knew the redheaded man."

"Captain Rouille, yes."

"How do you know him?"

"He's a part of the National Guard," Bonaparte said. "Who's repeatedly ignored my letters when I was in Corsica trying to… well, it doesn't matter now. I doubt he'll stay as palace guard after this."

"Then it's very simple," Arno said. "Learn where I can find him and I can guarantee my memory of this insurrection will fade to smoke."

Bonaparte twitched an eyebrow, before smiling again. "You are good at more than just fighting, I see," he said. "My personal leave is over, it seems, and it's high time I started doing what I was trained to do. Perhaps I can arrange an introduction as well."

"Bien."

"Bien."
The two left in opposite directions, Arno circling back to Rue Saint-Honoré, where his team had exited the tunnels.

Cosette was there, holding her arm delicately to her chest, gaze snapping to Arno. "You're alive!" She said, surging to her feet and limping over. "They had to carry Fabre underground, Pontmercy and Tissot, and so many others! Today has been a disaster!" She used her good arm to clutch him. "You took so long! I thought for sure the sans-culottes had gotten you!"

"No," Arno said gently, holding her shoulders. "No, I'm fine. The job is done."

She pulled back, dark eyes wide in shock. "You made it?" she asked.

He nodded.

Her horror morphed immediately to glee, hugging him again. "Then something good came out of today! Ah, dieu merci! You've no idea how many people we've had to carry back."

They moved below ground to the sewers, Arno could see the trail of blood and grimaced to realize some of the bodies he saw in Tuileries might have been Assassins. "This will lead people to us," Cosette was saying. "We have to clean as much of it as we can. Here's a mop." They used sewer water to clean up the stains, fresh enough to wash away relatively quickly. They cleaned several hundred feet and several main junctions before deciding they had done enough. If anyone came this deep into the tunnels the watches would pick them up. The pair moved slowly under the Seine and to the Sanctuary, finding the main hall filled with Assassins in varying states of injury, M. Dominique and several other doctors shouting and giving orders and trying to save whatever lives they could.

Arno felt sick to his stomach. "How many were out there?"

"Everyone we could muster," Cosette whispered. "It was just like the Women's March a few years ago."

"No, it wasn't," said a new voice. They both turned and saw Pontmercy, sitting on the steps, green coat and waistcoat missing, torso tightly bandaged with a smear of red staining the obvious injury. His neatly kept hair was askew, face ashen, streaks of dirt covering him. "There wasn't violence there," he said, breathing shallow.

"Marcel," Cosette said, kneeling down. "How many?"

"I don't know," he said, "Easily in the dozens."

They both staggered at the number, realizing how big a loss today was, how many covers, how many sources of information, how many feet on the ground the cult had just lost. This was devastating.

"I tried to stop it," Pontmercy said, trying to sag but pain forcing him to keep his back straight. "I was right next to Santerre and I tried to tell him to wait, to see, but none of them would listen. Him, Westermann, Danton, Rouille, nobody wanted to parler." He tried to sob, but his ribs wouldn't let him, and Cosette hugged him gently, Arno leaning forward to touch a knee.

"How is Fabre?"

"They say it'll be an arm, but Dominique is trying to prove them wrong."

Arno winced, gritting his teeth and thinking of how fast that man could climb, his amiable nature
and patience in teaching him.

"Are they still taking reports?" Cosette asked.

Marcel nodded, and with effort the two departed, leaving Marcel on the stairs and moving up to the observatory, the inner sanctum of the Sanctuary. All of the Maîtres were there, faces somewhere on the scale of dark and grim. Trenet straightened, crossing her arms behind her back. "What news?" she asked.

"Success, Maître," Cosette said, still holding her arm. "Arno managed to do it."

Cold eyes moved to Arno, and he held himself straight as he gave his report: starting at the southern side of the palais and moving his way north, coming upon a bloody but empty vestibule, and then to the northwest corner that Fabre had outlined. He described the Corsican officer who wasn't technically there, looking for state secrets just because, and their initial scuffle. He talked about all the eagles he saw, glossing over how much it hurt, and finding the armoire de fer and ransacking the papers, pulling out everything with an Assassin seal and throwing it into a fire right as the fighting returned to the palais, him fighting his way out with the Corsican Frenchman and finally rendezvousing with Cosette.

"You're certain all the papers were destroyed?" Quemar asked.

"I had so many eagles in my head I'd be shocked if I missed a single Assassin seal," Arno said, exhaustion making his tongue looser than it should have been.

Trenet visibly relaxed, sighing and running a hand through her hair. "That was good work, Monsieur Dorian. Very, very good work. You're dismissed to write your report. Cosette, you as well. By tomorrow would be better, but under the circumstances if it's the day after we understand."

They both nodded and left, Cosette to see to Pontmercy and Arno forced to face the staff at the café. He slipped upstairs and took a seat in the banquet hall, taking paper and quill to get the thoughts out of his head. Café Théâtre was mostly empty, between rushes and - Arno knew - there would be few customers today with all the action on the right bank. He blinked, realized he was so tired through his headache, he had barely written three words.

He looked up and saw Jacques there, fidgeting with a cup of café au lait, before setting it down.

"You all right, Monsieur?" he asked.

"Tired," Arno said, sipping from his cup. Ah, he felt that all the way down. His stomach was empty.

"You think…" Jacques started to ask. "You think this is it? The end of France?"

Arno forced himself to focus, to really look at Jacques. The man barely said a word, in his thirties and with four children. Arno had never known him to express any opinion whatever on the Revolution. Arno straightened, rubbing his eyes. "What do you think?"

"Monsieur," Jacques said, worrying his hands. "My wife's Prussian. They keep looking at her funny, and worried about spies and traitors. The Jacobins, the ones they say are at the palais… there's so many Austrians already locked up, but they want to lock up even more. I don't know…"

Arno blinked slowly, watching this quiet man. He pulled out a blank piece of paper and wrote on it, showing it to Jacques.
"Monsieur?"

"That's my first name," he said. "Not Arnaud, Arno. I don't remember my mother, but she was Austrian."

Jacques stared at him, eyes wide as his hands started to shake. "Then… you know…"

Arno nodded. "I do. I don't know what's coming after today, Jacques, I wish I could give you some kind of light at the end of this tunnel. But I can say that here, in this café, we'll do everything in our power to look after our own."

The shaking started to cover the server's entire body, the relief flooded over him and he sank to one of the chairs. "Oh, Monsieur," he said, "I've been so scared!"

"It's all right, Jacques," Arno said, wondering, through his headache, how he had become the man's confidant. "It's all right."

Célestine came in to the sight, eyes widening and Arno had to cut off her exclamation with a hard look, jutting his head to the kitchens, silently telling her to get Yvette. The Haitian cook arrived in minutes, and the two of them slowly helped Jacques make his way to the kitchen, slightly more private as he had his breakdown. Arno moved into the café proper, marveling that his morning had started somehow in Tuileries. His head ached, but he dutifully went behind the bar to start making café. He was nowhere near as good as Jacques, but the man needed something and they had to be prepared in case a straggler or two came in.

September 2, 1792

It was a mad flurry of papers, news, and blood. The day after the insurrection the Jacobins swept into Hôtel de Ville and announced themselves the new government. Miraculously some members of the old guard were kept - most notably a man named Georges Danton, who went from a Cordeliers and a subordinate member of the government to Minister of Justice. Many suspected his organization of the protest on the Champs de Mars, where Lafayette had disastrously fired on the crowd and Fabre and eliminated a man from his past, may have garnered the man's position. All Royalist papers and publications were shut down, municipalities were authorized to arrest enemies of the Revolution - whatever that meant - and the Royal family was imprisoned in the Temple. Lafayette tried and failed to march on Paris and instead was forced into exile. Robespierre, another member of the Commune who somehow carried over to the insurrectionist government, established a Revolutionary Tribunal to smooth over the transition - the tribunal to handle political prisoners and sentence them to death if needs be. Their first execution by the more humane guillotine was on the twenty-first. The new government abolished religious teaching orders and religious hospitals - the last holy places in France. The new government, calling itself the Paris Commune, ordered that instead of the intensely formal Monsieur, Madame, et Mademoiselle, the people instead would address each other as the far less formal Citoyen et Citoyenne.

All in the span of a week.

As Arno turned twenty-four, he wondered if these heavy-handed changes would really do any good.

The changes were just as radical underground: forty-three dead.

Almost a quarter of the Brotherhood, lost to the pointless objective of preventing bloodshed in a world that was desperate for blood. Two hundred in a city of hundreds of thousands was bad
enough, but now they had even less. Beylier was forced to take a leave of absence in the military - in war time - to keep the Brotherhood together. Trenet brought her children underground to be trained far earlier than she wanted according to the rumors, and Quemar had all but moved underground - they said he was considering early retirement at his practice in order to fill all the gaps the insurrection had created.

Word had arrived that Austria had crossed the border into France. Nobody felt safe, everyone was panicking. Jacques had brought his wife and children to the café almost daily, mixing with Tissot’s children to make them feel safe, and Mme Gouze - Citoyenne Gouze - spent more time looking after children than she did managing the Café Théâtre. Arno was forced to make the final choice on the new theater troupe, of far higher quality than the bawdy group they had been employing, and Paul had managed to find a carpenter to fix the floors. At last.

The last three weeks were little more than turmoil, one crisis after the next as everyone tried to level out and figure out the new normal. The Council wanted more eyes in Hôtel de Ville, the three biggest names that kept coming up was Robespierre, Marat, and Danton. Marat and his paper were fire-burners in the city, fanning one controversy after the next or creating one when he needed to, Arno knew that from reading the papers. Robespierre was a Jacobin in the Assembly, a pretty dandy who made an excellent speech. Danton, Danton was an unknown, and none of them had an Assassin spy in their number.

That needed to change.

Arno checked in on Fabre as he recovered, arm severed at the elbow. He was in a fever most of the time, the pain of the recovery and the loss too raw to be anything other than pitiful. Arno smuggled wine down to him to help with the pain, but Fabre never drank it, sweating and tossing and turning in bed as his body tried to reconcile the loss.

He held his latest letter to Élise in his hand, telling her about finding Rouille, and trying to figure out if the post was even functioning enough to send it.

… How were they going to recover from this? This… second Revolution?

Arno didn't have an answer, and he sighed and put the letter in his breast pocket for now, moving back upstairs. It was still early, no patrons yet, and he moved into the theatre to see Jacques wiping down the counter and getting ready for the day, his wife in a booth on the far side feeding her children day old bread.

"Bonjour, Citoyen Dorian," she said her accent faint.

"Bon matin, Citoyenne," Arno replied, rubbing at his too tired eyes. He was beginning to think they would be permanently bloodshot if he kept unifying his eagles with everyone in the cult. He yawned, wondering how Fabre was doing as Jacque slid over his café au lait, hoping the drink would wake him up enough to make a final check of the ledgers and receipts before he made his next deposit to the bank - for whatever good it did, with inflation making the assignats practically worthless. Printing money didn't make the national treasury any less empty.

"Citoyens," a new voice, deep and gruff said. Arno, Jacques, and his wife turned to see a man in blue uniform, one of the city police with a bicorn hat. "Sorry to disturb you so early in the morning."

"What can we do for you, citoyen?" Arno asked, stepping up in front.

"Have reports of an Austrian staying here," he said simply.
Before Arno could even react, Jacques: "No, non, she's my wife! She hasn't done anything!"

"Jacques..." she shot up to her feet, accent obvious in how she said his name, clutching the newborn she had been feeding. "Mon, dieu..."

"Citoyenne, you'll have to come with me."

"Non, non!"

"S'il-vous plaît... non..."

"Jacques," Arno said, hand raised. "Calm down, we can talk about this-"

Jacques had darted from behind the counter, hands balled into fists and Arno somehow knew he was going to attack a police officer. He stepped in front of his staff member, seamlessly grabbing his wrist and twisting, getting a foot under and tripping him. "Citoyen," he was saying while doing so. "I think it's obvious that this is a bad time. Perhaps later we can-"

"I don't want to go! S'il-vous plaît! I have four children! I don't know anything!"

"Giraud, what's taking-?" a second gens d'armes came in to see Arno pinning Jacques down as he tried to get up and get in front of his wife who was backing away in terror, baby in hand, as the first man, Giraud, moved up to the woman. Jacques twisted out of Arno's grip and tackled the man, the second officer yelling and the baby screaming upset and Arno shouting over all of them to just calm down this could all be handled reasonably. Célestine came in to the scene and shrieked, running away calling the rest of the staff and Yvette came in with a frying pan ready to do violence, thinking someone was committing blue murder in the café making a second person Arno had to subdue while Paul came in demanding to know what was going on and a third policeman came in to back up his compatriots and merde this was going to be a riot in his own home!

Cursing, Arno pulled out his pistol and fired up into the ceiling, wincing at the money that was going to cost him.

Everyone stilled, even the police, and he put his gun on the table. "Messieurs," he said before correcting himself. "Citoyens, I apologize on behalf of the staff. We're all wound a little tight these days, and several of us have jumped to unnecessary conclusions. Citoyen... Giraud, I believe? You asked if an Austrian was staying here. None are. We apologize for any inconvenience."

Giraud frowned, his two fellows helping him up from where Jacques had knocked him down. "You need better control of your staff," he said carefully, straightening his hair.

"Of course," Arno agreed quickly. "It will be handled."

"Who is the woman?"

"Citoyen Gagnon's wife. Citoyenne Gretel Gagnon."

"Why did she enter hysterics?"

Arno pursed his lips, a hundred lies flitting through his mind, ways to protect Jacques and his wife, thoughts on the insurrection and the Commune and how... these were just cogs in the machine. Men doing their job. They didn't have a say in who they arrested, and they were not so bloodthirsty as to pull their words or their pistols. Reason had to win out. Reason had to be better than the insurrection, than the blood, than the mistakes. He risked honesty. "Citoyenne Gagnon is Prussian by birth," he admitted. "Since the Declaration of Pillnitz and seeing so many Austrians arrested she
has feared people mistaking her for Austrian and arresting her. After… the events of August she has been even more afraid. Now," he said, throwing a glance as Jacques and giving him a hard glare. "We're all civilized *citoyens des France*, no one here is going to act rashly now that we've had a moment to breath. Right? Jacques?"

"... *Oui, Monsieur."

"Right? *Citoyenne* Gagnon?"

"I won't leave my children!" she sobbed.

"There," Arno said, turning his back to his staff and facing Giraud and his two partners more fully. "This was all a misunderstanding. We understand and apologize for any undue stress we've caused you but are happy to have cleared things up. Is there anything else we can do for you?"

The other two, without names, were still tense, but Giraud had also straightened, stiff but listening.

"We respect the strain Paris is under these days," Giraud said. "We've been asked to bring in all Austrians to better understand if conspiracy is at our doors."

"Of course," Arno conceded. "A sound strategy."

"We will ask *Citoyenne* Gagnon to come with us to confirm that she is Prussian and not Austrian."

"Perfectly reasonable," Arno said. "We agree."

"*Monsieur!*

Arno glared at Jacques, but Paul beat him to it, touching his shoulder and trying to pull him aside. He turned his attention back to the policeman Giraud. "Under the circumstances I propose an escort, to ensure that *Citoyenne* Gagnon can remain calm."

That was a very, very long pause.

Everyone waited tensely. No one dared breathe. Then,

"... Of course."

The sigh of relief was audible as everyone exhaled the breath they had been holding.

"We'll give you five minutes to choose who accompanies us. Not *Citoyen* Gagnon."

"Done."

Giraud and his three stepped outside, and Arno turned rapidly to the staff in front of him. Gretel was still sobbing, moaning that she wouldn't survive jail and Jacques holding her desperately, ready to do something, anything.

"*Citoyen* Mercier," Arno said. "You're the escort. Yvette, tell *Madame* Gouze and *Monsieur* Grizier what's happened. Célestine, go to Sorbonne and find Michel and André and get them in here. They're not as good as Jacques but this might take a while. I'll go to Hôtel de Ville and file a complaint. If the Commune is supposed to be so good, let's see if they can handle something as simple as this."

"*Oui, Monsieur."

"... *Oui, Monsieur."

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"We'll give you five minutes to choose who accompanies us. Not *Citoyen* Gagnon."

"Done."

Giraud and his three stepped outside, and Arno turned rapidly to the staff in front of him. Gretel was still sobbing, moaning that she wouldn't survive jail and Jacques holding her desperately, ready to do something, anything.
"Citoyen," Arno corrected.

He went upstairs to his room to grab his blue surcoat. He was planning on heading out anyway to see if his contact in the military really was a part of the military. Though with a name like Bonaparte he doubted… so many things. He saw the hole the bullet his shot had made, and he could only sigh and cover it with a small rug for now. Back downstairs he grabbed the pistol he had placed on the table in the café as Gretel had to be pried from Jacques hands, wailing and sobbing. Arno nodded to Paul and then outside he nodded to Giraud. He stopped long enough to watch Paul come outside with Gretel, still crying, and they and the three police started moving. Arno left a different way, reloading his pistol as he did so and tucking it into his belt. He crossed over to the right bank and started moving to the seat of the city's government.

The seat of the city's government since 1357, l'Hôtel de Ville was conceived in 1533 and completed in 1628. Inspired by the Renaissance, the building was tall, refined and spacious. The home of the National and Legislative Assemblies, it now housed the Paris Commune, and Arno entered the building to find a politician that would listen to his complaint: how can a simple café perform its job of feeding and informing the citizens of Paris if its members are unduly arrested and whisked away in a garish assertion of power and incitement to riot? Arno winced. No, he couldn't risk Giraud - rational on the surface but who knew if he was vindictive underneath? - abusing his power as a policeman to make things difficult for Café Théâtre. He rubbed his chin, feeling the stubble he hadn't had a chance to shave, as he asked for where he could find the politician of his department.

"Listening to the speech," was the consistent reply.

Frowning, Arno asked and was given directions to one of the chambers of the Hôtel de Ville, where the entire room was filled with the new Paris Commune, a man standing and giving a barn-burner of a speech.

"... to conquer the enemies of the fatherland, we need audacity! More Audacity! Always audacity, and France is saved! ..."

"More audacity, he says," someone murmured next to Arno. "As if a revolution weren't audacious enough."

"Careful, that thought sounds awfully Royalist."

"Nom de dieu, excuse me for talking to myself. Diable. Maybe if Danton stopped talking..."

Arno looked to the speaker again, noting the uneven, over-pronounced frown and exaggerated gestures and stern features. That was George Danton? What was he talking about?

"Two fortresses! Lost!" he was saying. "We are in crisis! Paris is the natural and constituted center of free France. It is the center of light. When Paris shall perish there will no longer be a republic! We cannot let Austria push us any further - the people are in a panic, and as well they should be! We need to act! Not make pretty speeches! We must rise! Tell Austria she is not welcome here! Chase them out and put their heads on pikes!"

More warmongering. Arno backed off, uninterested. He didn't need someone inciting another riot, he needed a politician or a bureaucrat to sign something that would release Jacques' wife. Then he needed to find out where Bonaparte was stationed and see if he learned where Rouille was.

Napoléon moved through the Hôtel de Ville having filed his return to service. He was promoted to
Captain now, the military in desperate need for anyone with experience and half a brain to push back Austria and make France safe again. Some discreet questions about his original liaison, Captain Rouille, told him where the man was stationed for the moment, with the provision that things were changing rapidly with the new government, and the National Guard was hardly on friendly terms with the military anymore. Not that it ever was, Napoléon thought, given the tone of Rouille's letters as he continually denied him advice on how to help Corsica and keep everyone safe and calm. Napoléon wasn't sure how much longer he could keep his family there, he had burned quite a few bridges with his naïveté, and he was beginning to think it would be safer to move his mother and siblings to the mainland. At least the savagery here had everything to do with who was in power and not what house you were born under. The officer asked what political party he was affiliated with. Napoléon didn't have one, as yet, but given the current state of affairs he allied himself with the Jacobins. They at least, seemed to understand the need for military strength.

Of course, now they were statesmen, so that could change.

He wrote down Rouille's post, in St. Denis in charge of some kind of excavation, and idly wondered when his shadowy partner from a few weeks ago would pay him a visit.

That had been thrilling - he could admit that if only to himself. The man, Dorian, had slipped into a King's office as if it were the easiest thing in the world, laughed at his attempts to find state secrets before calmly opening a wooden armoire de fer, and burned letters. Napoléon patted his lapel, where his own treasure lay. There was a curious sense of power to it, and he looked forward to studying it, unlocking its secrets. But back to Dorian, the man was more than just some slippery thief, he could fight, a demon with a blade. Napoléon doubted the man even counted how many he had slain trying to get out of Tuileries, but Napoléon and his gun paled in comparison to that man, a sword, and the little hidden knife on his wrist. It was a sight to behold, power in motion: economic, graceful, brutal. Napoléon, by sheer accident, had found the visual embodiment of what he wanted out of his life.

Too bad he was an idealist.

But, if the man was merely a citoyen, then he would learn the hard way - just as Napoléon did - what idealism cost one. Paoli… damn that man…

And, almost as if summoned by the thought, Napoléon saw the dark blue surcoat. No hood this time, only a trail of hair so long as to be womanly. He was powering out of one of the audience chambers, a black look on his face before he stopped and took a breath. Napoléon stilled, watched as the shadow rubbed his chin and his eyes, shifting on his feet before coming to some kind of decision. His eyes seemed to snap right to Napoléon, and against his will he jolted slightly in his boots to be found so unerringly.

Dorian walked straight up to him, charming smile on his face, and the change was so sudden as to be magnetic. This man was dangerous if he could shift auras so quickly, on top of fighting, on top of sneaking, on top of being able to do damn near everything. Napoléon offered his own smile, knew he had to be just as charming.

"What an unexpected pleasure," he said before Dorian could say a word.

"I wouldn't know," Dorian replied, easy smile on his face. "I don't believe we've had the pleasure of meeting."

"Well, then, let us dispense with the formalities quickly: Bonjour, I'm Napoléon Bonaparte, recently promoted Captain."
"Citoyen Arnaud Dorian," Dorian said, and they shook hands firmly. "Would you like to go for a walk?"

"Certainly," Napoléon agreed. "What brings you here?"

"... A problem with the staff. No one here seems to be interested in helping me resolve it. I can't seem to find who I'm looking for."

Subtext. This man was so very good. Napoléon wanted him on his side. An ally for his future ambitions. "I'm in the military, of course," he replied as they slowly walked around the Place d'Hôtel, "so I can't help in terms of politicians, but then again, this is what happens when you give command of the government to half-starved lunatics."

"I see you still think little of the people's desire for change."

Napoléon shrugged. "This morning I was accosted by three men carrying some poor soul's head atop a pike. Seems they mistook my uniform for a mark of nobility, and demanded I shout 'Long live the Republic,' to prove my allegiance."

Dorian scoffed. "I suppose handing out tricolor cockades is now passé. What did you do?"

"I shouted, 'Long live the Republic.'"

"A man of principle."

Napoléon shook his head. "Life is more valuable than dignity. One must pursue one's ideal, no matter the cost - and that includes something as shallow as self-respect. There's no point in dying if you're doing it for principle. Do it instead for your dreams, die instead for a goal that you can achieve. These men here," he said, tilting his head to the crowds. "They will all die. But most of them will be from fear: fear of Austria at our doorstep, fear of the last dredges of nobility, fear of Louis, fear or never knowing a taste of power. Fear makes them angry, and makes them violent. Make them feel powerful, and the fear will go away."

"Does experience color those words?" Dorian asked, a slight furrow in his brow.

"Of a kind," Napoléon said, unwilling to explain the politics of Corsica. Parisians thought the politics here were complicated, they had no idea what it was like outside their city, in annexed islands still wanting to be independent. Napoléon thought he had a taste of power. That was before the naïveté had been burned out of him.

Dorian mused for a time, seemed to be the type who was thoughtful. "I think," he said, "That people simply want things to be better. There's nothing wrong with that. They see all the wealth and want it fairly handed out instead of held by a privileged few. If they can sense the fairness, then they will be calm."

"Ah," Napoléon said, "But define fairness. They think it will be fair if they feel the power they crave."

"No, they will think it fair when they know everyone is treated equally."

Napoléon shrugged. He wasn't going to argue. The silence drew out, comfortable - which surprised Napoléon because he didn't think he was supposed to feel comfortable with such a shadowy figure, but the man's charm made it easy. He remembered reaching for his gun when he had first met Dorian, thinking he would have to kill the man if they were to fight over treasure. Dorian's needs were very specific, though, and Napoléon wasn't yet powerful enough to meet this man on even
footing. They looked out over the Seine, much like they had before.

"If you still need to find a man," he said. "You might try here." He handed the paper with Rouille's post off to Dorian. "This one redefines the term 'friends in high places.' He's untouchable." He paused, giving Dorian enough time to reach the scrap of paper, smooth face becoming intense, the dark circles under his bloodshot eyes becoming more noticeable. What kind of work made one as capable as this man look so haggard? Napoléon wasn't ready to know - yet. "If he were to meet with an accident, few in France would suffer. My career certainly wouldn't."

"Well," Dorian said, a smile on his face so dark it sent an involuntary chill down Napoléon's spine. "Practice your speechmaking."

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh, we love this chapter. It's so chalk full of plot and character beats and historical events... this is what an AC chapter SHOULD look like... (happy sigh)

Assassin's first: this is the first chapter where we really see that the Council might have had a point in putting Arno on a short leash, because he finally asked a question about the Creed to his teammates and they were able to help him. More moments like that and things might have gone very differently. But then Arno sees Rouille and all development flies out the window as his single minded focus comes up. But even outside of Arno, we see that Arno has changed Tissot's mind, and with time he might change others.

We also nodded to the game and turned a single-player memory into a multipler player memory (sort of) with the Four Man Squad swooping in to do an objective, except history got in the way.

The Aug 10 Insurrection is one of the biggest events of a time of big events, and we've done our best to show how it was built up and even had the Council exposition it to make it all perfectly clear why this was such a big deal. And since absolutely no one has good luck in this fic the Assassins take a huge, huge hit for trying to prevent the bloodshed and are now even less effective than they were with only 200 operatives. The Revolution was a brutal time and we wanted it to be seen in all facets of live - even the Assassins. With so many members there and so many deaths it wasn't much of a stretch to throw around numbers like that. And with that many eagles there was NO WAY Arno was going to have the concentration to see Bonaparte take his Apple.

And Bonaparte! We finally got to you, huzzah! Right now he's a little too young to be anything other than "ambitious," he hasn't had his chance to really shine yet, but we use as many actual quotes of his to give his personality nuance as we could and dig into his philosophies. He's also a GREAT way to see how normal people see Arno. In his head Arno is a bit of a mess but externally he presents not only as functioning, but as damn near impressive. This is something we keep coming across as we share parts of our abuse to new friends who couldn't even conceive of us going through the things we did, because we're so put together. Well, on the outside we are. We also see a tiny bit of Bonaparte's mind, assessing Arno and setting a bar for himself to get on Arno's level.
Other small stuff includes squeezing in one of Danton's famous quotes on audacity. There are a million reasons for the insurrection but one of the biggest is that Declaration of Pillnitz that has everyone scared out of their minds. Speaking of which:

Next Chapter: There's a new Political Club in charge. Certainly, all that fear over Austria will be handled reasonably, cautiously, and thoughtfully.
Death of a National Guardsman

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saint-Denis. Excavation. Just outside of Paris, but isolated, away from the turmoil of the city. *Perfect.* Almost ten kilometers due north. Arno looked to the sky. *Diable,* the sun was sinking lower. Even if he left now, he might get there in two hours, but that wouldn’t be enough time to do more than find a cheap place to stay. He’d need to spend time there to investigate. Find whatever the excavation was, find Rouille's unit. It would take the better part of a day. Maybe more. He needed to prepare. He needed more tools. He had a pistol, he had his phantom blade, but he’d need his sword, he’d need bombs, things he couldn't just carry around on his person in the chaos that the streets of Paris regularly were.

Arno quickly crossed the *Pont Notre Dame.* He'd get back to the Café, pack a bag, head out immediately. If he was lucky, he could get a ride on a cart of some sort. He had spent too much time at Hôtel de Ville. After that Danton's speech, he'd spent hours trying to find someone getting more and more frustrated. Despite the lingering headache, he'd called on his eagle and found Bonaparte. Now he had a destination and a *purpose.* The sun would set soon.

He was making lists in his head. Bombs, poisons, extra phantom blades, food, various bits for sneaking around Saint-Denis. He'd improvise if he had to, but the more he had available, the more options he'd have. Once he'd crossed the bridge he paused. Saint-Chapelle was closer to get underground to the Sanctuary. More materials. He turned right instead of left. But the crowds kept thickening.

What the hell?

Not important. Another riot or some such, Arno had a *lead* and he wasn't going to let it go.

But the crowds were a problem. A real problem. They were thickest in front of the Conciergerie. Built sometime between the 10th and 14th centuries, when the western half of the island was the seat of the King and government. King Louis IX and King Phillipe the Fair had added the most to the massive structure, until King Charles V had abandoned it for the Louvre. The Conciergerie still held government offices and chancellery, with a concierge appointed to run it, earning the name. It wasn't until 1391 that it became a prison. Naturally, one's wealth determined how one was treated. The wealthiest prisoners were given a good bed, desk, and materials to read and write. Middling wealth would get a *pistoles* with a rough bed and table. The poorest citizens of France, the *pailleux,* would be dropped into the *oubliettes.* The forgotten places, with nothing but the plague and vermin as company. Arno had no doubt that Queen Marie-Antoinette, was in a posh cell at the Temple as she awaited trial from the new insurrectionist government.

Seriously, why were the crowds so thick today? Tonight? Whatever.

This was ridiculous.

He found a narrow alley and climbed up to the roofs. It would be easier to access Saint-Chapelle this way.

Damn, it really *was* crowded. The thick crowds extended further than Arno had originally thought. This wasn't just a riot then.
No matter, *Rouille*. Get information from him, and then move on to *Germain*.

People were *pouring* into the Conciergerie. No, people were being dragged *out* of the Conciergerie. And then the *sans-culottes* were cutting them down.

*Rouille*. Arno had to focus on *Rouille*.

But the cult did whatever they could to stop bloodshed. And the Brotherhood had just lost a quarter of its strength. They might not know what was going on.

Desire to fix his mistake warred intensely with his responsibility to the Brotherhood and how it *tried* to keep France sane. Arno stood on the roof, frozen in indecision.

Fine. He could inform them on his way to Saint-Denis. That meant he'd need to get down to street level to get information. It didn't take much to climb down to an alley and start pushing through the crowds. Another man was dragged from the Conciergerie and killed by the *sans-culottes*. Arno looked to the Palais du Justice, were a number of guards were, but they were just sitting on the steps watching. *Quoi*? Nothing was making any sense. What the *hell* was going on? He didn't have *time* for this!

He snuck into the Conciergerie through the open door that people were getting dragged out of at almost set intervals. Inside the vast hall columns sprouted up to a medieval ceiling of heavy stone and there was almost an order to the people inside. Arno watched as a man was dragged out from the prisons and thrown down what almost looked like a sham of a court. The lead of the court started asking questions. Name and why you were arrested were primary and repeated. The man offered his name but kept hedging around why he was arrested. Arno studied, taking mental notes to tell the Brotherhood, staying hidden behind one of the massive columns.

Behind the leader of this tribunal, several other members of the so-called court were furiously digging through papers. One such paper was brought up to the leader of the tribunal.

"You lied, to us, *Citoyen*," the man said coldly. "You were arrested for printing false *assignats*.

"*Please, Monsieur*, spare my life! I just needed a little more money to feed my family!"

Arno sucked in a breath. *Assignats* were paper money printed by the Constitutional Assembly to try and start fixing France's crisis of debt and possible bankruptcy. Rather than being backed by gold or silver, they were backed by the lands of the church which has been confiscated. It was one of Mirabeau's suggestions. They were almost like bonds, with a five-percent interest rate. It had been one of the many controversies that the Assembly had faced as it tried to set course for new methods of survival for France. Things had been going well with the *assignats* until in 1790 they were reclassified as legal tender at a reduced interest rate.

Many who had printing presses started to print *assignats* as well, and the inflation started skyrocketing.

"Then your sentencing is obvious," the head of this farce of a court said coldly. "Transfer."

"*Non! Nooooooon!*"

And the prisoner was dragged outside where everyone could hear his screams as he was cut down by more *sans-culottes*.

*Diable!*
Arno slipped deeper into the Conciergerie. How were they getting the prisoners out of their cells? Arno doubted the prison guards just happily handed over keys, so how?

"Monsieur! Dieu merci!"

Arno completely froze.

Gretel?

He turned to her immediately. Her tear-stained face was in the tiny window into her cell, fingers fitting through the four-by-four grid of bars to reach for him.

"Madame, what the hell are you doing here? You should be at the local jail on our small island. What are you doing on this side?"

"I don't know!" Gretel sobbed, dipping her head to hide behind her bonnet. "I was there for a few hours, but then I was brought here. I don't know what's going on at all. I'm so scared!" Her legs seemed to give out under her and she disappeared from view. "$I heard people are dying. I'm going to die." She hiccupped through her sobs. "$Tell my children I love them. Tell them I'm strong. Tell Jacques..." she wailed, "$I don't know!"

"Quiet, Madame," Arno hissed, pulling out his lockpicks. "$You aren't going to die, and you are going home to your family tonight."

Rouille would still be in Saint-Denis in the morning. Arno could do this much. Jacques deserved this much. He should have been able to stay focused on this, but once Bonaparte had told him where Rouille was, it was like Arno forgot everything. What a damn fool he was being. To forget the staff? What did that make him?

He broke one of his picks and stopped. He straightened and took a breath. He needed to focus. He had no idea when the next member of that fake tribunal would come through this hallway. He needed to do this swiftly and accurately and not be distracted. He knelt down again and felt for each tumbler.

"Three tumblers? Really? Well it is a prison..."

He heard the click and flung the door open.

Gretel was too upset to have noticed, sobbing on the floor, and wailing.

Arno didn't have time for this.

"Citoyenne," he hissed coming into the cell. "$Madame!" Finally, he kneeled by her and gently touched her shoulder. "$Gretel, do you want to leave or not?"

"Wh-what?" She seemed to come to herself and her eyes widened, losing more tears, as she saw Arno beside her. He watched her eyes dart to the open door and she was on her feet in an instant. "$Truly, Monsieur?"

"Oui. We need to go. Now."

She nodded hurriedly, stumbling to her feet and hitching up her petticoats. Arno guided them from shadow to shadow, checking with his eagle to make sure the path was clear. The false-tribunal was still in full effect and another man was being dragged out to be "transferred."

Arno paused with Gretel, calculating. Finally, he turned to her as a scream echoed from outside.
While already pale, Gretel seemed to pale further. "Madame," he said firmly. "When we get to the door, you close your eyes and don't look till we're clear."

"O-oui, Monsieur."

Somehow, against everything, it went perfectly. By this point, it was the middle of the night, the shadows deep and thick, making it easy for Arno to guide Gretel to the outside. The crowd wasn't quite as thick as Arno remembered it being, but there was still grim work being done and Gretel kept her hands over her eyes. He continued to guide her across the street, when his eagle screeched, firecrackers exploded in his ears so loudly, he thought he'd go deaf and he stopped to turn and see... Wiry red hair...

Battered tricorn hat...

A group of men around him...

"Come on! I hear more prisoners at Tour Saint-Bernard are going to support the Austrians!"

"What the hell is that connard doing here?" he hissed to himself. "That putain du personne isn't supposed to be in Paris!"

"Monsieur, you're hurting me."

The gentle plea pulled Arno out of his instantaneous rage and he realized he was gripping Gretel's arm so tightly he'd probably leave a bruise. He immediately released her and apologized. "Désolé, Madame," he murmured. "Désolé."

"Oui, Monsieur," she replied meekly.

Damage. He'd done damage. Diable. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "We're almost at an alley," he said softly. Instead of taking her arm, he gently pressed at her back and she tentatively let him guide her to a shadowed alley. Behind them there was another scream.

"Madame," he said. "Excuse me, Citoyenne, we are safe. You can open your eyes. We're in an alley heading back to the Café." He hesitated a moment. "Just don't look behind us," he stated after another scream was cut off.

She nodded. Opening her eyes, Gretel stood still, letting her eyes adjust to the little light that was there.

Together they walked to the end of the alley, across the street and down another alley, still going southeast. The screams were fading behind them, as they came out to another intersection.

"I must leave you now, Citoyenne," Arno said softly, stepping back to the shadows. Rouille was heading to Tour Saint-Bernard. He could make it there and do something. But he would need to move swiftly. Gretel was finally safe. She could make it back to the Café.

But she certainly didn't seem to think so. Despite how badly he had treated her mere moments before, she turned and clung to his arm, her grip strong. "Non, Monsieur, I'll never make it! Please, just take me home! Someone will know I've escaped."

No, they wouldn't, she didn't look like she'd been in jail, she looked like she'd been sobbing at a friend's home. But Rouille! He had freed Gretel, now he needed to be on his way!
Arno struggled, looking right towards the Seine and across it which would be Tour Saint-Bernard where Rouille was headed.

What to do, what to do! Rouille was his path to Germain, was his path to erasing his mistakes! But Gretel was terrified and with good reason after the day she'd had and he needed to reassure her!

Arno pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking. There had to be a way!

Ah!

Arno reached into his coat and pulled out his letter to Élise, the one he had hoped to post earlier. Gently, with far more care than how he had held her arm earlier, Arno entrusted the letter to her. "If anyone stops you on the way back to the Café, you are on an urgent mission to deliver this."

"Mais, Monsieur!" she insisted. "Anyone will hear my accent! No matter what I do, it's still there!"

Arno wanted to pull out his hair. The worst was past for Gretel. There was no way she was going to get stopped on the short walk between here and the Café, because all the troublemakers were behind them at the Conciergerie or on their way to Tour Saint-Benard, troublemakers he needed to follow!

He put the letter back into her hand. "This is your pass, proof that you are a servant of some house with a demanding lord sending you off in the middle of the night. It's the middle of the night. No one's going to see you, because everyone's in bed. Just stay in alleys if you see any crowd."

Tears started welling up again. "Monsieur!" she shoved the letter back. "I'll freeze! I'll behave poorly like this morning!"

She wasn't going to run in to anyone and Arno needed to get going to—

Arno paused, standing straighter.

He was a royal idiot sometimes.

The Tour Saint-Bernard was in the same direction as the Café.

Idiot. Putain d'idiot.

Arno straightened, gently pushed Gretel's hands back and offered a deep bow of apology. "My apologies, Mada—Citoyenne," he offered. "This day has left us all... strained." He offered an elbow. "I'll escort you home."

Gretel sniffed, clearly confused on what had made him switch positions so fast, but it was clear she wasn't questioning it. She took his elbow and quivered next to him the entire stretch, from one island across Pont Rouge to where the Café stood, a light burning at Citoyenne Gouze's window. Arno nodded to himself. Better for Gretel to stay with Citoyenne Gouze. As an Assassin, Citoyenne Gouze and Augustin could provide better protection if the guard came again. Arno stayed right by Gretel's side until the pop of fireworks alerted him that Citoyenne Gouze was at the door.

Silently, Arno slipped away. Pont de la Tournelle was just a bit further southeast. He heard Citoyenne Gouze answer the door and let in Gretel, and he let the words fade behind him.

Rouille was nearby. And Arno had work to do.

Arno followed the Quay d'Orléans along the perimeter if the Île Saint-Louis until he reached Pont
de la Tournelle.

It had to be almost three o'clock in the morning as he crossed the dark bridge and then looked up
the looming dark edifice of the former Château de la Tournelle, where the Tour Saint-Bernard was.
The château's roofs were steep and pointed as it faced out to the Seine from left bank. Windows
were narrow and tall, leftover from medieval architecture to protect against sieges and fighting. At
only four stories tall, it wasn't the tallest monument Arno had had to climb it since joining the cult,
but in the non-existent light of the deepest nights, climbing to get inside would be exceedingly
difficult.

Climbing of any kind would be difficult.

Carefully, Arno took a deep breath and called on his eagle. Pops of color appeared above the
interior and Arno knew that Rouille was there. He flexed his hidden blade. He'd finally get a clue
towards Germain. Crouching and slipping deeper into the shadows, Arno circled around the
exterior. One of the gates was indeed open to the cruel work of extremists dragging out prisoners
for "transfer", but the little light of the stars would make Arno easier to see. So, he circled around
again, all the way over to the small port and the docked boats beside the château.

Growling in frustration, Arno circled back to the gate. The walls of the château were incredibly
smooth, and the grout between bricks wasn't deep enough for Arno to be certain of his grip to climb
in the dark. Against his better judgement, he'd have to sneak in through the gate.

He eased into the shadows of the gate, and called on his eagle again. A flare of color, bright loud,
came from just beyond the opened door to where the little "court" was likely being held.

Right.

Of course.

Another prisoner was dragged out and slaughtered as Arno slowly made his way through the
shadows, across to the door that lead inside the prisons. Then another man was dragged out and
screamed before his throat was sliced.

Arno winced. Diable, he couldn't stand this! He had to walk by as people were being killed for no
good reason. This was why there was a court system. This was why the Assembly had redrafted so
many laws. So that this insanity didn't happen and that reason would win out.

And the worst was that Arno only had to wait a few minutes before another prisoner was dragged
out and he was able to slip inside with the distraction of a cut off scream.

Inside the prison were even more shadows, but there were torches lit as well. Arno stepped more
carefully.

There!

Past the fake tribunals Rouille was heading back into the prison, likely to gather more prisoners for
this farce of a "trial".

Arno did let out a satisfied grin. Got you.

Another prisoner was dragged before the so-called court and Arno took that moment to slip past.
His eagle was able to guide him and Arno swiftly found Rouille, searching the interior of a recently
vacated cell.
Arno paused. He wouldn't mess this up. He wasn't late, he was on time.

Silent feet, extended blade, swift grasp of the neck, deep stab into the back of the stomach, hitting several organs to ensure death, but slow and painful.

Slow enough for Rouille to be able to talk.

"What the h-ack!" Arno then punched Rouille directly in the throat. No screaming allowed, he thought.

Rouille collapsed, spinning as he did, and Arno knelt over him, letting the torches of the halls light his back leaving his face in shadows. He smiled as Rouille's eyes widened as he continued to struggle to catch a breath.


"F-fuck-y-you," Rouille grunted.

"I'm the one doing the fucking," Arno retorted. "Now, where is Germain? He and I have a long overdue conversation."

Rouille smiled, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. "You damn Assassins..." he gasped. "All alike."

"Yes, yes," Arno condescended. "How did you all phrase it that night at the Hôtel Voysin? 'Assassins have already proved useful... when properly led,' I believe was the phrasing." Rouille's eyes widened. "It seems I'm the one leading now."

"Hah," the man croaked. "Saw your grand Mentor once..." Rouille turned and spat. "Tennis Court Oath. 'Yielding only to bayonets'... So inspiring..."

Arno snorted. "Is that admiration I hear? You should have joined us then."

Rouille gave a bloody smile. "I tried... Went to shake his hand... brushed off like any... noble would to a peon..."


But Rouille was fading. "Marie... you've taken... too long..."

Marie. Arno searched his memories, knowing he'd heard that name before.

Not recently, when...

That mad time right at the end of March a year and a half ago. That meeting when Arno was under a kitchen. The woman that was working for Germain.

"Who is Marie?" he asked quietly.

"... not... enough... time... yet..."

Merde, Arno's stab must have done something wrong, Rouille was bleeding out faster than he should.
But he had a name now. Marie. Marie who was linked to Germain.

He could work with that.

"Repose en paix," he offered quietly, before releasing his hidden blade one more time to give Rouille a merciful death. He swiftly stripped Rouille of identifying clothes, leaving him in rags and blood so that none would see him as anything other than a prisoner. It was time to go. At four in the morning, the sky was just barely starting to lighten.

And Arno finally had work to do.

By the time Arno returned to the Café, the sun was rising and Arno hadn't gotten any sleep. The Café was still dark, the crowds didn't start filtering in mid- to late- morning, but Yvette was already there, setting up to cook for the day and Paul was in the intendent's office, going over papers and ready if anyone came in early to reserve the Café. Célestine wouldn't be for another two hours, but she was at least coming on time now. Morning meeting would be once she arrived.

Arno's body was screaming in a desperate plea for sleep, but Arno's mind was far to energized. Marie, involved with Germain. He smiled. I can work with that.

He needed to send a letter to Élise. She would want to know immediately. Progress. Finally progress.

He stepped lightly up the stairs, not wanting anyone to realize that he'd only just got back. He shrugged out of his coat, and fought back a yawn, even if his mind was oozing with thoughts. He needed to check the files down in the Sanctuary, would records be public with the insurrectionist government? Where could he go to ask?

Ideas were flitting back and forth as he headed into his room. His desk had scraps of paper. He needed to make a list.

"Hello, Arno."

Arno involuntarily stiffened and turned to his small breakfast table at the end of his bed.

"Madame Gouze," he bowed his head. "This is... a surprise."

Her hat was off, set on the breakfast table, ornate feathers unable to hide her burn scar.

"Yes," she said softly, straightening out already perfect petticoats. "I imagine it is."

Arno turned and brought over a chair from the corner by the large windows to the rooftop garden. He put it down by the table and sat down. "How can I help?"

Her smile was wan, and a hand seemed to unconsciously go to her burn scar. Finally, she let out a small sigh. "You had me worried," she said softly.

"Désolé," he replied, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. "Yesterday was... long."

She gave a small, ironic laugh and looked to him pointedly. "Yesterday hasn't ended for you yet."

Arno shrugged. "Too much to do. It's no different that when Fabre plans a heist and I get no sleep."

"No, Arno. I've already told the staff that you are ill and not to be disturbed today."
Arno's mind immediately went to lists and plans. A whole day without having to look after the Café? He could get so much done!

"Augustin and I will make sure you aren't disturbed."

Arno's brain skittered to a halt and it took a moment to process what Mme Gouze had just said.

"Er... quoi?"

She smiled gently and for one brief flash, a dim and dusty memory of Arno's mother swept across his vision. "You're pushing yourself too hard," she said gently. "You'll get sick if you keep this up. Today you are to do nothing but tend to yourself. Tomorrow as well if you still look so haggard."

"Madame..."

"Gretel will likely want to thank you," She said, standing. She turned and started setting his bed. Straightening sheets and turning them down.

Gretel...

Arno blinked, suddenly realizing one of the many things he'd done the previous night. "How is she?" he asked.

"Terrified. She thinks that if she so much as speaks she'll be arrested and then executed."

Arno's shoulders slumped. "It was a massacre last night," he muttered, memories coming up, unbidden, replacing his to-do lists and plans with flashes of blood and screams. "They were killed. That farce of a trial was all they had, and it was clear that it was just a formality. Those extremists..."

A soft knock on the door and Arno looked up to see Augustin come in with a few buckets of water that he set by the fire to heat before he nodded and silently left.

A bath. They were setting up a bath for him.

All the chaos of last night, mood bouncing back and forth between hope and frustrations, all the feelings... And Mme Gouze and Augustin were setting up a bath for him and told him he had the day to rest.

"Madame..." he shook his head. "Citoyenne, you are too kind."

She was sitting in front of him again, and she reached out to hold his hand. "Arno," she said softly. "You can call me Charlotte."

"But... you own this establishment, you are in charge here. You deserve that respect."

Her smile beamed at him, but she ducked her head, forgetting there was no ornate hat to hide behind. "Then as the owner, I give you permission to call me by name."

She had him talking about inconsequential things after that. What his plans for the week were for the Café, thoughts on the staff and some of the new staff they'd needed to hire for the Café's bigger functions, longer term plans and how progress was coming along. Once the buckets were boiling, she filled his tub. Arno watched and had to remind himself that Madame—Charlotte was an Assassin and often had hidden strength that she never showed to the public. She sat at his desk while he took his bath, quietly saying that she wasn't going to let him run himself ragged again.
Arno felt cared for in a way that he hadn't felt in a long time. The water soothed his body and he got more and more tired. Everything he needed to do to find Marie still filtered through his mind.

"What happened last night?" Charlotte asked quietly, screen and shelves and books between them.

In an instant he was awake again, attention jolting through him as he realized: he had killed Rouille. Without the permission of the Assassins. He had broken his punishment in his rush for redemption, and his new punishment would likely be even worse. Charlotte was Maître Trenet's eyes on him, she would have to report everything he said if he mentioned Rouille. He couldn't...

He couldn't tell her. Not about Rouille. Not about his new lead.

He had a secret. Something no one could know, lest the chance be ripped from him.

"... Too much," he replied. And he explained what he dared: From going after Gretel to never finding an official who would listen to him, to finding the crowds outside the Conciergerie to the bloody work he found within. He focused on the riots, the massacres, the things he saw and mentally cutting out his emotion about Rouille. Inexplicably, Arno found himself starting to cry. He had been so focused and driven that night, didn't even want to escort Gretel home like some damnable idiot. He'd been willing to abandon a part of his staff over his quest. What the hell had he been thinking? Of course, he knew why, he'd needed to get to Tour Saint-Bernard. There had been more bloody work there and he half-remembered talk of La Force Prison as well.

"How many people died?" he asked quietly, staring up at a painting of a redhead that reminded him of Élise above his fireplace. "And why? Even if Austria got so deep into Paris as to get access to the prisons, there's no way to know if the prisoners would automatically join the Austrians. So why kill them?"

"Fear, ultimately," Charlotte replied sadly. "Human beings can be motivated by a great many things. Fear is a simple one to inspire and react to. We are all afraid to lose something or someone. The question isn't why, the question is how much fear can a person stand before they react without thinking?"

"Not much it seems."

Charlotte tutted. "Arno, most of France has lived in fear in some way or another for centuries. Fear of the king or nobility, or famine or flood. The Third Estate hasn't had any control over any of it, just felt the fear for so long they could cope with it. Now we are in massive upheaval and change. People realize they have more control and now they are afraid to make a choice. They have less experience with this sort of fear. They've been too stuck in their ways. They have a dogma they aren't willing to change."

"Mhmmmm," he murmured. He was so tired.

Charlotte may have chuckled and muttered something about getting him to bed. Arno wasn't sure. He'd fallen asleep.

Augustin and Charlotte did a fine job of keeping him to his room for three days, insisting he sleep, eat, and read, nothing else. While Arno appreciated the gesture, once he'd slept he was ready to start tackling things again. He wrote a letter to Élise, but he wasn't allowed out to post it. He wanted to research this Marie person, but he never left his room. He wanted to check in on the staff, and they simply came up with all his favorites. Jacques was near sobbing with relief when he brought up Arno's café-au-lait, thanking him for getting Gretel home, Yvette always said it was
good to see him finally taking care of himself, Célestine needed to be told to stop going through his things for cleaning, etc., etc.

Arno would admit only upon pain of death, that those three days were perhaps more needed than he realized.

Paul kept him updated, but stayed busy down in the Café and agreed to post Arno's letter once he had the chance.

"A lady friend, Monsi—Citoyen?"

Arno only smiled.

On what would be the last night of his rest, he awoke in the middle of the night from a deep sleep that he hadn't managed in he wasn't sure how long. Once awake, he was alert, and he grabbed his hidden blade and lit a candle, going up to the attic where he heard the noise.

To his surprise, he found Claude trying to heft... was that a printing press?

"Claude?"

The grumpy retired Assassin turned and glared at him. "Either give me a damn hand or go back to being pampered."

Arno shrugged, set his candle down and did more to move the printing press than Claude could with his damaged foot. It took the better part of an hour, and Arno was sweating, but between the two of them, the printing press was settled into a well-hidden nook of the attic. Panting, Arno looked over to where Claude had eventually set himself up to "supervise".

"Well?" he asked between gasps of air. "Why do we now have a printing press up here?"

Claude grunted something, looking at the candle. "That girl Gretel. She was terrified."

"Of course, she was," Arno agreed straightening and trying to stretch out his back. "She was stolen from her family for no other reason than she spoke differently."

Claude hrumphed. "She has four children."

Arno nodded.

"That Tissot that comes around all the time, he has six children."

Arno tilted his head.

"Children need a mother."

Arno felt emotion swell up to his eyes, but he beat it back down. "Yes, they do," he said quietly. "And fathers."

"Hmmmmph." Claude stood and pulled out a drawer of letters that he must have snuck up at a different time. "I can't be an Assassin anymore. Not with this leg. But I can forge."

Forge? Arno suddenly smiled. "We many well need a forger soon."

"That Gretel will have documents showing her French citizenship."
"I think she'd appreciate that."

"She can't know it's forged."

"I was seeing an official about her release."

And for the first time since Augustin had dragged Claude to the Café, Arno saw Claude smile, his eyes sparking and his grizzled beard split with a beam. "Good to see you new kids understand the way of things around here."

Arno smiled.

October 1, 1792

Leopold was, in Élise's estimation, a decent man. His rule of Tuscany was orderly and fair, and with only two years as the Holy Roman Emperor, he understood that he was living in the center of Europe and subject to all the powers around him chomping at the bit to eat up chunks of his empire. Catherine off in Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain always lurking about with their ships. Leopold – indeed, everyone in Austria, was happy to see France eating itself in its Revolution, tearing up its own goodwill and influence. With one powerhouse down, the board was clear to maneuver.

It had been hard work, getting Leopold to do anything, he was smarter than anyone in the French court, and the Austrian Rite spit nothing but contempt at the Italian Rite for not forwarding information on the new Emperor. But then, even three hundred years after the fact, the Rite always had difficulties in Italy. Élise nodded and agreed in all the right places, and then asked how close he was to his sister Marie Antoinette.

That, of course, had been a stroke of brilliance, the Grandmaître had said. Élise did not role her eyes at such an obvious course of action, and hid her French accent to pose as a minor Austrian noble who exchanged letters with his poor sister and the things she was saying! Élise spoke with the Emperor about her month stay in France, the riots, the blood, the heads on pikes, it was absolutely dreadful! Why, it wasn't much of a stretch to think they would degrade themselves from killing their betters to killing their King! And what of my poor friend, I've not heard from her since this all started!

Leopold was cold, did not give away anything after Élise's audience, but the Austrian Rite assured her that she had played her part perfectly. When Padua Circular came out asking other sovereigns to meet at Pillnitz, Élise thought she was making progress. The Rite assured her she was making progress.

Nobody outside of Prussia came.

Élise was too cold to react, but her mind, already broken somewhere deep inside her, fractured further to see all her effort come to ashes. Oh, Leopold and Frederick made a declaration – war if and only if harm came to the Royal family. Leopold didn't want war, even for his sister, and Élise knew in that moment that going to Austria had been a mistake.

She wasn't a French Grandmaître, leading her Rite and guiding the Revolution, she was a French émigré, demanding outside influences sweep in and fix her own house. She was no better than the French nobility that had run to Austria demanding Leopold make all the problems go away. The only difference was that Leopold saw her under pretext, he had refused to see the others.
Oh, the Rite was kind enough, more than happy to repay debts to her father that Élise didn't even know about, and they were helpful in their own way. Élise had read the letters detailing Germain's expulsion – it wasn't just heretical notions about Jacques de Molay, he thought he was Jacques de Molay, claiming the phantom spoke to him and other sophistry. She learned about the council her father kept outside of his close friend Chrétien Lafrenière, his cutting ties with the English Rite and the letters from the Carrols expressing their offense with France when Grandmaitre Cormac took on the responsibility.

There were days when she woke up and it was everything she could do to force herself to get out of bed, mind swirling with the life her father lead, seeing him outside the view of an enamored little girl and instead as a compatriot. He was fair, honorable, patient, and helped all of Europe in some way, shape, or form. That was the destiny she was to inherit, and all that greatness was in the hands of a mad charlatan.

Anger, the closest thing to a feeling – the only feeling she had left – sat heavy in her stomach on those mornings, and that was the only thing that would get her out of that bed. She still suffered the malaise, she'd come to realize, and she welcomed the anger, because it made her act, and it got her through the day. Everything was an indignity or slight – she was called Mademoiselle instead of Grandmaitre, she was only listened to politely instead of actively – hers was the only idea to get Leopold to do anything with France and it was treated as a momentary intelligence rather than the natural course of a destined leader of a Rite, many men of the Order sought her attentions but they were overtly seeking power and not allegiance, and Élise was beginning to wonder if her father was the only man who knew what he was doing.

Heaven knew, she was the only one who knew what she was doing.

Germain.

She had to get to Germain.

The need had morphed, changed, merged with other thoughts in her head. He killed her father, yes, but now it was so much more than that. He was mad, and deserved to be killed. Records indicated he was making money off of the revolution, and deserved to be killed. He took her position, he deserved to be killed. He murdered her allies, and deserved to be killed. He insulted the Austrian Rite, and deserved to be killed.

Born in 1726 of a pair of silversmiths, Germain took on the family business and was good enough to garner work in the Louvre until 1765. Austria didn't have detailed records, only something about a scandal and speaking in tongues. Within a year he was inducted into the Templar Order – with a note that he had found them and not the other way around, a rarity for the Order. In the span of a decade he had worked up the ranks to be her father's advisor – and then, shortly after Arno had joined the staff – the trial.

Her father did not forward transcripts of the trial, only wrote that Germain had been proven sufficiently mad and no longer fit to serve the Order. Élise had thought him dead as a child, but in actuality Germain had fled to Austria after his expulsion, returning to his work as a silversmith and carefully watched by the Rite per her father's request. Nothing was out of the ordinary until he just... disappeared, in 1786. Seven years. No trace. Élise had combed through every record the Austrian Rite had, but no one knew how he had slipped from their fingers. Everyone had a theory: Assassins were always a possibility, stray lover, Russia, an artifact. Marie Lévesque had suggested he had died of a broken heart, robbed of his destiny with the Templars. That had made Élise frown.

She could remember Marie, their estate just outside of Paris. She was one of the crows, wearing long black capes against the weather and making all of her father's advisors look like crows.
(And they were crows. Every last one of them, feeding on her father's corpse in their rise to power and she would kill every one that was left and make them suffer the way she suffered...)

Marie had been the only one, according to the records, that had defended Germain and argued against his expulsion. Perhaps... a lover?

He resurfaced as an accent to court life: Comte Saint-Germain, son of Francis II of Transylvania, educated by the last of the Medici's, and rumored to be used by Louis himself for diplomatic missions. The Wandering Jew, he was called. Where did the money come from to finance his transformation? What was he gathering by talking and entertaining all those courts? Someone with that much freedom around nobility could learn almost anything. Élise had never heard her father mention him, so he clearly kept his head down in Versailles working so close under his nose, but why? What was he doing?

His sightings were spread out, even now, it was only Arno who could confirm that it was Germain who had orchestrated her father's death until they had plundered his manor in the Marais – a scant ten-minute walk from her house, no less! The gall! His wealth was impressive and Arno's work with the Assassins had produced evidence that he was gathering money like it was grain to be hoarded for a lean season. Templars had never wanted for wealth but this was excessive even by French standards. How was the money to be spent? What was it used for? What was his goal? Why did he kill her father?

Her depth of knowledge increased, but Austria was starting to suffocate Élise. She was surrounded by records and letters and vestiges of her father, reminded constantly of the life he led and the destiny he had written for her, plagued by the fact that none of it was where it belonged: in France.

... She needed to go back to France. Back where she belonged. Back where her life was on the line every day, the threat of danger keeping her moving forward and forward and forward until she had achieved her goals or died trying.

Weatherall had sent another letter, trying to lead her back under his wing, thinking he could somehow protect her, or worse, help her move on. There was no moving on. Her father was dead, her future destroyed, all because of that man, and she was certain to make him feel every inch of suffering she could pull out of him, one drop of blood at a time. The anger boiled under the ice in her, and she was tempted to find one of the Austrian Templars who fancied her and challenge him to a duel. Nothing was more satisfying than showing those paltry fops just was real strength looked like. Élise opened the letter and saw that it wasn't actually from Weatherall, he had just forwarded it.

It was from Arno.

She sighed, finger tracing through a curl. His letters didn't help. He was still under lock and key with the Assassins, banned from the Germain investigation and too simpering to ignore their wishes and investigate himself. Moreover, his letters sparked in her memories of Before: when her father was alive, and they played together as children. Making him learn to dance so she wouldn't do it alone, M. Weatherall using him as her sparring partner, running through summer thunderstorms or camping in attics in winter. Love making, and how good it felt. Such pleasures were beyond her now, burned out of her by the malaise. She couldn't go back, and reading his letters reminded her of that over and over. She should stop reading them.

Stop reading them.

Stop...
She cursed and opened the letter.

Élise, I've found a lead on Germain.

Every thought she ever had stopped, snuffed out like a candle, her very heart stopping as her entire body braced itself against that one single sentence, those seven simple words. I've found a lead on Germain.

I've found a lead on Germain.

She put the letter down, suddenly desperate for breath and had to force herself to breath in, hand covering her mouth. Found a lead on Germain. Her heart started up again, thudding heavily in her chest, and she picked up the letter.

Élise,

I've found a lead on Germain. It will take a lot to explain but I came across one of his compatriots, a member of the National Guard named Rouille. He was at l'Hôtel de Beauvais when Germain and the others spoke of the attack on you at l'Hôtel de Voysin. I came across him quite by accident at Tuileries...

Tuileries? What on earth was Arno doing at the royal palace? Was this before or after that disastrous escape to Varennes? It must have been after... She read on, realizing – she quickly glanced at the date – how much had happened in the last two months? A second revolution? Paris Commune instead of the Assembly? And... what had happened in the prisons? He wasn't clear on that, Arno always had a selective memory in that regard, more focused on getting this man named Rouille and getting another name: Marie.

Élise leaned back in her chair, not daring to breathe, and read the letter a second and third time, deconstructing every single word. Arno...

Even under lock and key he was still somehow managing to do more to avenge her father and she with all the resources of the Austrian Rite. There was something profoundly disturbing about that. He wasn't even a blood relation, what did he have to do with her father? It should have been her! And yet in the same breath she was glad it was him, someone she knew. Someone she could trust – well, almost trust. If nothing else he always had her best interests at heart, even if he didn't always understand what her best interests were. His heart was always in the right place, and that included now, and she wasn't angry, per se – not the way thinking about Germain made her angry – but it was her duty to avenge her father, and clearly she was doing a poor job of it.

"The Brotherhood has resources... Man power..."

"Maybe I should have taken that offer," she murmured to herself.

No, for now her objective was clear: get in contact with Arno and get more details, things he wouldn't say in a letter. She also needed to comb through the Lévesque family finances, and Weatherell knew the old accounts best.

Austria could not give her the results she wanted.

It was time she went back to the source.

October 18, 1792
The First French Republic.

And already a mess.

Somewhere around two thousand prisoners massacred in the first week of September, including the rest of the Swiss guard who had lost so badly at Tuileries and an inconceivable number of clergymen. The Battle at Valmy, a French victory; and the new Paris Commune: 749 deputies, 113 Jacobins, and utter dissent at every corner. Robespierre, Marat and his paper, and Danton were the new triumvirate dictatorship, according to the Girondins. Robespierre was too busy with the Revolutionary Tribunal, Marat was publishing every ugly thing that was said in the Commune to fan the flames of the people, who knew what Danton was doing and the people were still hungry. Assignats did not do enough to cover the lack of money, and with people printing more of it their value was decreasing by the day. Between feeding and fighting and funding, no one was happy, everyone wanted a change, and no one knew what that change should be. Political discourse fell to fistfights, and Charlotte had to watch Arno and Jacques both escort patrons out of the café when things got too heated. She wasn't sure if it was safe to run Marat's paper anymore, but her intuition told her that it wouldn't be long before that was the only paper deemed safe by the new government.

Jacques took his duty to usher people out seriously, thinking he was protecting his wife by doing so. Yvette, bless her, fed into the idea and was a wellspring of positive talk for everyone in the café. Célestine and her lover were in some kind of tiff, and she spent more time at the café, looking after all the children running underfoot.

Senior staff meetings between herself, Augustin, Paul, and Arno were tense affairs, especially when the café was closed for two weeks as the floors were stripped and redone. Arno's pet project finally being completed made him smile, but all four of them understood that business was going to be dicey for a while.

"It's not for lack of patrons," Arno said, tapping at the account ledgers. "We've enough of a reputation that people will come and everyone is hungry. But they don't have the money, and the ones that do have the money..."

"Are Royalists," Paul said, rubbing his forehead. "In principle that should make no difference whatever, but if we're seen as supporting Royalists the goodwill we've garnered will go up in smoke."

"And we'll be the next start of a riot," Augustin said, crossing his arms. "Fencing brings in less money," he added. "Classes are full, but the majority of students are... part of the political club."

Paul nodded, understanding early on that 'political club' was code for 'private affairs.' Charlotte watched the three men talk. She could remember the conversations she and Augustin would have in the beginning, the plans they made. Oh, there were the surface ideas on pushing this place in the black and providing for the Brotherhood, but there was also the idea of making this place a hub of information. Not as popular as Café Procope, that would be dangerous, but just enough on everyone's minds that important people would come. They had one man from Hôtel de Ville, a secretary that was now jobless after the restructuring. Charlotte wanted at least a dozen regulars who worked there, and all she would have to do is listen, and then meet at night in the atrium to share information or write reports.

It had been easier when Mirabeau was alive, he would bring his entire contingent and sweep in. But no one of that old guard were in important positions anymore, except for Robespierre, and he did not like the café being used as a demonstration. But... they would get there. The dream she had for this place was still possible.
The meeting lasted another twenty minutes before it was time for the lunch rush to start trickling in. Arno said his goodbyes and left for the bank, and then to the suppliers. She watched his back as he went.

... He’d left something out in September, after his rescue of Jacques wife. She’d waited for him to confide in her, but he’d said nothing, seemed to think the matter was closed. She would allow it for now, Charlotte decided. Arno had earned a secret or two for all the work he had done. He was the type of man to give and give and give, and expected nothing in return – not because he knew he was doing the right thing, but because no one ever repaid the kindness he offered. She could only do so much, Augustin as well, to shift his perspective from the latter to the former. De la Serre saw him as a houseboy, and whatever pedestal Arno put the man on Charlotte understood the master of the house did not see Arno as family the way he did. The steward Olivier hid nothing of his hatred for Arno, ensuring the boy never really knew his place. The girl Élise... well, that was a complicated knot she had not yet touched, but it was obvious that at the very least the daughter did not recognize taking advantage of him as children and getting into trouble. After that was Bellec and Charlotte was still picking through the damage that man had done to Arno.

Ah, that poor, gentle child. He was her third child, in a way. Still alive but so weak to the world. The least she and Augustin could do was shelter him as he continued to weather his life.

The grey clouds seemed to hear her thoughts, rain starting to patter the cobblestones. Then it was pouring, a cold, icy rain that had several people dart into the café to stay dry. Perfect. Time to perform.

"Bienvenue à Café Théâtre," she said brightly to a group. "We'll have you seated in just a moment."

"Merci, merci," a couple said. She glanced to Célestine and she nodded, coming over to guide them to an empty table. A third person waved off a table, moving to the counter with Jacques and café. The fourth pulled her hood down to show a mass of red curls.

"Please inform Arno that I am here." Élise de la Serre said.

Charlotte blinked, needing a fraction of a second to recover from the sudden change in the air.

"Well," she said gently. "Look what the storm blew in. Citoyen Dorian has stepped out for supplies and will be several hours."

De la Serre pursed her lips, gaze cold. "This can't wait," she said.

"It can," Charlotte replied. "And you will. But not here. Let us retire to the library. I'll have some café brought up to warm you up, and we can talk about Citoyen Dorian."

She breezed through the café, around a gaping Célestine and to the main hall. Charlotte trailed after her at a sedate pace, unruffled by the other woman's rush. Claudette the baker was carrying a tray of something and Charlotte stopped her. "Have come café noir brought up to the library when you can," she said gently. "I'll be entertaining up there for a while."

"Bien sûr, Citoyenne," Claudette said, eyeing Mme de la Serre and her pants and loose curls. Charlotte continued to act like nothing was the matter, instead going up the stairs and around the landing to the wing over the kitchen. The smell of leather filled her nostrils, and she offered a seat by the fire, giving them a cursory glance to make sure Arno wasn't doing research here. Good, only local papers.
Élise de la Serre sat, back straight, and stared in expectation. Charlotte, in turn, began the game by artfully sitting herself down, adjusting her petticoats and gown, and saying absolutely nothing. The silence drew out, Charlotte watching the Templar twitch in impatience and struggling to see how far propriety could stretch. "How do you find the weather?" she asked. "It's been quite chilly of late. I expect the mittens and gloves will be coming out before long."

"It's not so bad," Élise said, cordial but terse.

"The rain has been ghastly. This is the third storm this week, and if it gets any colder it will turn to ice. That's a bad sign for winter."

"I see."

"Tell me, what's your opinion of the Commune? Their declaration that we're now the First French Republic?"

"I don't care one way or another," Élise de la Serre said, glancing at the clock on the mantle. "What we're called doesn't change who we are."

"On that we disagree," Charlotte replied. "What we're called dictates how people see us. The name is a good one, I think, for the people of France but I worry about the other countries. All those monarchies are afraid of what we're doing here – don't you think?"

"Hardly," de la Serre said, turning her attention back to Charlotte.

"Oh?" Charlotte said, tilting her head just so. "You don't think Austria is desperate to put all our heads on pikes?"

De la Serre snorted, a soft delicate sound that still had a feminine affectation. "The other kings are perfectly content to let us eat ourselves and then claim the remains."

"But we're at war with Austria."

"Because we declared it," de la Serre countered. "Leopold wasn't going to go to war, not with only two years under his belt as Emperor and Poland weighing heavily on his mind."

Hm. She'd been to Austria, Charlotte realized. That made sense, with Germain's coup d'état of the French Rite she had no allies left, she would have had to go somewhere. De la Serre himself had cut ties with the English Rite almost two decades ago, but he was close friends with the Austrian Grandmaître, and heaven knew both the Brotherhood and the Order were heavily invested in what was left of Poland. Letters said it was a nightmare over there. But why had she returned? That was the real question.

"You might be right," Charlotte said, "but who can tell the whim of a king these days? Or an emperor? Reason is something that does not seem to come naturally to them."

"Doesn't it?" Élise asked, turning to face Charlotte, eyebrow slightly raised. "Royalty is fallible, of course, if it wasn't then regimes wouldn't rise and fall. But someone has to lead the people."

"But not unilaterally," Charlotte countered. "I think we've fairly well proven that checks and balances need to exist to prevent leaders from overreaching themselves and forgetting the people that they lead. Reason must be held above all."

"Reason," the de la Serre girl scoffed, crossing her legs. "Reason can only take a person so far. Impulse is too quick to override reason."
"Which is why it should be tempered with thoughtful deliberation and mental exercise," Charlotte said, sipping her café.

"And everything that's happened in the last few years is merely 'thoughtful deliberation," de la Serre said, leaning back in her chair. "The riots, the fevered declaration of war, arresting the royal family, and now the Paris Commune? Oh, yes, clearly that's thoughtful deliberation and mental exercise."

"Not all of it," Charlotte said, lifting up a placating hand. "But you must understand, mademoiselle, that anger so deeply repressed will bubble up at the most inconvenient times. A man can only suffer abuse for so long before he simply can't take it anymore. That is why reason needs to be held so dearly, before revenge can destroy them."

"Unfocused revenge," the redhead corrected. "If reason were ever used properly, then revenge would be narrowed to only the abuser, and with the abuser dead then the need for revenge disappears."

"And that's one of the reasons why Louis will likely die in the next year," Charlotte said, sipping again. "And then we will have provoked Austria into being justified in the war we are fighting. What I'm trying to say, mademoiselle, is that some things we are doing right and some things we are doing wrong, but we are trying, and every time we learn and get a little better."

"Not as much as you think," de la Serre said. She still hadn't touched her café. "Whatever one thinks of those Americans, with an entire ocean between them and England they had to self-govern, they knew how to take care of themselves. France hasn't lived without a king making decisions for them. You can't say that anyone here has any idea of the responsibility of leading France, let alone winning a war or feeding the people. They all want to be told what to do, and without a leader they'll listen to anyone who sounds remotely intelligent."

Ah, there was the Templar. Charlotte let a natural pause draw out in their conversation, mentally cataloguing what she was learning about de la Serre. The more information the better, partly for the Council, yes, but also for Arno. This relationship was his most important, and Charlotte wasn't so blinded by dogma to assume that Élise de la Serre was automatically bad for Arno – she wanted to make that decision herself by getting to know the woman.

"I should warn you," she said. "You left quite the impression on the staff when you first arrived last year. Pants and all." The Templar glanced down at her riding pants, but did nothing to shift her position or show shame in such masculine clothes. "We all thought you the next Théroigne de Méricourt. We've since learned not to believe everything we read in the papers, but she at least has had the chance to explain herself. You haven't."

"I don't see that I need to explain myself to you," she replied, cold.

"Perhaps not," Charlotte said, setting down her cup. "But if you don't, this is the picture we have of you: and old lover of Citoyen Dorian that swept in to talk to him. I saw his smile when he saw you had arrived, we all did; he still loves you. You whisk him away and by the end of the day we're told he's drunk in an alley with his arm in a sling sobbing over all the people he thinks he's responsible for killing, including being the last person to have an appointment with Monsieur Mirabeau before his passing. And, where were you? Gone, like smoke."

Charlotte waited, watching de la Serre very carefully. She had used the cover story for Arno, not wanting to advertise she was an Assassin, of course, but also to gauge the Templar's reaction to the picture she was making. Would she alter the story to make herself look good, twist the facts, defend Arno?
"'Élise, please,' Charlotte quoted, pressing the point. "'I know it's my fault. He's dead. Like Monsieur de la Serre. Like mon père.' That was what he said when we were sewing him up and putting him to bed."

De la Serre blinked, eyes widening a fraction of an instant, an indication of... something. The ghost of a memory floated across her face, and her features softened into something very different than the cold and imperious woman she presented herself, something Charlotte could easily see Arno falling in love with. And then it was gone.

"As I said," the redhead said. "I don't need to explain myself to you. What exactly is your relationship with him, exactly? You seem to be taking a special interest in his private affairs."

"Ah, mademoiselle," Charlotte said. "I've known that boy for two years; when I interviewed him for the position I could tell right away he knew exactly what to do with customers. I've watched him get on his knees and clean floors and season pans and shovel horse manure until he looked like a scullery boy, stay up into the wee hours of the morning trying to find the best way to save money, shelter people from riots and hire the best cook we've ever had and the best intendent we could find. Our first repairs came from his own pocket. He is a good boy, and a good man, and we would all of us be devastated to learn that he had been treated wrongly by the love of his life."

There it was again. The softness. "A chevalier," de la Serre muttered. And there was a smile, soft and faraway. And it was gone again, her emotion cutting off so suddenly as she uncrossed her legs and shifted her weight. "It's good to hear he's learned responsibility."

The anger that callous statement inspired in Charlotte was so sudden and so visceral she was silent for a very long time as she struggled to control her reaction. Reason, like she said, had to win out. She would be angry later, with Augustin, where it was safe. Charlotte had no idea what Arno was like before he came to the Brotherhood. He was sober and serious now, but as a child... who knew? Finally mastering herself, she made herself smile. "We've never known him to be irresponsible," she said carefully.

"You didn't grow up with him," de la Serre said dismissively. At last, she sipped her café, eyes widening slightly when she realized how good it was. She didn't say anything after that. Good. She was finally relaxed.

"Tell me," Charlotte said. "What was he like as a child?"

"Like all children, I suppose," de la Serre said. "Eager to please, happy for adventure."

"Happy for your company, I'm sure," Charlotte said. "He mentioned he was 'taken in,' but never went into details."

"Pox," she said without skipping a beat, meaning this was the story the de la Serre had told everyone. "His father died; I don't know about the mother. My père took him in when he was eight. We've been together ever since."

"It must have been nice to have a brother," Charlotte said, adding a hint of wistful whimsy to her voice. "I was the oldest of six daughters. I can only imagine having someone to stand up for your honor."

"Hardly," the Templar said. "More like a wayward puppy following you around. Cute and sweet, but occasionally annoying."

"Right up until you bloomed, I expect," Charlotte said with a knowing smile. "You can't tell me a
man of that fine a cut didn't grab your eye once you realized men could be... inspiring."

The girl didn't blush, but here silence was very telling.

Charlotte was content with that for now, let the natural pause draw out again and glancing instead at the fire. Arno might have changed before he came here, but it was becoming obvious that the Templar girl had, as well. That softness, it had to be omnipresent for Arno to fall in love with it, and having her empire topple damaged her as much as Arno was damaged by his very life. Now the coldness made more sense, and Charlotte started to realize that Élise de la Serre was dangerous. Very dangerous. Especially with her comment on focused revenge. She had seen that kind of focus in the Brotherhood, and it led to ruination. Oh, Arno, you always have the worst luck.

"Well," she said, standing. "You can wait here for Citoyen Dorian's return. I'll send him right up. Oh, and mademoiselle," she added, artfully turning as she moved away. "Do be careful with his heart. It won't last another break."

Yvette all but pounced her on when she finally went back downstairs. "She is here?" the cook demanded in a low hiss. "That woman playing at being a man? The one who broke his heart?"

"The mademoiselle is here, yes," Charlotte said.

"Why did you even let her in?" Yvette demanded, spoon gripped in her fist. "Everyone here knows what she did to him."

Charlotte smiled gently. "But we don't have the right to keep them apart," she said. "If Citoyen Dorian wants to see her again we can hardly stop them. They'll sneak off to see each other like Célestine did before. At least here, we can be watchful."

It was three hours later when Arno finally arrived, and he wandered into Paul's office with a confused look on his face. "Célestine said you wanted to see me?" he asked.

Charlotte got up from her book. "Yes, we need to talk. Let's go to the dining hall." She led him to the banquet table, sitting at the far end, the furthest away from the dinner crowds and de la Serre upstairs. "A friend of yours is upstairs waiting for you in the library," she said quietly and without ceremony.

"What? Who?"

Charlotte looked at him, gaze flat. "You didn't tell us you were sending her letters."

Arno stiffened, realizing in equal parts that his lover was here and that he was in trouble. "She never replied," he said quickly. "I didn't think she was even receiving them. I just... I wanted to feel..."

"Then what did you say in your last letter than inspired her to come here?"

The answer flashed across his face in an instant, but he blinked and said, "I have no idea."

He lied. Bon Dieu, he lied. He'd never lied about anything, even when it would have helped him. But now that was twice he had kept something from Charlotte, and she was starting to worry. "Arno," she said, "you can tell me anything. You do know that, don't you?"

He pursed his lips, a small tell, and he looked down. "I know," he confessed.
"Does she have something on you?"

"Non."

"Did you invite her?"

"Non."

"Then why is she here?"

"I could only guess," he said, trying to demure.

Charlotte couldn't let it go, however. "Then guess," she said, quiet, soft, but also very firm.

"Charlotte..." he said. He had only just gotten comfortable with calling her by her given name, she did not want to trample on two years' worth of very hard work and progress, but she had to know what had happened to make this turn in him. His reticence spoke for itself, however; his voice drifted off and he could supply nothing to satisfy her, couldn't even try.

"I don't know what she was like before you came here," she said softly, reaching out and touching his wrist, drawing his gaze to her. "But in the now I can tell you: she is not good for you."

He pulled his hand away, defensive. "Because she's a Templar?"

"No," she said, "Because she is damaged. The loss of her father and her would-be empire as a Templar has broken something in her. She is cold on the outside, but on fire on the inside. She will drive herself to self-destruction and drag everyone around her with her."

Arno shook his head. "You're wrong."

"You have no idea how much I want to be wrong," she said. "I want what's best for you, Arno, and she isn't in a place to give you what you need."

"Charlotte," he said, leaning forward. A hundred emotions were on his face, guilt most prominent. "I'm the one who broke her. I'm the one who failed to warn her father that people were trying to kill him. It's my responsibility to fix her."

"Oh, Arno," Charlotte said. "No, it's not."

"Yes, it is," he insisted. "I have to fix the things I did wrong. I have to make it right again."

This poor, gentle child...!

Charlotte stood and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pressing her face into his hair, kissing the top of his head. "I can't stop you," she whispered, "But I want you to know you can tell me everything, even what goes wrong, and I'll do everything I can to help you. Augustin, too."

A hand reached up to touch her arm. "I know, Charlotte," Arno replied, voice soft and warm. "I know."

He couldn't tell her everything.

Arno squirmed in guilt as he realized he couldn't explain it all to Charlotte. Charlotte was doing her best but she was still an Assassin, still reported to the Council, and he couldn't risk the Council punishing him even more than he already was – not when Rouille had dropped in his lap, and not
now when Élise was literally upstairs waiting for him to tell her what happened. They wouldn't let him fix his mistakes, and he had to fix them, he had to redeem himself in Élise's eyes and in his own. That was why he had joined the cult in the first place, and he would be damned if he let them stop him.

Charlotte, Augustin, Café Théâtre, they had done so much for them, given him a home, work, pay, and a safe place to recover when Mirabeau had been murdered. They had kept him sober, let him mourn, the least he could do was make sure they could deny any involvement in what he was about to do.

Arno went upstairs and moved to the library, seeing the red hair glowing in the firelight as the sun set. She was resplendent, as she always was, and she looked up and locked her eyes on him.

"Took you long enough," she said with a slight smile. Oh, he had missed that smile.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, smiling himself. "Let's go for a walk, shall we?"

"Of course," she replied, gracefully getting up. "Will I need a blindfold?"

Arno winced. "No, that won't be necessary. We're not going that way."

"Good."

They took the far staircase down, by the kitchens, and Arno saw Yvette peeking her head out and watching them, a dark glare that made her eyes bulge slightly when they saw Élise. Arno smiled at her, tried to nonverbally reassure her, but Yvette shook her head and moved back to the kitchens. Nobody approved, it seemed, even the staff.

Arno moved slowly but with purpose, knowing the Left Bank had fewer Assassins and Assassin bureaus and therefore more privacy. They moved south and slightly west, toward the Panthéon, taking in the evening light and the long shadows. Arno found a poor excuse of a café, entering and sitting at a secluded corner, the volume of the patrons drowning out any prying ears. He asked for a small pulse of his eagle, but he didn't hear any fireworks and sat down, Élise following suit.

"Your letter said you had a lead of Germain," she said, waiting for drinks, "but you were never good at telling stories."

"No," Arno corrected, "I was never good at writing it down – it took too long compared to saying it out loud. I've gotten better, I'll have you know."

"Tell me it again," Élise said. "In your own words."

Arno explained it all, seeing Rouille by bald chance at Tuileries while he was trying to secure documents and keep the bloodshed to a failed minimum. He talked about finding a contact in the military, that Rouille was in the national guard, and learned where he was stationed. He talked about the massacres in September, one of his staff being arrested and coming across Rouille as he was murdering people in the prisons. And he explained the man's last words.

"What I don't know is who is this Marie?"

"That would be Marie Lévesque," Élise explained. "The Lévesques have been Templars since the Third Crusade. Marie was the only one who argued against Germain's exile; I'm not surprised she's thrown in with him."

Lévesque...? "I know that name," Arno said, frowning. "There was an estate, just outside of Paris.
And old Templar estate, long abandoned when the family moved to the city, but we were trying to learn about the new power structure. We found a hidden room but it had long been emptied." That was the night Tissot's wife had nearly died, he remembered the throbbing head from so many eagles merging into his vision.

"That would have been her mother's summer estate," Élise said. "Halfway between Paris and Versailles?" She leaned back. "The family lived in the Marais before moving closer to Tuileries. Though now with the Revolution she could be anywhere. Germain has all but disappeared."

"That makes sense," Arno said, searching his memory. "At l'Hôtel de Beauvais, he said something about a Sanctuary."

"Sanctuary? That doesn't sound particularly Templar," Élise said. "We've never needed sanctuaries because we hide so well."

"Well, Sanctuary is now the new word of the day," Arno said dryly. "Any thoughts?"

"No, but Marie would know. The bitch is probably pleasing him right now, the harlot."

Arno winced to hear such language from his beloved, but put it aside to focus. "How to we find her?"

"She was Second Estate," Élise said. "She would die before lowering herself to work with the Thirds. She'll still be with the elite, likely holding a party to fraternize and learn secrets."

"That follows what the Brotherhood knows," Arno said, sipping his drink. "The Templars are collecting money like it's going out of style. They don't know why yet, but a party like that would be a big draw for them."

"Then we need to learn when the next party is. Can you find out?"

Arno hesitated. "Élise," he said carefully. "The Brotherhood lost over forty people during the insurrection. A quarter of their sources of information are gone now, and they don't have anyone in Hôtel de Ville and almost no one left with the bourgeoisie or the old Seconds to get that kind of information."

The redhead pursed her lips, leaning back in disapproval. Arno winced, knowing he had let her down, and struggled to think of a way to correct that.

"It doesn't matter," she said, clucking her tongue. "We know what to look for now. I'll just have to dust off one of my old dresses and hope it isn't too out of fashion as I learn when and where."

"I'll do my own digging," Arno said quickly. "We'll see what we can come up with."

"Agreed."

Charlotte was waiting for him when he returned, but said absolutely nothing, just looked at him sadly. Arno's heart squirmed again, but he couldn't let guilt stop him from erasing his greatest of mistakes.

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**October 25, 1792**

For the better part of a week Arno locked himself in the Café, going to the bank with earnings, ordering supplies, cleaning with Célestine and Yvette to make up for the disappointment Charlotte
had expressed without words. Yvette had of course given him a long, extended opinion of "That Woman," and begging he not see her again, and he lied and said he wouldn't, because he did not want to disappoint her when she had done so much for him, as Charlotte had.

Augustin asked if he needed to tell the Council anything, and Arno steadfastly said no, Élise didn't know anything new – again a lie, because if Trenet and the others were going to ban him from investigating Germain, then he would keep what she learned to himself. This, too, made him feel guilty, but finding Germain and avenging M. de la Serre had to come first. No matter the cost.

... And if they threw him out, well, at least he had Élise again.

It wasn't until a week later that he realized how he could find out about a party, and sought out Marcel Pontmercy.

His bookshop, near Tuileries on Rue Saint-Honoré, and catering to the bourgeoisie, had been at some point ransacked, shelves broken and wounded and sections of them missing books that had clearly been torn asunder in the near past. One of the panes of glass in the front window was missing, letting in the cold air, and there were – were those burn marks? – on the counter where Pontmercy usually did his work?

"Citoyen Pontmercy?" he called out, surprised that the front clerk was nowhere to be seen.

Pontmercy came out, but the last two months had clearly been hard on him. Trying to stop the assault on Tuileries and considering himself a failure, he had suffered broken ribs; and now his shop was ruined. He stepped out and his hair was messier than normal, his silk waistcoat missing. His eyes were dark, and in his fist was a bottle of wine. He saw Arno, and a small pause drew out before those dark eyes widened and he stepped forward.

"Is there an assignment? Am I finally cleared for work?" he asked, mouth slurring the words slightly.

Arno blinked, realizing that of course he hadn't been working, not with his ribs from Tuileries, and that meant he was on his own to stew in his defeat. Like Arno after Mirabeau's murder, only without a staff that looked after him. He straightened, realizing he was helping Pontmercy as much as Pontmercy was about to help him.

"I need information," he said simply. "From one of your rare books."

"Of course," Pontmercy said, falling into character almost immediately. "I've still some rare items left after the massacres. You'll have to forgive the mess, it's been difficult to restructure."

"What happened?" Arno asked once they were out of the front room.

"I was too posh for my own good," Pontmercy said, voice low and bitter. "They thought I was a Royalist. I was laid up, couldn't defend the place. They killed Antoine and my new assistant, they would have killed me but I was able to say all the right words at the last minute. Then they left. Didn't even apologize, and no one at the political club has people to spare."

"Everyone's gone to ground from what I can tell," Arno answered. "No one's coming out of their cover unless they absolutely need to. Have you heard from Fabre?"

"No, but he'll be out for another two months yet. I haven't been below to see him. You?"

"He was still in a fever last I saw, but that was weeks ago," Arno replied.
"You're right over the Sanctuary, how haven't you seen him?"

"Because Tissot kept ushering me out, saying my hovering wouldn't help. I gave up trying."

"Merde, what's become of us?" Pontmercy said, slamming his bottle onto a desk and sitting heavily in a seat. "Jumping from one crisis to the next, afraid of our own shadows, aren't we supposed to be a city of light? I knew the Revolution was going to change everything, we all did, but not like this," he gestured to his back room, tables covered with ripped up books and bits of broken chairs. Was Pontmercy trying to repair all of this himself? "Merde," the bookseller cursed. Then, "What do you need?"

"Information," Arno repeated, leaning in and lowering his voice. "I'm looking for someone. Marie Lévesque. Had an estate outside of the city, moved to the Marais. Now she's in the wind, but we do know she's the type to throw parties for the elite so she can mingle and learn gossip."

Pontmercy listened, all business, rubbing his stubble. "I still have a few people who will talk to me," he said, thinking out loud. "One of them used to be a baron, claims he's distantly related to the Bourbons but never provides a family tree. He might know, and if he doesn't his wife definitely will." He nodded to himself, looking to Arno with intense eyes. "Give me a few days to clean up and get in contact with him."

"I understand," Arno said, straightening.

Pontmercy reached out, grabbing Arno's wrist as he was turning to leave. "Arno," he said, and his voice was different, fuller. "Merci. Merci beaucoup."

Chapter End Notes

Another nice, big, plot-y chapter, hurray! We start almost immediately with a brief nod to Dead Kings where Rouille has been stationed and it's off to the Next Big Thing of the Revolution: the September Massacres.

It cannot be stressed enough that things were absolutely crazy at this point. The insurrection and new government hasn't even been in power a full month yet, Austria's warning to be nice to royalty making everyone paranoid and starting wars, political parties pushing and pushing and PUSHING, and finally this: Men break into prisons, hold a sham of a five minute trial as pretext to execute all the Austrian's they've been arresting. It would be like... like in WW2 when America decided to arrest everyone that was Japanese for fear of... whatever... and then having Joe Schmoe come into the internment camps, say some vaguely sounding legal words, and then marching them out to a firing squad. It's insane. The Revolution was insane.

And unlike other AC fics we've written, we took pains to have the Revolution affect everyone personally, several times over. Jacques wife is arrested and almost massacred, Pontmercy's shop is ransacked, Fabre lost an arm in the Insurrection of Aug 10, the Brotherhood is nearly gutted, etc. There was no way the Revolution didn't touch somebody during this time.

Elise: That was a big timeskip in the game for her to do nothing, and this seemed like the most obvious way to use her. It's not explained clearly, but in Lafrenière's assassination in the game he's talking to an Austrian Templar, meaning the two are
allies, meaning Élise in turn probably went there after things blew up with Mirabeau and Bellec. She understands - a little - that she's suffering from something and is trying to cope by being active, but she hasn't realized that she's not using healthy coping mechanisms. She thinks that doing one thing - killing Germain - will make all her problems go away, without understanding that she's suffering something more systemic and has to be treated, not removed. She's trying to fill her empty self with the wrong things.

Also, possible explanation for Germain's backstory. Since for a major villain he had no development or even investment for the entire game.

And we also get a soft pass for the Bechtel test for having Élise and Charlotte talk politics. Ah, but the conversation eventually went back to Arno, so it probably doesn't count. Speaking of...

And then there's Arno. Now we start to pay off aaaaaalllll that work we've put into his mental psyche and defining what is and isn't healthy for him. Élise was always a bad influence, and now we see all the progress he's struggled to gain be trampled by himself. It's almost painful to read this chapter because he gets so lost in his obsession with Rouille and then deliberately chooses to not tell Charlotte about what he's doing. He knows what he's doing is wrong - that's more than in the beginning of the fic - but he doesn't stop from making those bad decisions. That's the hardest thing for a loved one, to watch someone make those bad decisions, knowing they're bad decisions. Hell, it's hard watching students make those decisions, sometimes. Charlotte knows damn well Arno's doing things behind her back, and she knows going to the Council would hurt him more than help him, and she doesn't want to lose all that hard-earned trust, and all she can do is watch him self destruct.

Next chapter: Pontmercy, Marie Lévesque, balloons, and it continues to go downhill...
October 31, 1792

"Citoyen Dorian?"

Arno looked up to see Pontmercy, clean cut and perfectly trim and dapper.

"Citoyen Pontmercy," he said, putting his broom aside and wiping his hands on his apron before tugging it off. "Good to see you doing better. We were all worried when we heard what happened to your shop."

"Dark times hit all of us," Pontmercy said grandly. His color was better, his face clean-shaven for the first time since knowing him, his hair cut in a shorter style. "Some more than others. I must say I was grateful for your order. It was quite the project and I enjoyed the challenge."

"Well, then, let us go upstairs where we can talk," Arno said. He handed off his broom to Célestine and nodded to Jacques, moving up the grand stairs and to his room above the café. He closed his door and locked it, turning. "What did you find out?"

"That she hides very well," Pontmercy said, demeanor dropped. "But there was a scandal about a month ago – this will take some explaining: The Lévesque name comes from her side of the family, not her husband's. The Lévesques were strapped for cash about twenty years ago, like every other Second. They decided to marry off their daughter, Mademoiselle Marie Lévesque, to one Thomas Lobit. The Lobits were new money and were happy to take the Lévesque name to prove their legitimacy to the other nobles. Now, about a month ago, Thomas starts calling himself Lobit again, told his brother he'd married into a crazy family obsessed with history and reinstating the Ancien Régime, and all the backwards laws that came with it. The Madame was forced to declare him of unique condition."

"Madness," Arno supplied.

"That's the rumor. Now she's holding a party at Palais du Luxembourg, the word is that she's trying to show that everything's fine and there's nothing to worry about."

"Is there?" Arno asked dryly.

Pontmercy shrugged. "No idea. Want to crash and find out?"

Arno gave a predatory smile. "Of course," he said genially.

"Then pull out your good surcoat. I'll meet you there in three hours."

"Bien sûr."

Arno was out and in the streets in the span of ten minutes, walking west to Notre Dame and then across the Seine to the left bank, where Élise had taken up residence in a rundown apothecary.

"Palais du Luxembourg," she said by way of greeting, still lacing up a gown of green silk.
"Tonight, at sunset."
"That's what I heard," Arno agreed, eyes drifting to the dark green, the cut of the shoulder. It wasn't that stunning velvet dress at Versailles, but she was gorgeous to look at nonetheless.

"Her husband finally learned she was a Templar," she said, pulling at the complicated strings. Arno reached out to help, pausing only when he remembered they weren't there yet, that she hadn't yet reopened the relationship. He ached as she turned, heedless of how close he had come. " Took him long enough, I say," she was adding, finishing with her lace and pulling at her red curls. "Probably saw her laying with Germain or something else equally deplorable, the harlot."

"I notice you don't have a high opinion of her," Arno said, carefully putting his hands behind his back.

"Do you remember the crows?" Élise asked, looking at herself in the mirror, grabbing at a loose curl.

"Black birds you never liked as a child," Arno supplied.

"No," she corrected, checking her hair again before reaching for an emerald necklace. "Well, yes, I hated the birds, too, but because they reminded me of the crows: Sivert, Lévesque, Germain. They would come to the estate in black cloaks – I assume it was in the winter – and they looked like crows. They didn't like me as a child, and I didn't like them. Only Chrétien changed, warmed up to me as I grew up. Now I know why they hated me: they hated my father and were always planning on betraying him. I look forward to getting everything we can out of her."

"And how will we do that?" Arno asked.

Élise finally turned, beauty personified. "We go to the party. We corner her. We make her talk."

... "That sounds a little thin for a plan," Arno said, crossing his arms. "I think you're missing a few details there."

She shrugged her shoulders. "You're the Assassin," she said. "I thought sneaking around to kill people was your specialty."

"That's not what—never mind," Arno said, pursing his lips. He didn't know why her comment rankled him, it wasn't like he was a real Assassin, believing the Creed and all that. He was there to get the skills necessary to avenge M. de la Serre, and she was technically correct: he was very good at sneaking into a palais. Yes, her comment was accurate, he had no right to feel offended. He pulled on his surcoat, a rich navy blue, darker than his normal one. He re-tied his hair and pulled at the cuffs of his sleeves.

"You always clean up well," Élise said softly, smiling as she followed him out.

Arno felt heat in his cheeks and... elsewhere; reminded himself that now wasn't the time to think about how close they once were.

Even if he still ached for it...

Palais du Luxembourg was constructed in 1625 for Marie de' Medici, built to resemble her old home somewhere in Italy. Passed between several women of the family d'Orléans, it infamously fell into the hands of one of the widows in 1715 who was renowned for her promiscuity, where the "French Messalina" used the palais to explore all carnal pleasures of the flesh, including tableaux-vivants where she modeled as Venus or Diana – naked as the Renaissance paintings depicted, and she would act out her fantasies. The palais eventually became a museum before it was given to the comte de Provence by Louis in 1778. It was still technically royal property, but with Louis and the
royal family locked away in the Temple and the nobility afraid to announce themselves, it was a little bit of everything, even a prison.

"... What's to become of us, Michel? It was only a loaf of bread!"

"Every man here is convicted of the same or less, Jeanne."

"But this isn't 'justice'!"

"I know, mon amour, I know."

"Oh, Michel, je t’aime...!"

"Moi aussi, Jeanne, je t’aime..."

Arno watched the woman, standing at the windows of the palais, stand up on her toes to kiss her husband, locked away for trying to eat. Even with the Paris Commune, the fundamental problem still persisted. Arno watched the tragic pair, knowing how the story would end and wanting to rewrite it. Élise pulled him away from the scene, closer to the gates. "So," she said, "How does this work?"

"It starts with you waiting in line to gain entry," Arno said. "I'll scan the area and see if I can find an invitation. Failing that, I'll look for a way in."

"All right," the redhead said. "Don't take too long."

Arno nodded, slipping into the shadows and slowly to a back alley, climbing up the façade of a building and getting to a roof. He closed his eyes and looked inward, feeling the world around him fall away. The world's problems were below him, the lovers about to be torn apart were beneath him, all that was up here was himself and his thoughts. This was his chance, his chance to get close to Marie Lévesque, to get one step closer to M. de la Serre's killer. This was his chance to redeem himself, he could afford no mistakes.

He called on his eagle.

And found another eagle.

He looked to his left and saw Pontmercy, braced against a chimney and gazing out at the palais as well. He got up and moved to him, saw the bookseller was wearing a dark green surcoat, hair combed back and a clever looking top hat covering most of it. His culottes were dark charcoal and his leggings a bright white; in his hand was a cane with an ivory handle, and lace cuffs were bright white in the dying light.

"What do you see?" Arno asked.


Arno blinked, suddenly floundering for an objective for Pontmercy. He couldn't outright say he was looking for a Templar woman who might give him Germain – the whole Brotherhood knew he was banned from the investigation – and he wasn't going to announce that Élise was below waiting for him to get her inside. He dithered for a moment before something his partner said earlier came to him. "Thomas Lévesque," he said. "He's of 'curious condition.' That's the rumor. You said there was a scandal."
"Going by his own name again, yes."

"The Council wants to know why," Arno explained. "They can't get to him through the wife, but he supposed to make some kind of appearance or some such at this party. We get to him first, break him out, get him to a safehouse. That's your job. I get close to the wife, see what I can learn from her, maybe relieve her of some paperwork."

Pontmercy smiled. "How generous of you."

Arno paused, looking down at the gates, where he had seen the lovers split apart by bars. He leaned closer to Pontmercy. "Breaking out some starving citoyens isn't technically an objective," he added, "But reuniting some helpless families might help the sleepless nights."

He saw Pontmercy stiffen, his eyes widening and his face becoming more guarded. "I never said I didn't sleep."

"You didn't need to," Arno replied simply. "I don't, either."

A hand reached up and touched his arm. "Mon frère..." Marcel said, emotion welling up in his voice, his eyes moist. Then he coughed, the feeling gone, and he nodded gravely. The bookseller turned and moved to climb down to the street level, and Arno was left with the warmest feeling in his chest, and the burn that somehow this lie would come back to bite him. He frowned, tried to shake the feeling off, as he looked down across the street. He called on his eagle again, listening for fireworks, and felt his eyes flick to a cart filled with — wait, where those actual fireworks?

"Hand over the powder!"

"No, I need them for tonight! Someone, help me! Back, you ruffians!"

Arno grinned, sweeping down to ground level, rolling up his sleeve and snapping open his phantom blade. He waited until he was just across the street, in the shadow of an alley, and took careful aim. The first man fell, seemingly without warning, and the cart driver startled as the other would-be bandit didn't even notice the loss of his partner. Arno walked up from behind and tapped the brute on the shoulder. "Is there a problem, citoyen?" he asked brightly.

"Merci, monsieur," the cart driver said, sagging in his seat.

"Are you all right?" Arno asked, calm as could be.

"Fine, fine," he said, taking a kerchief and wiping his brow in the chill air. "They think because it's powder it will work for guns and cannons. Crazy, the lot of them! This is a precise science, not a tool for murder!"

"Oh," Arno said, acting surprised. "Are these fireworks, then?"

"Oui, oui, I've a contract tonight. It's sure to be the show of a lifetime!"

Arno smiled. "Far be it from me to ignore an artist in need," he said.
"Merci, mon ami," the man said, adjusting his circular spectacles. "I only wish I could reward you properly."

"No need," Arno said genially. "The distraction will be more than enough."

"... What was that?"

_Diable._ "Nothing," Arno said quickly, straightening and backing up. "I'll leave you to your art."

He watched the cart move around to the south side of the _palais_ where the gardens were. Perfect. Between Pontmercy breaking out the prisoners and the fireworks there would be more than enough distraction for he and Élise to do their work. Élise... _merde_ he still didn't have a way in. He marched back to the line and carefully moved through the crowd of well-dressed guests, pilfering _merde_ he still didn't have a way in. He marched back to the line and carefully moved through the crowd of well-dressed guests, pilfering two invitations. He rejoined her and handed hers over. "Monsieur Jean-Jacques," he said by way of greeting.

She looked at the invitations. "Monsieur Jean-Jacques," she said just as demurely.

"There will be two distractions," Arno said, "The guards will be quite busy and so will the guests."

"Perfect. Then we each take one side of the _palais_ and work our way towards the center. Lévesque will be wherever the biggest crowd will be."

"And how do we get her away?"

"If the guards will be busy, as you say, she'll follow me on sight. Failing that, I would assume mentioning how wealthy you are would ensure a private audience."

They waited in line, Arno occasionally asking for a pulse of his eagle. He saw the moment Pontmercy snuck over the roofs, mentally noted to start in that side of the _palais_. Their invitations checked out and they were escorted inside the _palais_, the opulence of the royal residence obvious to anyone to see. Élise moved around like nothing there impressed her, but Arno needed to stop and take it all in: it was like Versailles: solid gold trim, wainscoting, lush red carpets, _parquet_ floors.

"We part ways here," Élise said.


She turned and gave him a look.

He smiled. "Don't get caught," he corrected.

She smiled, and moved with a swish of her petticoats. He quietly moved to the second floor, grabbing a glass of wine from a server and taking several gulps of it to get it on his breath should the need call for it. He kept his back straight, looked down his nose at the guards and acted like he belonged here. Pontmercy was somewhere up here, and Arno had to make sure they didn't accidentally run across Élise and start putting two and two together, the wine actually settled his nerves a little, he was effectively trying to play two violins and he wasn't sure he could pull it off.

First: keep Pontmercy occupied and also help him out of his depression at the same time. Second: keep Élise away from Pontmercy and not let her know that the Assassins she so hated were helping her. Third: find Mme Lévesque and avenge M. de la Serre, as well as get a lead on Germain. If any of the three objectives interfered with each other he risked any number of severe consequences: if the cult found out he was on the Germain investigation or working with his partner again he would be expelled, maybe even killed for breaking their damn useless Creed. If Pontmercy saw Élise he
might react to seeing a Templar, and Arno couldn't afford that – nor could he afford Élise reacting
to Pontmercy's reaction. He dithered once he hit the second floor, trying to figure out if there was
any hope this wasn't all going to blow up in his face. Humming, he gulped his wine again and
looked for another server. He wasn't calm enough yet.

Still, he closed his eyes and asked for a pulse from his eagle, listening for fireworks as he
wandered the halls.

"You have to help! It's my wife! She's locked me in here!"

"Ssh! Do you want to bring the guard here?"

Arno froze, eyes wide as he tilted his head to the side. Had he actually heard that?

"Please, I beg you! You don't know what she's capable of!"

Arno leaned forward slightly, looking around a corner to see Pontmercy with a lockpick at a door.
The sound of the husband was muffled, but Arno wasn't going to take any chances. He ghosted
down the hall and touched Pontmercy's shoulder. The bookseller startled and had his hidden blade
ready but didn't even lift it all the way as he recognized Arno. He handed over his own set of
lockpicks, smaller and finer, and said nothing.

Pontmercy nodded, and Arno turned and back down the hall, putting a sway in his steps and
accosting the first guard he saw. "Say," he said, slurring his words. "Tell me where the servers are.
I need another drink!"

A sneer, a roll of the eyes.

"Now," Arno said, "Don't you disrespect your betters." He leaned in, breathing on the guard and
watching his nose crinkle to the wine on his breath. "One word from me could get you fired!
Where is the wine?"

"Ugh, this way, Citoyen."

"No, no, not citoyen, Monsieur to you!" Arno said, keeping his voice a hair too loud, drawing the
eye of several other guards as he was led down the hall, being as much of a distraction of himself
as he could. His guide pointed to a stairway and Arno started to stumble down it, waiting for the
other man to disappear before dropping the act and moving back upstairs. He'd seen a hallway that
would have led to the center of the palais, there would be some kind of great room or ballroom
there.

There was a low boom, the floors vibrating, and a flash of color. Too loud to be his eagle. Arno
turned to a fenêtre-porte, seeing the explosion of yellow and red.

Fireworks.

... There really were fireworks.

"Courage, my boy. You just wait here. I will return when this hand reaches the top."

"... That's forever."

"Hmph, not as long as all that. And when I get back, we'll see the fireworks."

...
"And Arno? No 'exploring', hmm?"

"Oui, père."

... He still missed his father, even all these years later. He hadn't written a letter to him in over a year, hadn't told him about the things he'd seen and done, how close he was coming to avenging M. de la Serre, or how much he still ached over being ten minutes late. The color popped and bled, lighting up the sky and echoing in his ears as he remembered Versailles, the gold afternoon light, the chill air, and his father prone on the floor. He could still remember the feeling of the world falling away, seeing dead eyes for the first time, not understanding why his father wouldn't get up.

He pressed his hand against the glass, vision blurring as he watched. Would his father be proud of him, now? After everything he'd done? The death he'd wrought? Would he forgive Arno for exploring, for being late? For growing up under a Templar? Would he forgive Arno for killing Bellec, his best friend?

... Would he ever go back? Back to the good times, when things were simple and solid, not dark and broken?

Another pop of color, this time below his line of sight, and his watery eyes drew down to the ground and the massive gardens of the palais, two shadows moving across the lawns. Who...?

Pontmercy and Lévesque. He'd done it.

... Arno took a shuddering breath and turned his back to the fireworks, pressing himself against the glass and closing his eyes and pressing his palms into them. Focus, Arno, focus merdeux, or this chance will slip through your fingers!

He took several minutes to pull himself together, and pulled away from the distraction, slinking deeper into the palais and away from the light and sound of his first and worst mistake.

Finding the hall he had seen earlier, Arno crouched down and started moving down, coming out on the landing above a room filled with people: the center of the party. A single guard with a musket stood, and Arno held his breath as he moved up from behind, grabbing him by the neck and slowly choking him. The massive salle below was filled with fancy gowns and jewels, silk top hats and ruffled collars, shiny shoe buckles and dainty petticoats. There was more money in this room than the entire district. Arno called for his eagle, silently mourning as he heard fireworks in his mind's ear, and saw the pop of color.

Mme Lévesque was not in bright colors, but rather a subdued navy blue, darker than even his own surcoat, with grey petticoats and simple adornments. She lifted a glass of wine to the circle of men and women she was with. "Mesdames et Messieurs, I would like to thank you all for coming. Tonight, we celebrate another milestone on the road to liberty. Tchin!"

"Tchin!" the circle said.

"Claudette, you look lovely tonight!"

Arno knew the face now, and the gown, and he needed to get to the second floor. He didn't spy any red hair, but he wasn't going to wait for Élise either. Back downstairs and more familiar with the floor plan now, he entered the grand salle and started making his way to the target.

"Quite the party, isn't it?"

"I find the whole thing a bit gauche."
"Why?"

"Celebrating the opening of a prison while people starve in the streets? Isn't this precisely what we rebelled against?"

"Celebrating the triumph of revolutionary justice over the tyranny of the monarchy, you mean. The criminals are finally being arrested, and you have to appreciate the irony of using the palais to hold them. The building has gone from the lascivious den of royalty to the final home of the murderers who face the guillotine."

"But that's not who they're arresting!"

"Oh, don't be like that. It's about time the government seized this place. The prisons are full to bursting. I expect we'll have to turn every palais in France into a prison before this is over. A better use for them, n'est-ce pas?"

Arno moved through the crowds, eyes darting every which way, identifying who was bourgeois and who was nobility by the conversations. Mme Lévesque really had invited everyone with money, regardless of class. What gossip was she learning, connections was she making? How was she to turn this to her advantage?

"I hear they'll start deliberating on whether to bring the King to trial soon."

"Trial? Pah! The man's a tyrant and an enemy of the nation. He should be executed straight away."

"This is what happens when you let a room full of lawyers run a country: It's all trials and depositions."

"So glad to see you. Is that a new suit? Very fetching."

There. Mme Lévesque. Arno's head spun around, eyes falling on her immediately. She was shorter than he thought from above, almost petit if it weren't for the bussel under her petticoats filling her out. She moved from one collection of people to another, complimenting their attire and style. Arno frowned, confused. Wasn't she supposed to be gathering information, gossip, from all the guests? That presupposed spending time with the attendees, yet she was moving from one person to the next: "Everyone all right here? More wine, anyone? So pleased you could make it! I do hope you're not thinking of leaving, the evening's only just beginning!" It was all pleasantries, no guided questions or pointed comments to precipitate conversation. Was there a different currency for the evening instead of gossip?

A server came up, Arno grabbing another glass of wine for show, saw the man move up to the Madame."

"Lovely party. You've outdone yourself this time."

"Merci. Now, pray, excuse me. I need to see to my husband; he should be well enough to make an appearance. You know how worried I've been."

"Oui. Bien sûr."

Mme Lévesque disengaged from the party, moving through the less crowded halls and moving to one of the staircases. Arno sidled up next to her, extending his hidden blade and pressing it into the small of her back. "One word," he whispered. "And the entire party will be screaming about your murder before they learn about your husband."
"Assassin!" she hissed.

"Sh, or I let your husband loose on the party. Now smile." He took her arm, a bright grin on his face, and led her up the stairs, talking about the ships he'd just bought and his plans for marketing his wares in the Americas. He found an empty room and silently moved her in before shutting and locking the door.

"Blasted Assassins," she cursed. "How did you know?"

Arno didn't answer. He wasn't here as an Assassin tonight. He was here for Élise. M. de la Serre. His father.

... His redemption.

"Where can we find Germain?" he demanded.

"You'll get nothing from me," Mme Lévesque said, chin high.

"You were the only one who defended Germain in his trial against the Rite," Arno said, voice low and calm, using Élise's information. Where was she, anyway? She had a right to be here. Well, time for some guesswork. "After he was exiled to Austria there were letters. Coded of course, but deeply romantic, and when he disappeared from Austria it was either by your machinations or, more likely, to your relief. How long before he showed up on your doorstep, I wonder? I've no doubt you welcomed him with a scandalous kiss."

Her face didn't change, but her cheeks colored, and Arno knew his guess was right.

"Where is he?"

Silence.

Arno sighed. "Did you feel any guilt?" he asked. "When you discussed killing Monsieur de la Serre? Orphaning his daughter?"

She snorted. "François was a fool," she said. "And his daughter a harlot running around with that hous—" Her eyes widened, snapping to Arno. "You?" she asked, incredulous.

Mistake, mistake, he'd made a mistake he'd taken his hood off to blend into the crowd he'd never put it back on she knew who he was...! Arno said nothing as his mind started to panic, cycling through how many ways this was going to blow up in his face and how he could possibly cover up this problem. He couldn't kill her, not yet when she hadn't said where Germain was but she couldn't live the night either, not without risking his face being given to the Templars and if she knew who he was, she could guess that Élise was part of this and that meant she was in danger and—

"You don't even know your place, do you?" Mme Lévesque said, tone superior and condescending. "You think because you slept with his daughter that de la Serre thought anything of you? That you're somehow special, worthy of anything? You're nothing, just like the people around you, unable to make a sound decision, rioting at anything that moves. All we have to do is point you in the right direction and you do exactly what we want. I suppose I should thank you; I assume you're the one that killed Lafrenière?"

The tables had turned, now. Arno was on the defensive, silent for lack of a better response, and the madame knew it. He had to take control again.

Arno moved aggressively forward, taking his blade and pressing it to her neck. "It doesn't have to
be you," he said, voice low and – he hoped – intimidating. "We have other ways to find him."

She smiled. "Then use them."

Élise was beginning to think this wasn't the right party. There'd been no sign of Marie Lévesque on her side of the palais. The upstairs were almost empty and she was turned back to the ground floor every time she tried to go up. She had far less maneuverability in her ballgown, her stomacher pulled tight and her sleeves restricting her movement. She wore the longest gown she had to hide the fact that she was in boots – she would at least be able to run, damn it, if worse came to worst. The gardens south of the palais were full of guests, three hot air balloons being filled to take in the evening light. A cart with fireworks was out, a man lighting the display, but Mme Lévesque was nowhere to be seen.

Frowning in consternation, Élise fingered the knife in her bodice, nervous that the evening would be for nothing. She reentered the palais and entered a grand salle, and it was here she found the thickest crowd, and the richest people of the city. Élise could name them all if she needed to, but her eyes scanned the faces looking for the crow of her childhood.

She spent almost twenty minutes scanning the room before she saw a dark blue surcoat. Arno...?

She followed his coattails, struggling to keep sight of him as he weaved through the crowds unerringly. His height and posture kept changing, almost with every blink, before exiting out to a less crowded hall. He was following a woman, grey and dark navy blue, grey hair. Who did she know with grey hair?

Then he pressed something into the woman's back. Lévesque...!

Élise felt the impulse to grab her right there, but Arno was talking loudly about ships and business in the Americas, and through the pulse of hate she realized he was leading her somewhere. She followed at a sedate distance, keeping her eyes down, glancing only for his shoes. She moved upstairs to the third floor and saw Arno take Mme Lévesque into a side room. The door closed before she was able to close the distance, and she heard the distinct sound of a lock.

_Bon sang. Bon sang! _He hadn't realized she was following him! How was she going to get to him?

Holding in a curse for fear of drawing attention, Élise moved down the hall, eyes moving to the windows and—the terrace. There was a terrace here at Luxembourg, the room faced it. Could she...?

Élise moved to a different room, empty, and pushed at the fenêtre-porte, opening it easily. Perfect. She moved out into the chill air and shivered only briefly before marching north, eyes on the rooms as she passed. It was dark inside, but there was just enough reflection on Arno's blade that she knew where to enter. This door was unlocked, too, and she moved in quietly.

"François was a fool," Mme Lévesque was saying. "And his daughter a harlot running around with that hou—You? You don't even know your place, do you? You think because you slept with his daughter that de la Serre thought anything of you? That you're somehow special, worthy of anything? You're nothing, just like the people around you, unable to make a sound decision, rioting at anything that moves. All we have to do is point you in the right direction and you do exactly what we want. I suppose I should thank you; I assume you're the one that killed Lafrenière?"

Élise only barely heard the conversation, registering Chrétien's name as she pulled out her knife and started to advance.
"It doesn't have to be you," Arno said, voice and dark. "We have other ways to find him."

"Then use them," Lévesque countered.

Élise snorted, lifting her knife and plunging it into the back of the crow, above the line of her stomacher and any hope of protection. Lévesque gasped, a great heaving gulp of air and screamed before Arno covered her mouth, holding her as she fell to the floor and writhed in the sudden bloom of pain.

It made Élise smile. "How does it feel," she asked, "to be stabbed in the back?" She crouched down, leaning into Marie's line of sight. "That was how my father felt," she explained. "When you and Germain decided to kill him. You're going to know it for the rest of your life – whatever's left of it. He can make this last for hours if needs be, with no one being the wiser."

She perceived Arno stiffening next to her, his hand still pressed against Marie's mouth.

"Was it worth it?" Élise asked. "Fucking Germain behind my father's back? Letting that madman back into France with all of his delusions?"

Arno removed his hand, and Lévesque was gasping, chest heaving and entire torso twitching as the blood pooled at her shoulder. "They will both kill you," the crow hissed. "Thomas and de Molay both. You think you've hit rock bottom? You can still fall, putain, and only then will you and your amateur understand why we did what we did."

Élise reached down and pressed her enemy's bosom, right in front of the stab wound, adding pressure to the pain. The crow started to scream again, and Arno again put a hand to the woman's mouth.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"You hit an artery, Élise," Arno said softly. "She won't survive this."

"Tell me," she said, putting more pressure.

"Élise..."

"Tell me!" Élise said, louder.

Arno touched her shoulder, grabbing her attention and shaking his head. He lifted his hand away, and she could see that the crow's gaze was far away.

"... Oui, Mamen, I will remember what I taught you..." the crow whispered. "Oh, Thomas, I won't be there... when your wishes for the King..."

She died.

Without saying where Germain was.

Merde. "Merde," she cursed, standing and pulling back. "Bon Dieu! What do we do now?" The ice was gone, all she could feel was the hatred for this putain and the denial her death had given her. She kicked the body, spat on it, growled as the anger bubbled over. Arno was still crouched over the body, studying it for some reason. He stood slowly, taking in a deep breath and closing his eyes. Élise didn't have time for him, she needed to figure out what to do next. How were they supposed to recover from this?
"This way," Arno said, reaching out to take her arm.

"No!" Élise said. "We can't! She didn't tell us where to find Germain! What are we supposed—"

"We can't do anything until we're away from here," Arno said softly, voice barely carrying. "We need to be quiet. Leave like nothing's happened. We can't be here when the body is discovered."

Élise growled but bowed to the logic, turning and marching back out to the terrace, Arno following and closing the window-door behind him. He moved with wide steps but an unhurried pace, tugging at his cuffs and adjusting his collar. "You have blood on your gown," he said softly. "Someone might notice."

Élise looked down, saw two tiny drops of blood on her green silk on her shoulder. Who would see that in this light? Arno was fretting over nothing. They moved back inside and down the stairs, Arno's head turning every which way, as if he were trying to see everything. Élise ignored him, powered ahead and pushed through the thick crowds in the main salle. All she wanted to do was curse and keen and hit something hard, preferably with a sword. She couldn't believe how close she'd come and now she was back to start! What was she supposed to do?!

She lifted a hand up to cover her mouth, if she growled in the crowds she would make a scene, and that was when she saw a much larger stain on her sleeve, obvious with more than a passing glance. She cursed under her breath and lowered her hand, hiding it behind her back. She hadn't even noticed the spurt of blood when she stabbed the old crow. The bitch was ruining more than just her chances at finding Germain, it seemed.

Then,

"Murder!"

"What's happening?"

"Mon Dieu!"

"Alarm! Sound the alarm! Guards!"

"Diable," Arno cursed. "The gardens, they'll be tightening security at the entrance of the palais, we'll have better luck in the gardens."

The press of being caught started to bleed into Élise's mind, the rage moving – not disappearing, just moving – to the side as she started to take in her surroundings. They exited to the massive gardens outside the palais, all sculptured trees and grass and steppes, hedges and flowers, and in one of the massive pastures were the three balloons. She had an idea. "This way," she said, grabbing his arm and pulling. Oh, if only she weren't in a damned ballgown.

"Will we be taking a ride this evening?" someone was asking.

"No, I'm afraid not; there's a storm coming in and it's much too danger—What do you think you're going?"

Élise ignored the man, stepping up to the massive wicker basket that would hold them, Arno as ever only a step or two behind. She pulled out her knife again, bloody, and started to hack at the first safety line she could see. "Cut the ropes," she told Arno, but he was already following suit.

"I say, come down here this instant!"
"Sorry, Citoyen," Arno said brightly. "Can't ignore the pull of adventure when it grabs you!"

"But the storm...!"

"Only adds to the excitement!"

The rope finally cut, and they lifted into the air effortlessly. The sun was hidden behind a massive bank of clouds rising up to the heavens, shadows darker than usual as one last firework lifted up into the air and exploded, a dash of color in the night. Men were running around the palais, panicking over finding the old crow's body, but Élise was beginning to realize they had gotten away. Scott free, no less! Arno was at her back, looking out over the rapidly diminishing backdrop, and all too suddenly she was a child again, running through orchards and being chased by dogs, sneaking into kitchens or haunting estates. She felt something outside of her malaise, she felt elation, accomplishment, the thrill of adventure and narrowly ducking consequence. Giddiness bubbled up in her and she laughed, laughed for the first time in years, laughed like she used to before everything fell apart.

Arno, at her side like he always was, looked at her and then looked at the roofs below.

"Have you thought at all about how you plan to get down?" he asked.

"Oh, these things tend to work themselves out," Élise replied, so happy to be happy, not wanting to think beyond this moment, beyond this feeling. "Do you have a plan?"

"Does 'watch and laugh as we crash into the river' count?"

And she laughed again, because she had not heard his wit in years, and it all felt so good, she felt so good, and she couldn't remember the last time she was free of the malaise. The sun continued to set, streaks of gold slowly disappearing as the rain moved in, pattering on the lining of the balloon and filling the air with a chilly, fresh scent. A low rumble of thunder rolled in from the left, a hint of danger, and all Élise could do was smile. They were high enough that the city was a mass of lights, pinpricks of gold and yellow, glowing and beautiful. It filled her up, and this was a moment that would stay in her mind forever: the smell of rain, a romantic glow, and Arno at her shoulder, keeping her warm and safe.

... The man who failed to warn her father.

And, like smoke, the feeling disappeared, and her smile faded. The malaise had never left.

"It's beautiful," Arno said, leaning forward on the gondola.

Élise was beyond that thought, looking out over the city with new eyes. This was the same city that had slaughtered prisoners in panic, assaulted the royal palace and arrested the king, the same city that had riots every other day because it was starving while the Seconds were eating cake, that put heads on pikes and necks in guillotines.

"From up here," she said, "you'd never know the nation is tearing itself apart."

She could feel Arno sober next to her, sense him looking at her. Lévesque had died before she could get answers; she was no closer now than she was when this started. Stagnation was her enemy, she would go mad if she could not move forward, make even an inch of progress.

"Can..."

She looked to Arno, saw a thoughtful expression on his face, a hint of hesitation.
"Can things ever go back to the way they were? Before, do you think?"

Before? Before her father was murdered? Before her life fell apart? Before everything was ripped of her? She looked at Arno, about to say something incredulous, but she could see new lines on his face, and not just the scar on his nose. There was a pain there, one she didn't know about, but it was the same pain she knew so well: loss. His life had fallen apart, too, it seemed, though she didn't know how. Élise was irrevocably changed by what had happened, and she understood that Arno, too, was no longer the man he was. Go back? How could either of them go back?

"Do you?" she countered. "After everything that's happened? Everything we've lost?"

It wasn't the answer he wanted to hear. He shifted on his feet, pursing his lips as the rain continued to fall. Always such a baby.

"... So that's it, then?" he asked, looking away to hide his pain. "The course of history forever altered? Never again to return?"

"Do you know how to raise my father from the dead?" Élise countered. "How to erase everything Germain and his crows have done? Turn the clock back to the Estates-General?"

"But... if the mistake can be erased..."

"Arno," Élise said, closing her eyes against a headache. "There is no erasure. My father is dead, no miracle can undo that wrong."

"But..."

"Arno."

He stopped talking, and at a glance she could see he was forlorn, leaning on the whicker and looking as if he were about to cry. Another roll of thunder, the rain suddenly intensifying. She could remember a summer afternoon, running in the rain and trying to change out of wet clothes. She looked to the side.

... Arno was still here. Even after everything he'd done he was still here. After everything she'd gone through, he was still here. Even suffering the malaise, he was still here. She... wasn't alone anymore. He wasn't Weatherall, trying to change her plans. He wasn't Austria, indifferent to her presence. He held her above everything, would follow her to the end of the earth, even after joining the Assassins. Something, deep in her broken psyche, woke at the realization. She could feel with him: feel adventure, glee, excitement. These were not pale impressions of emotion, they were real, and he had brought them out in her.

She wanted to feel again.

She reached out, placing her bloody hand on his. "Maybe we can't go back," she offered, carefully looking up at him, "But... going forward isn't necessarily an ending."

His face was an open book: hope and hesitation, love and adulation.

"Do be careful with his heart. It won't last another break."

Élise wouldn't be the one to break it, she vowed. Arno had learned from his mistakes, wouldn't betray her again. She could trust him with what was left of her heart, and maybe he could put it back together.
He licked his lips, so much on the tip of his tongue. "Élise, I—"

Oh, he never just got on with it. Élise closed the distance and kissed him. Lightning erupted just as their lips touched, charging the air and jolting something deep inside Élise.

He hummed when she pulled back; there was almost no light but she could just tell his eyes were dilated. "You cheated," he muttered.

Élise replied: "You took too long."

They kissed again, deeper, longer, the icy rain nothing to them.

The rain slowly blew out the fire keeping the balloon up, and it landed awkwardly on a roof on the right bank. The jolt of the landing pulled the two of them up for air, bumping along the side of the gondola and making them realize they needed something better than whicker. Arno climbed down to street level and broke into the house to give Élise access to the ground. They found a cheap inn two streets over, laughing and giddy, making the concierge smile as they checked in and all but ran to their room.

It was like their first encounter: Rain and lightning, wet clothes and curls. Arno was much more skilled at undressing this time around, and much more experienced in what Élise enjoyed. He took clear pride that he was able to put her over the edge, she was certain they kept the entire inn up as he pleased her in every method she enjoyed, one after the other, both slow and fast, before she finally kissed the top of his head, her signal that now he could please himself. Even then, he took his time, careful not to pull one of her muscles or make her sore the next morning, and even when he finally spent himself he held himself still to prevent hurting her. He was a gentle lover, and his consideration nearly made Élise want to have him take her all over again.

They were wet from more than just rain when all was said and done, sweat and other liquids coating both of them after the series of exercises he'd performed on her.

"Je t'aime," he whispered into her ear as he fell asleep. "Je t'aime tellment..."

The words rang in the chambers of her mind as he finally drifted off, heedless of her weight on him. She watched him sleep, innocent and happy.

Je t'aime.

... Je t'aime...

"Do be careful with his heart. It won't last another break."

The euphoria of the balloon ride, the haze of the sex, it had all disappeared now, as Élise realized just what Arno had done, what the woman at his café had warned her against. He loved her. He loved her with everything in him.

Those words had never been said before. Arno was just a houseboy, too uncertain of his place to make a declaration like that for fear of consequences. Now... Now he had the confidence to tell her the truth, and somehow that changed everything.

Did she love him? Before the answer would have been obvious. There wouldn't have even been a need to ask herself that question. But now... now... Now he had failed to deliver a letter, resulting in her father's death. Now she suffered a malaise that hung over her head and cut off any hope of emotion outside of anger and hatred. He had made her feel, tonight, for the first time in years, but
she didn't know if this was a momentary flicker of emotion like with her other lovers, or if this was the depth of feeling she had had before... Before.

Could she live with his heart in her hands?

... She couldn't say with honesty, and that realization kept her up that night.

Did she love the boy she grew up with? Yes. Did she love the man in front of her? ... That was the man whose mistakes had cost her dearly, and she realized she wasn't sure if she had forgiven him yet.

She watched him sleep, without a worry in the world, and her mind could not come up with a satisfactory answer.

"Do be careful with his heart. It won't last another break."

No. She had to love him. She could make it work. There were so many good memories. This was just the malaise. Time would cure her of it. Killing Germain would make all the doubt go away.

Élise tried to sleep, but her mind wouldn't quiet. She needed to report to Weatherall, let him know of the latest development, try to determine her next move.

"Had to dash," she wrote as the sun rose. "You looked so peaceful, I didn't want to wake you."

And she debated her last line for an eternity.

"Élise," she wrote, never once returning his declaration.

The night's events came to Arno in a rush: the party, Mme Lévesque, trying to get information, Élise's violence, the balloon ride, all the way through the pleasurable hours they took to reacquaint each other. He smiled into the pillow, pleased with himself.

She had forgiven him. She still loved him, even after all the mistakes he'd made. A deep, aching weight lifted from his shoulders, and he knew his life could only go up from here. They would work together to get to Germain, complete his redemption, and have a future together. It would be wonderful.

He was still smiling as he got up, yawning and stretching, turning to see the note on the pillow. He read it quickly, smiled yet again at her consideration, and got up to get dressed.

Sneaking back into Café Théâtre was careful business. The sun was already up and Arno knew Charlotte would have kept an eye out for him. He circled around the back of the café and used the outside stairs to the gardens, keeping behind the hedges before entering his room andshrugging off his rumpled evening coat, changing into his normal clothes and examining himself in the mirror. He washed his face and made sure his cravat covered the love marks on his neck (even as he lost himself in that particular memory). He schooled his features and moved down to the kitchens.

He had just gotten a café au lait for himself when Tissot appeared from below.

"Dorian!" he called, making Arno jolt – had he been caught so soon? Was he in trouble? He turned, a little nervous, as the Assassin met him halfway down the hall. "The club wants you," he said in a low voice. "We have an Interview."

He turned without ceremony back the way he came, expecting Arno to follow. "I'm sorry," he said,
darting after Tissot, "What do you mean 'interview'?

The weaver looked at Arno before something clicked in his head. "That's right," he said, "You probably hadn't seen an Interview before. Let's go, I'll explain on the way." The pair took the stairs to the sewers, entering the Sanctuary and moving through to the grand staircase. "You know about the honor watch in Saint Chapelle, the one for people with strong eagles? Well, we just had someone with an entry disk come in. Beaumont guided him to the chapel, and the Interview is about to start." Instead of moving up to the Observatory, though, they moved underneath, to the room Arno had only been to once before. He saw the silhouette of a man under the dim light, saw Trenet and Quemar in white hood with their beaked shapes.

"Out of the dark, you come into the light," Trenet said. "From the light, you will return to the dark. Are you prepared to travel the eagle's path?"

"... Yes."

Trenet nodded, her face obscured by the shadows of her white hood. She gestured. "Then drink."

The person stepped forward and took a massive chalice into his hands, drinking from it. Arno stiffened, realizing what was happening, because it had happened to him. The person started to sway, and the maîtres lowered their hoods and started to move, disappearing into the shadows. The figure continued to stagger, Beaumont doing nothing to help him, and Arno started to move forward, jumping to catch the person just as he overbalanced, easing the fall.

"... wwhat is happening?" the man said, face filthy and chin stubbled. "White... so much white..."

Arno knew all too well what was happening, kept a hand on the man's shoulder, remembering his own... "Interview." He'd relived so many dark memories, but the experience was profound to the point of religious. He could still remember the feeling of killing the killer, and discovering it was himself: the weight of it and the sensation of rising and falling at the same time, buried in nuance and metaphor but somehow clearer than anything he had ever experienced before or since.

Trenet touched his shoulder, silently commanding he move aside and knelt down by the man.

"Now begins the end and the beginning," she said, her usually flat tone gentle. "Let your life be judged, and see it reflect back on your actions. Show us the canvas of your heart. Natis, Juventus, Puerilis, Adultus, Mortis."

"... wasn't always a grave digger... wanted to be a shoe maker..."

"Yes," Trenet said, still gentle. "Tell me more." She glanced at Arno, expecting him to do something perhaps, but he had no idea what. Beaumont did, made a noise and grabbed an arm of the new man, shrugging him over a shoulder to carry. Tissot joined him on the other side.

"Go ahead and find an empty room," he said softly. "The Interview will take a while, we wouldn't want him to catch his death on the cold floor."

"Yes, child," Trenet said, "To live, first you must die. To die is to remember that which defines you. Jump."

Arno stiffened to hear the words, forced himself to move forward. It didn't feel right to be on this side of the Interview, he felt like he was witnessing something private. He could still remember the crowd of silhouettes, sneaking through them and killing his mistakes: his life goal. That feeling was precious to him, and he didn't want to intrude on someone else's moment. He moved through the utilitarian cells where he had stayed during his Death, finding one that was empty and propping
the door open. Tissot and Beaumont carried the new blood in, Trenet still in her white robe, as the men set him down gently on the thin bed.

"... wasn't right... stopping us from working just for a meeting... cornered us... man saved us... gave the disk... we'll guard the catacombs... cover your escape if you need it... find the bookseller..."

Arno blinked, turning to look at the man again. Was he familiar...? He shook the thought off.

The men left Trenet to her interview. Arno turned to Tissot. "How long do these usually last?"

"Depends," the weaver said, shrugging his shoulders. "They have to pick apart someone's life and see if they'll betray the Creed. We don't take people who are here for a lark. They say the Interview has prevented the Templars from ever infiltrating."

"Until one of us started fucking them," Beaumont said. Arno held his breath.

"Bon Dieu, Beaumont, have some decency," Tissot said. "He's a brother, you shouldn't go off on him like that."

Beaumont actually turned his head, soft voice dipping into a lower register. "What?" he asked.

Tissot held the mountain of a man's gaze. "Dorian saved my wife and kept me sober. He looks after the kids and he keeps his nose clean. Don't break the Creed over him."

Beaumont said nothing, just turned and walked away. Arno blinked several times, staring at the weaver and his well-made clothes. "... Merci," he said finally. "You didn't have to do that."

"Meant every word I said," Tissot replied, gaze heavy. "I misjudged you, I'm not so proud as to admit when I make a mistake. You didn't have to do what you did, that night, but you did and Camille is alive because of it. You haven't seen that Templar bitch for a year, without complaint, and you never looked her up. You've earned the right to be here." He held out a hand. "You can call me Jérôme of you want."

Arno shook Tissot's hand, internally wincing at the high praise when nothing of it was true: Arno had sought out Élise in his letters and had just... eh... "seen" her that night... all night... He shifted on his feet. "Don't go out of your way for me," he said softly, looking down.

"I don't," Tissot said, "Only for people who saved my life. And there are others who will too," he added. "I've talked with your staff, what you did for your cook and Gagnon, the place you gave Claude, the things Charlotte and Augustin say about you. Hell, Marcel came in this morning, sober and sane for the first time in two months, saying you gave him an assignment last night and he remembers why we do what we do. Fabre is sorry he kept turning you away while he was recovering. Not all of us can say that." He patted Arno's shoulder. "You're good people, Dorian."

"... Arno."

"As you wish Arno. But back to what you were saying. The Interview will take at least the rest of the day. Tonight, we'll all gather around and Trenet will induct him to complete his Death. His name is Gabriel, by the way. He had an entry disk, says one of us gave it to him."

"Will all of us be there?"

"No, just whoever's down below. We don't have a lot of ceremonies, but the ones we have can define some of us, and we want to do that honor."
Six o'clock that evening, right as the dinner rush was starting and Arno was most needed, Tissot - Jérôme - arrived to say, "It's time."

Augustin, knowing what was going on, ushered him underground. He and Jérôme moved back to the underground chapel, joining a dozen other Assassins, forming a loose circle around the new blood, stretched out on the floor, the Council again in their white hoods. The man came to slowly, stirring and crawling up to his knees, eyes wide. After so many hours he face was gaunt and pale.

"These are the words spoken by our ancestors," Trenet said, voice low and curiously heavy for a woman, "The words that lay at the heart of our creed and the salvation you seek."

Beylier nodded his head, sober and heady. "Stay your blade from the flesh of the innocent."

A senior Assassin, one Arno didn't recognize, said, "Hide in plain sight."

Quemar stood resolute, old but somehow wise. "Never compromise the Brotherhood."

The three tenets. The foundation. The fundamental rules that Arno didn't understand.

"Nothing is true," they all intoned. "Everything is permitted."

Arno stared at them, wide-eyed. So did the new blood.

"Let these tenets be branded upon your mind," Trenet said heavily. "These words, that have saved so many lost souls that washed upon our shores. Follow them, and be uplifted. Break them at your peril."

The scruffy man shed two fat tears, shaking, and bowed his head. A heavy sob fell from the man's mouth. Arno felt uncomfortable again, his own experience echoing in his mind. He shouldn't be here, not when he didn't understand their Creed and following their rules hurt him more than helped him, not without Mirabeau hear to guide him.

"Rise, Assassin," Trenet said.

The other man did.

The senior assassin produced a red velvet pillow with golden tassels. Upon it, a hidden blade. He placed it on the new blood's left wrist, buckling and adjusting as the others watched. The air was solemn, respectful, full of emotions Arno wasn't comfortable touching. He felt an intruder, watching something so deeply personal. The silence held his tongue, however.

"Gabriel Jules Duchemin is dead," Trenet said with finality. "He has been culled from this world, with his sins and failures turned to dust. Tonight, he is reborn: a novice of the Assassin Brotherhood."

Duchemin nodded, too emotional to speak. He looked down at his wrist, turning the hidden blade over and accidentally triggering it. His eyes doubled in size, staring at the weapon of murder, and stared at Maître Trenet.

"Merci," he managed to choke out.

And, just like that, the spell was broken, the assembled Assassins smiling and sweeping in, patting Duchemin on the back and welcoming him to the Brotherhood, introducing themselves and
ushering the new blood to the underground dining hall, apologizing that there wasn't much bread.

Arno and Jérôme followed, Jérôme smiling. "The Mentor said he'd be a good match," he said, "and she's hard to convince of anything. After everything that's happened in the last few months this is just what we need: a burst of good news. I wonder who gave him the entry disk…" They all sat at the dining hall, Arno thinking about Café Théâtre upstairs and the rush they were probably having, but it seemed customary to make the novice feel as welcome as possible, everyone giving a personal welcome or story. Even Jérôme stepped up, shaking hands with Duchemin and smiling. "Welcome to the Brotherhood," he said.

"Merci," Duchemin said, wide eyes. "It's all a little overwhelm-you!"

Arno blinked, startled to see Duchemin jolt to his feet and take Arno's hand in his own. "It was you!" he said, beginning to shake. "I recognize the coat. You're the one who gave me the disk, you're the one who started my journey here. Citoyen… You've no idea what you've done for me!"

Assassins were staring at him, Arno felt more uncomfortable, especially since he didn't recognize - couldn't place - how he knew this man. His hand hurt from the grip of Duchemin, the shaking traveling all up his arm. He licked his lips, tried to think of something… appropriate to day.

"... I'm… glad you joined." He cut himself off before he could say "the cult."

"Will you be my teacher?" Duchemin asked.

"What? No… I don't think…"

"Arno here isn't a maître," Jérôme said smoothly. "So he isn't assigned any students. He might instruct one on certain techniques or skills, but one of the seniors will handle your training." He went on to explain Duchemin's "death," how he would be underground for a year to train while his records were erased. "Do you have family? They can come down, too, so long as they're interviewed."

"I don't… my wife died and I have two children. They're barely ten."

Jérôme smiled. "We understand," he said gently. "We'll look after them."

Arno slowly detached from the scene, feeling too many things at once. Jérôme joined him not long after, still smiling.

Was it always like this? Were they always so… welcoming? Why hadn't he been given such a warm reception?

"Arno Dorian is dead. He has been culled from this world, with his sins and failures turned to dust. Tonight, he is reborn: a novice of the Assassin Brotherhood."

Arno shuddered, and moved back upstairs.

Arno couldn't help but reflect on what his own "Interview" must have entailed. What had the maître learned about him? He would have talked about Monsieur de la Serre, and they knew who he was. What else had they learned during his death? The Council spoke like they knew him so thoroughly, pointed out records they had read up in Versailles before he had made that terrible mistake. Were their summations of his character accurate? Or was human nature that predictable?

When he finally arrived at the Café, he was lost in his thoughts. He sat down at a booth, not really
aware of anything but his memories of those paintings he'd seen of his life and how when he came out of it, he'd found his purpose. To erase those mistakes. Café au lait was set in front of him and he stared at it.

Eventually he blinked and saw Madame Gou—Charlotte in front of him.

"Arno?" she asked softly, tilting her head enough that the large feather shifted just enough that he saw the burn mark before it swayed back.

"Madame," he shifted in his seat, grabbing his café au lait. It was cold. "Désolé, I just..."

Her face remained open and concerned. She was... so like a mother.

Or how Arno imagined a mother might be. He didn't remember much of his own mother, and Élise's mother didn't mother him at all, not the way Monsieur de la Serre acted so fatherly to him. Books would speak of a mother's love, devotion to children, but mothers were so rarely mentioned beyond that. Arno supposed that a mother must love children. He would hope mothers dotted on their children. But he didn't have any experience to draw from.

Would children tell mothers things? Or was that reserved just for fathers?

He was already hiding Élise from her. He couldn't discuss Germain; she was an Assassin. She'd go to the Council.

The Council already thought they knew him. What would such information make them do?

He sighed.

Arno wouldn't say anything about Élise, but... this... maybe...

"They were doing an 'interview' at the club."

Understanding lit her eyes and immediately she reached out a hand to his wrist. She nodded empathetically. "It is most... difficult to watch an 'interview'."

Arno nodded, uncertain what to say.

Her delicate hand squeezed his wrist. "The life we lead," she said softly, "is a hard one. We choose to take another's life. It is always a last resort, it is never something to be done lightly, but to do so always leaves a heavy burden. Even Ezio, perhaps the greatest to have ever lived, was worn down by the necessities of his choices. It wasn't until he retired, they say, that he finally smiled honestly."

Arno stared down to his coffee, still untouched. We can't go back. But going forward isn't necessarily an ending. But what was forward? "I'm not sure..." He hesitated. "That new man... novice... Duchemin..."

"Go on..."

What could he say? "When he was initiated... he recited the Creed readily. Eagerly. The cult—" he cut himself off. "The Council accepted him so readily."

Charlotte nodded, still holding his wrist, drawing small circles gently and occasionally giving a supportive squeeze.

He shook his head again.
"You wonder why you weren't greeted as warmly."

"Yes."

She gave a soft smile. "Timing, mostly."

"Sorry, quoi?"

"It happens," she said. "You arrived starved and dehydrated, your feet were a swollen mess, and you fell into a fever for two days after the 'interview' started. You were too delicate in health to have everyone surround you. Monsieur Bellec did take you to the dining hall at least, correct?"

"Yes," Arno replied. "Sat me down with a plate of food then disappeared."

Charlotte's eyes narrowed in her clear disapproval, but she said nothing.

"Shortly after, Mirabeau... He sat with me and explained a few things."

"He would," she said gently, her eyes viewing some memory. "But you were confined to a bed for some time after that due to your feet, correct?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "Just enough time for others to learn of your interview and start making judgments rather than listening to their first impressions of you." She leaned back. "A victim of circumstance. We sometimes get novices so hungry that they fall into a fever. Downtrodden can come from any walk of life, depending on what's been trodden down. Those interviews are quick to spot and those novices are given time to heal."

Arno frowned, heavily. It seemed a poor excuse on why he'd been so mistrusted at first. But he could also see how circumstances didn't give him as much of a chance as Duchemin. What the hell was he supposed to feel about all this? He ran a hand through his hair, feelings so mixed and knotted he had no idea what he felt other than complicated. There were times that the Brotherhood... The Brotherhood could live up to that name so thoroughly. Arno saw people from all walks of life working together without any of the class prejudices hampering interactions. An actual brotherhood. Pontmercy, Fabre, Cosette, now Tissot—Jérôme, Charlotte, Augustin, the staff – even if they weren't aware of the Assassins – they all accepted him even from all their differing backgrounds, helped and supported one another. They were a brotherhood.

Yet Beaumont existed, the Council kept limiting what he could and couldn't do because he didn't see some esoteric bullshit that everyone else seemed to see so readily. The Council was trying to thump some sort of lesson into his head by leaving him only fetch-quests and heists and messenger duties but they wouldn't just outright explain it, saying that it was different for every person.

Nothing is true. Everything is permitted.

Mirabeau...

Mirabeau had believed in him. He was the most welcoming member of the Brotherhood, and always had time for Arno and his questions. He had also said that the Creed was different for each person, but there was still the underlying faith that Arno would understand, in time. The Creed had nuance, Mirabeau had once explained, and that was why it could be interpreted so many ways.

Arno still couldn't interpret it. The closest he could come to understanding the Creed was through the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and when he acted on it, the Council continued
to show disapproval.

Mirabeau had wanted for Arno to understand the Creed.

Arno didn't. He was more confused about it than he ever was before.

He was failing Mirabeau.

But he didn't know what else to do.

Charlotte and eventually Augustin spent most of the night talking to him. Speaking of novices who struggled adjusting to being an Assassin, the difficulty of learning the Creed and how the numerous interpretations often lead to confusion and sometimes conflict. They ended up in the library talking very late into the night.

"How we view the Creed, how we view life, politics, everything around us," Augustin said softly, "is colored by the lives and experiences we have. It is all too easy for me to look at things as mon père saw. But it was a very narrow view of the world. Being an Assassin, it means looking at more than one view. Many find that hard, as they view their perception as correct."

Yvette nodded, hat long discarded, hair unpinned and looking relaxed. "Diversity of thought is the largest strength of the Assassins, but it is also the source of the most conflict. Because we come from different walks of life, have different experiences, what we see as right can conflict with one another. Finding a middle road, one of compromise is always the most difficult because it means understanding another's views and experiences, and all too often people don't wish to realize that they might be hurting others."

"This revolution," Arno said quietly, "we're finally getting good done. People like us finally have a say, we're putting forth laws that make us more equal, we're no longer simply a Third Estate to be ignored. So why is everything so deadly?"

"Because," Augustin sighed sadly, "people don't want to realize that they're hurting others as they improve things. The ends justify what they're doing, and they think that just looking at the long-term is what matters, instead of balancing long-term and short term."

Arno wasn't sure how discussing the Creed had led them to such a philosophical discussion of politics and human nature, but it pulled him away from his mixed feelings about the Brotherhood and his currently sour relationship with it.

Except it wasn't sour. It was improving.

And he was doing things that would damage that.

For Élise. Always for Élise.

Arno reflected that if the Council and the cult rejected him, at least now he had Élise.

Yvette pulled him aside the next day, frown deep in her dark face. "That woman that pretends to be a man, you care for her."

Arno sighed. He didn't want to argue. "I love her. I've loved her since I was a child."

Yvette narrowed her eyes. "A first love." Then she sighed tiredly. "First loves, they never go the way we want them to. The love we feel as children, it is a child's love. Blinding, fanciful, and
lacking in depth. You don't see her yet. Not really. You see her as when you were a child. But you will. I just hope she won't hurt you, *Monsieur*. You always come back from seeing her in such a state."

Arno offered a flat look. "This is only the second time I've seen her since I've come here."

"That's enough," Yvette said with conviction. "Watch yourself, *Monsieur*. You're the best we'll ever have, and we don't want her to destroy you."

"Don't worry," Arno gave a wry smile. "Riots are more likely to hurt me than her."

Yvette's look clearly disagreed, but she didn't say any more on the subject.

So Arno got to work.

Arno met with Élise once or twice a week, usually at a different café or restaurant to see how their research was going.

Élise was looking for more crows, having realized the link between the crows and serving Germain, and was doggedly looking for anyone she knew. But the Revolution had led to many *émigrés*, people who fled France to escape all the chaos, and many would either wag their tongues with rumors or keep tight-lipped and lie through their teeth. From what Arno had observed, she didn't have an eagle, so she wasn't as good at catching fact and fiction from her sources, and her narrow-minded search and determination left few willing to talk to her. Arno tried to talk to her contacts as well, using various ploys and disguises that weren't so pointedly searching like Élise was, but he didn't have the time for that when he was also stewarding the Café.

The second week in November, Fabre appeared up in Arno's room when he came up to collapse into bed in the wee hours of the morning.

"*Fabre*?" Arno hissed. Then he noticed the empty sleeve. "Oh Fabre..."

The man's eyes flashed. "I won't take any pity. I made a choice, I've paid for it, now I live with it."

Arno seriously doubted it was that simple.

"How can I help?" he asked instead.

A ghost of the old smile appeared in Fabre's beard. "I'm still the King of Rats. That hasn't changed. My subjects know I have a safe spot to heal, and when I go see them, I usually take someone with me to reinforce that I'm in charge still."

"And you want me?"

Fabre's smile was steely. "One week. I need someone new with me and they've seen you with me before. I can finish healing there." Then his smile cracked. "I can't stay in the Sanctuary any longer. My hold is tenuous at best at the moment. I need to start staying there more permanently."

Arno rubbed at his day-old scruff. Then he nodded. "Whatever you need."

Fabre had done much for him. It was the least that Arno could do.

Chapter End Notes
So much to say for this chapter...

Things are continuing to get complicated for Arno. He has this deeply real, sincere moment with Pontmercy - all empathy and understanding that Marcel latches on to in the extreme. But it's based on a mission that's a lie. Arno literally lies to Pontmercy's face, and thus starts yet another layer of guilt as he does something he knows is wrong but does it anyway. You can see his unhealthy coping mechanisms start to bleed into a live mission: Arno is drinking on the job to steady his emotions because he's under so much pressure it's pretty easy to set him off into a tailspin. That he sees fireworks that evoke his father and everything else decidedly Does. Not. Help.

Having said that, though, we can see a little bit of growth: he thought quickly to get Lévesque alone, and we're starting to see his area of expertise that we decided on for him. He's not good yet, though - Lévesque catches him flatfooted and Arno absolutely flounders in trying to get back on his feet, and Lévesque can see right through it. In real life this is something experience teaches.

But then there's Élise. Her illness is starting to become more visible: she's numb most of the time, desperate to feel anything, but once she can it's like a switch is flipped, and we see a different side of her. The hurt comes out in ugly ways: she's vindictive and heartless and a little unhinged. For a leader of humanity she, like François de la Serre, has little understanding of the human condition and at this point can't see outside her own hurts. She doesn't understand what Assassins do but expect Arno to just act like one without thinking about... well any of it.

We snuck in a small hint about Jacques de Molay, did anyone see it? And then the balloon sequence.

We almost cut the scene out entirely - in the game it's a comedy piece to lighten the mood before the hammer drops, but as our opinions about Élise formed in replaying the game we couldn't see passed Élise's speech. We'll get back to that in a later chapter when we explain our decisions about her, but or now we instead played it to the malaise. One of the fundamental problems with depression is that it's nearly impossible to feel happy, even when the person suffering it knows they're supposed to be. There are science reasons for it but we tried to manifest it here: for half a second Élise can feel something, and then it's gone when it shouldn't be and she struggles to get it back.

And then what we call the Relationship Advice Scene. Both Arno and Élise make some very bad decisions here. Élise's is the most obvious: she chooses to stay in a relationship because of all of the emotional investment in the relationship, regardless of the fact that she still blames Arno for her father's death. That is NOT a healthy decision and will turn to resentment and other things. Arno, in turn, makes a lot of assumptions based on one night and doesn't talk after. Granted, Élise didn't exactly give him time, but the jump from "not there yet" to "totally forgives me and we have a future together" is kind of absurd. Ah, you two... Why do you do this to yourselves...

We also have a quick moment with Tissot to remind Arno that the Brotherhood isn't evil incarnate, and we see what a proper Interview is like. Arno has the worst luck, but it was important for us to make him see why recruits are so enamored with the Brotherhood after their Interview and understand why it's called a "Brotherhood." Bellec is shown to be wrong again, Arno realizes just how bad his luck is, and the
Brotherhood has a very visible endorsement that Arno isn't as bad as he seems, aloof in his café all the time.

And he has another conversation about the Creed! I swear, if Élise wasn't here...

Next chapter: Shattered
He sent a letter to Élise, explaining that he would be out of touch for a week, informed Charlotte, then followed Fabre into Le Court des Miracles. Arno stayed quiet, let Fabre do all the talking, and did whatever Fabre asked. Mostly it was intimidation. Unlike Fabre's subjects, Arno was better fed, built and could scowl and glare people down. Not that there weren't some who tried to go after Fabre now that he was missing half an arm, but Arno intervened and left them in the mud.

It was strange to be doing this job, as Fabre breezed through and started taking control back of his kingdom. Working with the cult always had a great deal of planning and coordination and stealth. Working for Fabre was all about blunt force and intimidation. But Fabre ferreted out a man even larger than both of them combined and he became Arno's "partner" working under le Roi des Thunes. Fabre occasionally put some challengers down himself, but Arno could see that doing so was overly tiring. Once others were gone, Arno would ask after Fabre, but Fabre just smiled through his sweat, a glint in his eye and said he'd keep living till he was a century. Arno wondered what had happened in Fabre's past to inspire such determination. But that determination was contagious. By the end of the week he'd promised Fabre, there were three who joined Arno as the "honor-guard" for the King of Rats. Each held Fabre in deep respect and esteem, and when Fabre quietly dismissed Arno, the three were there to give Arno their own thanks.

Fabre looked to Arno. "I'll keep an ear out for Germain."

Blinking, Arno was certain he'd just lost color. "What—"

"You deserve your revenge. I get what they want, but... you're better once you have that revenge. It closes a chapter so you can move on." Fabre gave a lopsided grin. "Or so experience says."

Arno suddenly remembered the Champs de Mars and Fabre seeing someone who wasn't supposed to be in Paris.

"Je vous remercie."

"Don't worry about it."

Of course, for the third week in November, the Council brought him down to the Sanctuary. Arno tried not to bitterly ask what he'd done now.

Trenet looked older than she ever had. But the severity of her face was constant, even with more gray in her hair and heavy bags under her eyes.

"Mentor," he greeted.

She nodded her head. "Arno, we need you to go over what happened at Tuileries again."

"Er, what?"

Trenet kept her stoic unreadable face, but Beylier and Quemar were glaring at each other.

"From the beginning."
"Ahhh, oui." So Arno stretched back his memories to August, before the September Massacres, before the National Assembly was replaced with the National Convention, before Paris was as stressed and terrified as it was now. Back when he thought the fears in the streets couldn't get worse before they actually became manifold worse and were *still* getting worse. He started with getting the assignment, sneaking in and seeing all that blood on the vestibule, meeting a man named Bonaparte and finding the *armoire de fer*, despite having a migraine the size of France from all the active eagles, then rushing to escape as fighting broke out *again* and barely having time to burn all the letters that his overstressed eagle had pointed out, all the way to the point where he returned and was informed that the Brotherhood had lost a quarter of its people.

Quemar, squinting with his bad eyesight, was frowning heavily.

"You didn't burn *all* the letters in the *armoire*?"

Arno frowned. "No, *Maître*, just those that my eagle pointed out. The fact that I could see them at all after the strain of so many eagles was a miracle."

Beylier nodded. "We all saw him when he came to make his report. His eyes have never been so bloodshot and he has never been so pale."

"He should have burned *all of them,*" Quemar hissed back, so unlike his usual calm demeanor.

"You've reread all the reports, Hervé," Beylier replied emotionlessly, seeming very much the commander. "It was chaos. Madness. There was no predicting anything. The fact that he was able to then have the presence of mind to close the *armoire de fer* and keep it hidden to show that he had never been there, is a credit to just how skilled he is."

The two continued to argue while Trenet just stared at Arno.

Arno couldn't help but glance between the two. He had seen the Council argue before, Mirabeau could sometimes be heard bouncing off the walls when the Council was discussing something or debating a course of action, but this was more than just opinions flying. Arno could almost feel the anger under everything, the barely contained rage. What the hell had happened? He hadn't had a chance to read the papers yet, what happened?

Trenet listened silently, as reserved and unreadable as ever, but she continued to study Arno. He looked at her helplessly.

"Enough," she said firmly, raising her hand.

There were still glares across the table as Trenet stood. She stood, still staring at Arno, and he thought he almost heard her own eagle, the hum of a sword that was somehow an eagle's screech.

"What's done cannot be undone," she said, addressing the other two members of the Council. "Arno did what he did. We can no longer afford to argue over what should have happened, we need to deal with what *has* happened."

Arno desperately wanted to ask, but he didn't dare draw Quemar's attention to him again.

Trenet turned to Beylier. "Go back to your command. Keep the soldiers in line. God only knows how this news is going to affect them and they need to stay in control." She turned to Quemar. "You need to get a message to our man at the Convention. He can't keep being a low-level clerk. He needs to get into the upper echelons faster than we hoped. The Revolution keeps surprising us and we can't afford it anymore."
"But—"

"Now," she ordered.

Quemar was clearly less than pleased, but Beylier, despite the clear anger and rage that was still flowing around the Council, helped Quemar stand with his arthritis and started helping him out so that they could get above ground.

Arno didn't dare move.

Trenet let out a soft sigh once the rest of the Council was gone, and some of her hardness, faded.

"Mentor," he said softly, fully intent on turning around and leaving and specifically getting back to the Café to find out what the hell was going on.

"Arno Dorian, you are a pain in my ass sometimes."

Arno choked.

"You are so very gifted, but sometimes you leave such a mess that we are left overtaxed in fixing it."

And how the hell was Arno supposed to answer that?

Trenet stood and turned to the windows overlooking the lower level of the Sanctuary, where initiates were brought for their interviews, the ceremonial area. "I've gone through everything, all the reports from all the Assassins who survived at Tuileries and the insurrection. Everything you did was exemplary. You finished the mission, left no trace that the Brotherhood was ever there, everything an exemplary Assassin is supposed to do."

The silence filled with one very heavy word.

But...?

Trenet turned again, looking tired in a way that Mirabeau often did.

"The insurrectionists have found the armoire de fer," she stated.

Arno blinked. "The Montagnards control the government and Tuileries now. It's no surprise they would have found it eventually."

"Very true," Trenet conceded. "None of the radicals or insurrectionists have any hint that the Brotherhood exists. That is as it should be."

But...?

Trenet sighed, her shoulders slumped, and then she was back to being straight and in charge as if nothing had happened.

"Letters were found. Letters from Mirabeau to the King. The King to foreign powers. The insurrectionists believe that the King is a traitor, and they espoused that whenever they could in the past four months because if they didn't, then they have to admit that they themselves are traitors for usurping the crown. Now they have all the proof they need that the King was conspiring, paying off Mirabeau's debts and giving him a substantial subsidy in exchange for letters to Austria and stately papers for the Queen."

"What?"

Trenet turned, her face not as unreadable as usual, anger was under that stoic face, but it was being fought back.

"But Mirabeau would never—"

"I knew the man better than you, child," she said coldly, even though her eyes glittered for a moment in the candlelight. "He was a statesman, and all politicians promise what they have to in order to get what they want. Mirabeau wanted what was best for France, and if that meant he needed to play fop for the King, he would." She turned away and Arno thought he heard a watery sniff.

"It doesn't take a genius to see how this is going to go," Trenet said, no trace of emotion in her voice. "The King will be put on trial. Mirabeau's documents will be part of the evidence. And all of Mirabeau's hard work will fall to mud and slander."

*Mirabeau...*

Arno couldn't speak, couldn't get words past his throat. Mirabeau, the man who believed in him, who spoke of not having even the hint of a whisper of the Brotherhood around, was about to be seated with the King as a traitor.

Arno didn't care about the King.

But Mirabeau...

He may have choked, trying to hold his tears.

Trenet said nothing. Just let him be there, didn't dismiss him.

Just when things didn't seem to be able to get worse, something else happened.

Trenet's dire predictions came true swiftly. The rest of November had people clamoring for a trial, Marat's papers fanning the flames and the Convention was "gathering evidence" until December 10th when the trial started. Charges started from nearly three and a half years prior, when Louis disbanded the Estates-General, despite the fact that the Constitution hadn't even been proposed yet, let alone debated and put into law. Desecration of the cockade, marching armies on the citizens of Paris, paying out millions for corruption, the Day of Daggers, his escape to Varennes, the Champs de Mars massacre, the Declaration of Pillnitz, not stopping counter-revolutionaries, not providing enough men for armies for the defense of France, all sorts of conspiracies to support counter-revolutionaries in the French territories such as Haiti, the Tuileries massacre, and allowing French blood to flow.

Arno read some of these charges and he shook his head. Several of the charges had nothing to do with Louis. The Day of Daggers, the massacre at the Champs de Mars, Pillnitz, conspiracies for counter revolutionaries, Arno lived in a world of such conspiracies, and there was no way Louis was behind any of them. He didn't have that kind of communication, and the Brotherhood, though always shifting in placements, hadn't gotten any word of any of these events being orchestrated. The Champs de Mars, where Fabre found and handled an old enemy, was entirely spontaneous, like all the damn riots were. There was no rhyme or reason on when or why blood spilled. To lay all of this at Louis' feet was absurd.

For all that Arno didn't care for Louis and was less and less invested in having a King, he could see...
that Louis couldn't have done this vast web of conspiracies in order to do everything that was charged to him. Louis, from what Arno understood of the king, was an idiot and did what others told him. To have him some sort of cunning mastermind of this level, and then get caught...

And then, on December third, Robespierre gave a scathing speech calling for the death of the king, and on the sixth, Marat's urgings stated that each member of the Convention must publicly and individually state their vote of the verdict and punishment for a trial.

With the fervor sweeping the streets, and through the National Convention's halls, the trial came up swiftly.

Arno met Élise at a small café near the Louvre.

"This is insane," Arno said, reading over another paper as the trial had commenced.

Élise was dismissive. "It doesn't help us find Germain."

"Élise," Arno said patiently, "when we find Germain and take care of him, we'll still have to deal with all this. It's not going away."

"We can deal with it then," she said coldly. "Germain is all that matters right now."

Arno let out a long sigh and set the paper aside. "Very well, have you found any other crows?"

Élise glared at the papers as if she could set them aflame. "Non."

"And the Brotherhood is still rebuilding after Tuileries," Arno said sadly. "I've been doing heists regularly to get funding after... everything. Nothing has come up in all the documents we've been sifting through."

"Damn that harlot," Élise hissed. "If she hadn't died so fast..."

"I know."

They sat in silence for a moment. They had found nothing since taking on Marie Lévesque, and there were no leads to track. The crow had left nothing and Arno hadn't been able to go through any documentation before they had to disappear. He didn't dare ask Pontmercy if Marie's husband had let anything useful slip, since everyone in the cult knew that he was not part of the Germain investigation.

"All the crows who supported Germain are dead now," Élise went through it all again. "Rouille, Lévesque, Sivert, the King of Rats. Any of the other crows were supporters of my father and Germain has made sure that they are all dead as well."

Arno shook his head. "We keep going over the same material. We need to look at this differently."

Élise's eyes flashed at him, but she took a breath and let it out. "Fine. How did you find Rouille in the first place? He wasn't a crow when I was young."

"I told you, I saw him at Tuileries. He gave me Lévesque's name."

"No," Élise snapped, her frustration bubbling over, "how did you know he was one of Germain's?"

Arno paused, trying to reach back in his memory. When had he first seen Rouille? Before he had reunited with Élise.
He continued to think about it, trying to sort it all out while Élise ordered another café.

"Hôtel de Beauvais," Arno finally dragged up the memory. "Three days of hell."

God, no wonder it was fuzzy.

"What?" Élise looked at him, all of her sharp attention narrowed to him and only him.

He may have blushed at that.

But instead he closed his eyes and reached back. "Little to no sleep for three days," he said quietly. "Did a mission—" that involved hunting down Germain, getting hoodwinked, searching Halles aus Blés, killing Lafrenière as another mistake he needed to rectify and erase, then getting chewed out by the Council before going to the Hôtel de Beauvais- "reported back, was sent to Hôtel de Beauvais. Snuck in to overhear a meeting that lead me straight to an ambush on you."

Élise looked at him. Stared at him. "You mean to say that when you arrived you—"

"May have been a little sleep deprived," he offered self-deprecatingly. "Rouille was interrogating someone at the Hôtel. There was a meeting afterwards down in the kitchens. I hid in the storeroom underneath."

Now that they were discussing it... "Marie Lévesque was there as well... Germain of course... La Touche... Someone else..."

"Who?"

Arno squeezed his eyes, trying to think. So much of those memories were hazy...

"Who, Arno?"

"Let me think, Élise, it was a year and a half ago." He could hear the voice, but he just couldn't think of the details.

"Arno!"

The meeting ended without Arno remembering. Élise was clearly disappointed and every meeting they had after that she interrogated him about that night.

It wasn't that Arno wasn't working at it, he was trying to remember. But so much had happened in so compressed a time, that he just couldn't call it up. He did everything he could think of. He went over old notes, discreetly went to the Sanctuary to read the actual report, and while that did help jog bits and pieces, dialogue he'd overheard, a clearer picture of the face, the name, if it was said, just did not come to him.

Meanwhile, the trial proceeded. The Convention Nationale brought forth evidence after "evidence" for each of the thirty-three charges, which Marat and his paper went through in gleefully lurid detail. Sometimes just sitting in the Café was difficult because so many were debating the papers and the theater troupe made their various acts based off the news.

The day after Christmas, Louis finally reappeared before the Convention, and his legal team started their defense. It was pointed out that under the Constitution that Mirabeau and others had worked so hard to create and then pass, the king was immune from prosecution, that Louis had done as the Assembly had asked over and over again, proving himself to be one who restored the liberty of France.
Then came all the delegates stating their verdict. And since everyone had to publicly declare it, much of it came in speeches.

Given the clear collusion between Louis and foreign powers, it was no surprise that the guilty verdict was unanimous.

Then came deciding the punishment.

The day after the guilty verdict, on January 16th, the debates of punishment started. As with the verdict, everyone needed to declare their vote publicly. The evening papers gave the current tally, but voting was still ongoing into the following day.

It was as Arno was reading that tally that his eyes found a name that seemed so familiar. Of course, by this point, he knew many of the names of the Revolution, they were in the papers daily.

*Peletier! I'm an idiot for not remembering!*

That night it was Peletier who had told Germain that the King wouldn't be convicted of treason without evidence. Well now there was evidence! Was Peletier orchestrating the vote? He hadn't seemed interested in schemes from what Arno could remember, but at this point, he wasn't sure he could trust his memory if what he had memorized hadn't come to him till now.

But he had a name.

He had a lead.

Arno left in a hurry.

Meanwhile, the Convention voted in favor of the death penalty, with a difference of almost forty votes.

He found Élise at the room she was boarding in, and he was glad that she was there instead of out searching for more crows or leads through her own resources.

"Are you sure about this?" she demanded, her eyes intent. "This Peletier works for Germain?"

"Not with fervor, not from the little I've overheard, but yes, he was the last one there under the Hôtel de Beauvais."

Élise's eyes glittered.

Louis was the be executed on the twenty-first of January, and they would need to find Peletier before then.

"We just need to follow him when he leaves the Convention," Élise argued as they sat over scraps of discarded plans and ideas after another night of love-making.

Arno looked to Élise, her hair down and askew and doing nothing to cover her breasts. Not that he was much better as he was as shirtless as her. "We want answers," he explained again to her. "Your way is to just stab them in the back. That doesn't exactly give us time to ask questions.

Élise arched an eyebrow. "Isn't that what you do as an Assassin?"

Arno let out a heavy sigh. "Do you want to get answers, or do you just want him dead?"
She narrowed her eyes, face getting flush. "You know what I want. Answers."

"Then we're doing this my way," he insisted. "After all, aren't I the one with the experience?" he asked dryly.

The corner of her mouth flickered and she shifted where she was sitting to spread open her legs. "You need more experience," she stated with conviction. "After all, you know what I want."

With both his manhood reacting and his heart fluttering, Arno didn't need any other invitation to slide back in.

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**January 20, 1793**

Arno was barely at the Café for the next week. To the staff, he was just out and about doing his usual chores. To Charlotte and Augustin, he explained that he was observing the trial and debates and reactions on the streets. In reality, he was studying Peletier. A Parisian since birth, he had become an avocat, a lawyer, in the Place du Châtelet before becoming the avocat-général back in 1785. In '89 he became both a member of the Parisian Parliament and was elected to go to the Estates Général. Though initially conservative, it was clear that his time in all the debates Peletier had started to hear what the people were saying. Against the death penalty and a staunch believer in education, Peletier argued extensively for publicly run schools instead of church run schools, to educate the children about the Revolution, and fought to strike down brandings and other inhuman punishments, transitioning from abolishing the death penalty to pushing for a beheading as more humane.

*Quite the turnaround,* Arno mused.

Still, he was able to create a workable plan.

"We're ready."

"About time."

Peletier enjoyed taking his daughter out to eat, and that was how Arno planned to approach him. It took more money from his pocket than he would have liked, but he wasn't about to take anything from the cult for this and Élise didn't know what her finances were after the Revolution ransacked so much of what she had. But he and Élise were able to get a table not far from Peletier at the small public restaurant the man attended on the eve of the King's execution.

"Why am I facing away from him?" Élise asked once Arno made sure they were seated properly.

"Because you'll glare."

She arched a brow at him.

But he was able to watch discreetly, quietly informing Élise of everything he saw while none around them realized how closely he was watching.

"Citoyen le Peletier," a man greeted stiffly on his way out of the restaurant.

Peletier bowed his head fractionally. "Citoyen Tallien."

Clearly those two didn't see eye to eye on things.
Tallien... Tallien... Another member of the Convention. Tended to oppose Robespierre.

Irrelevant.

But Tallien was leaving.

"When, Arno."

"Patience, Élise."

Around them, other patrons were talking politics, as all of Paris was doing nowadays. Worry over the Brunswick's manifesto and comparisons to the Huguenots, or whether or not the Americans would join with France or not, would they be going to Louis's execution tomorrow, etc. Arno let the conversation flow around him, even as Élise got more and more impatient, before opportunity finally arrived.

"Garçon!" Peletier called.

"Oui, Monsieur?"

Peletier smiled at his tablemates and his daughter. "A bottle of your finest wine. Tonight, we celebrate the death of tyranny!"

"At once, sir," the waiter said, turning.

"Keep his daughter away," Arno said softly. "Then we can interrogate him."

Élise's eyes were predatory.

Arno stood and shifted through the tables, following the waiter who was calling for a bottle of the Chateau d'If. Arno slid behind a wall to the pantry, took off his coat to reveal the clothes of a waiter, and stepped back out. Moving with purpose, he went behind the bar and pulled out a glass. From his waistcoat, he pulled out a small vial and eased two drops into the glass, before turning and pulling out a bottle of the Chateau d'If that was called for. The bottle was almost empty, and it didn't take much to refill it with a similar wine from a bottle that was already available behind the bar. He swirled the glass gently, noting no discoloration, took a small sniff to make sure the bouquet still smelled right, and then placed the bottle next to the glass, label clear to see.

The waiter came over just as Arno eased back to the pantry to shrug his coat back on. He glanced around the corner and watched closely.

Élise... he thought ruefully. She had changed her seat to watch Peletier obviously.

The waiter looked at the tray with the bottle and the glass before smiling. "Well done, David," the waiter said softly. "Didn't even see you arrive."

Arno smiled to himself and watched as the waiter took the tray to Peletier's table.

"Here you are, sir. The '74 Château d'If. A lovely vintage if I may say."

"Merci," Peletier said absently, still deep in conversation with his small entourage.

Arno didn't have to wait long.

Within ten minutes, Peletier was looking pale and conversing less and less.
His daughter looked to him with concern. "Papa? What's wrong?"

Peletier was able to force a smile, and waved off her concerns. "Nothing, my dear," he said, even as he started to sweat through his paleness. "Just a stomachache. Go..." he winced, sipping his wine again in a vain attempt to settle his stomach, "go and find your nurse and tell her to take you home. I'll be along soon."

His daughter still looked on with worry. "Yes, Papa."

Peletier stood, still steady, and started to move away. Élise's eyes watched him, but Arno sent a pleading look that she stick to the plan.

She caught his eye then rolled her own eyes with a slight nod.

_Bien._

Once Peletier was away from his daughter and his daughter was turning to look for her nursemaid, Arno stepped up beside Peletier.

"Citoyen?" he asked with complete concern as he stepped up beside Peletier.

"I need... privacy..." he uttered, face still pale.

"Oui, Citoyen. This way."

And Arno started to pull him along.

"Where's Germain?" he asked coldly, once they were further away from the crowds.

"Who?"


Peletier looked over at him, pale and sweaty, and squinted. "Don't tell me that madman was correct and there are Assassins?"

Not the answer Arno was expecting. Instead he scoffed. "Please. Germain has done me harm and I wish to repay him."

"Germain is a madman," Peletier growled, attempting to pull away but unable to with Arno's strong grip. "He pretends he's powerful, plays to your weaknesses, makes you promises you want. He promised that he'd help me get education in France fixed after being in the stifling grip of the Church for so long. He hasn't done a damned thing. He just wants to see the King burn."

Arno blinked. "And you're not one of his Templars?"

"Oh, his promises brought me into that little society of his, but he couldn't fulfill what he promised. I left not long after."

"But where is Germain?"

"Hell if I know," Peletier coughed, his paleness starting to flush with apparent fever. "I know he was trying to cozy up to anyone with power and money and influence, and he talked all the time about getting the king disgraced and dead. Hasn't done a damn thing to do it. The people of France, as always, have to do all the work."
"But you met with Germain. How did you get word to him, how—"

They were interrupted by a war cry as a man pulled out a sword, hidden in his overcoat, and plunged it into Peletier's chest.

"Non!" Arno shouted. "Citoyen! Monsieur! Don't die!" Peletier fell against Arno, sword still in his chest. There were screams around him and the killer was already running away, but Arno didn't have enough information! Peletier couldn't die, not now! He lowered Peletier to the ground, trying to apply pressure.

*Stay your blade from the innocent...*

Peletier may have been a Templar in name, but he clearly did not share the same ideology. It was why Arno never recognized Peletier as a possible for Templar before, because of what Peletier fought for in the convention wasn't very Templar-ish.

"Stay with me, Monsieur, stay with me!"

And France was in such chaos that *this* had happened.

Peletier looked to Arno, face going pale once more, for very different reasons.

"I hope... you find... that madman..." Peletier whispered. Arno put more pressure on the wound, cries for a doctor all around him. "I'm glad... that... my daughter... was spared... this sight..."

Chaos was all around him. "*Don't die!*"

"I pray... France... will become... more..."

A hand grabbed Arno and roughly pulled him back. Arno tried to wriggle free, he needed to do *something*.

"Arno!" Élise hissed. "We need to *leave.*"

"But—"

"*Now!*"

Arno stilled, scrunched his eyes shut and took a deep breath.

Later. He would have to deal with this later.

He checked with his eagle. No direct enemies, and... *there* an escape.

He turned to Élise, and felt something drip down his face. Tears? He didn't have time. "Come on," he hissed, pulling her along. "This way."

Élise was frowning heavily, but she followed.

"He *still* didn't tell us where Germain is," Élise cursed.

"No, but we know what he wants now," Arno said. "You heard him say it himself, he wants the King—"

Both of their eyes widened.
"The execution!" they said simultaneously.

"Nom de dieu, we don't have much time," Arno said. He moved through the alley they were talking in to a main boulevard; it was dark, still the dinner hour, but there were still a few papers selling, and Arno went through his purse to buy one, then a second, giving one to Élise and then holding them up to the light, eyes scanning the page. "When?" he asked, "When is the execution?"

"Here," Élise said, "Ten o'clock. Place de la Révolution."

"What time is it now?" Arno asked, pulling out the broken watch. His eyes burned to see it and he put it away, making a face.

"Quarter after nine," Élise replied again. "We have just over twelve hours."

"There's only two of us, how will we find him? You know everyone and their brother will be out to see this."

"That will be easy," the redhead answered, eyes hard. "Germain will have the best seat in the house. If this is his life's work like le Peletier had intimated, then he will want to see it and glory in it. We look for platforms, horses, even someone sitting on the shoulders of someone else. We won't even need to repair, just arrive with the crowd and find him."

"Élise, you make this sound very easy, but—"

"No buts, Arno," Élise said, voice lowering an octave. "This is our chance. We find my father's killer, and we kill him."

"But Élise—"

"Shhh," she said, reaching out and cupping his cheek. "You needn't worry. This will work itself out." She smiled, soft and gentle. "My father told me never to focus on the what-ifs, only to focus on the will-bes. My father will be avenged. Germain will be dead. That's all you need to focus on." She leaned in, soft lips touching his, reassuring and pleasurable at the same time. She kept at it until Arno finally started to relent, leaning into the kiss. Only then did she pull back, cheeks bright and eyes dark. "There," she said. "Get some sleep, we'll both be up early tomorrow."

Arno gave a fuzzy nod, and Élise left like a whisper of smoke. With her went the sense of calm, and Arno remembered all over again how this could go wrong: they had no idea of the lay of the land, they didn't know what Germain's forces were there, how comfortable they were with making a spectacle, numbers and positions. Nervous energy started to fill Arno, and he grunted as he made his way back to Café Théâtre. Charlotte watched him go up to the library but said nothing.

Arno pulled out the maps, looking for the most recent city map they had... Plan Routier de la ville et faubourgs de Paris, 1792. He unfolded it, taking in the red and green, eyes roving about until he found Jardins Tuileries, and then the Place de Louis XV, only recently renamed Place de la Révolution. He eyes the legend, trying to get a sense of scale, trying to picture the place in his mind. Arno had been to the royal palace of course, when he'd met his contact Bonaparte, but he'd never been in the gardens, nor the place. He studied every green dot and square, every tree and grassy square until his eyes burned. Straightening, he rubbed his eyes and pulled out a bit of paper and tried to sketch out the area from the details on the map. The guillotine would be in the center of the square, that much was obvious, and there would be gens d'armes to keep the peace – unless they were in Germain's pocket, he couldn't rule anything out, and he wasn't sure where a raised platform would be—
"Arno."

He jolted up, not realizing he had started to nod off. Augustin was leaning over him, dark face almost invisible in the dim candle light.

"... Yes?" he asked, rubbing at his eyes again.

"There's a meeting underground," Augustin said. "Full attendance. You can guess what."

"... what?" Arno asked, standing and struggling to wake back up. He looked at the clock over the fireplace. One in the morning. He pulled at his cravat and stretched his shoulders. "What's going on?" he asked again, a little more awake.

"The execution," Augustin replied, starting to move out of the library, Arno following. "Everybody's going to be there, so we have to be there. The maîtres are giving out the assignments."

"Ah... oui. Bien sûr."

Diable, how was he supposed to look for Germain if he had an assignment from the Council? He rolled his shoulders again, rubbing his face and moving downstairs and then to the underground entrance. The two men exited out to the main hall, turning right and gathering under the grand staircase with everyone else. Arno spotted Cosette, Pontmercy, Jérôme, Fabre, Beaumont, Charlotte, Lisette, the new blood Duchemin, everyone in the Brotherhood was crowded together under or on the stairs. Beylier came out to the top, called out a series of names, and disappeared back to the Observatory as the people he asked for ascended the stairs. Arno made his way to his best friend Cosette.

"We're all a little nervous," she was saying, "Given what happened a few months ago. But we can't shrink back from something like this. We have to help the gen d'armes keep the peace. Even undermanned."

"We've always been undermanned," Fabre was saying, palm rubbing his aborted elbow like a nervous tick. "It's the story of our history."

"Do we know if there are secondary assignments?" Pontmercy asked. "Like... like last time?"

"Who can say?" Fabre said with a smile, though he squeezed his elbow a little harder.

"Arno!" Cosette said, spying him. "You look like death warmed over! What happened?"

Arno shook his head, unable to answer and unwilling to lie.

The four waited together at the base of the stairs for almost an hour as the Maîtres called up pairs and groups for assignment. Mostly it was pairs, and everyone knew it was because their numbers were so small. No one would have the security of a four-man group, no one would have the luxury of having someone watch their back, not with a quarter of their numbers gone and an event bigger than even the insurrection in August – the very event that had culled them so badly. Arno rocked slightly as he sat on one of the steps, trying to figure out how on god's name he and Élise were going to find and kill Germain with every Assassin in the Brotherhood prowling the Place de la Révolution. This was worse than sneaking into Lévesque's party with Pontmercy, how were they going to manage it?

Cosette leaned over to him, touching his knee to get his attention.
"Are you sure you are all right?" she asked.

"... I have a lot on my mind," he murmured.

"Then talk to me," Cosette said, "Like we used to. I haven't seen you in weeks, what have you been up to? How is the Café?"

Oh, where to even start? Arno couldn't just explain Élise; or the Germain investigation; or doing triple duty between that, Fabre's heists, and running the Café. He couldn't explain juggling excuses with Charlotte and Augustin, trying to soothe Élise's pain, keeping all of his whereabouts straight. He felt like he was flying apart at the seams, and he couldn't tell anyone, because no one would understand.

No, that wasn't true. Cosette would understand; so would Fabre and Pontmercy, but they were Assassins – they believed the Creed, followed it, and would be obliged to tell the Maîtres, who already hated him.

"Arno," Cosette said, shaking his shoulder. He startled from his thoughts, blinking and looking to see how concerned she was.

"Hey," Fabre said, leaning in, "They just called you both."

The pair got up and moved up the stairs. Each Maître was talking to a pair of Assassins, spreading themselves out to dole out assignments as quickly as possible.

Beylier spared the time to give his former student a warm smile, and then a stiff look to Arno. "You've both read the papers," he said by way of introduction.

"The King's execution," Cosette said.

Beylier nodded. "We know the order of events, we know where the gens d'armes will be placed, we know who Louis' confessor will be. What no one knows, is how the crowd will react once they've realized their actions have brought the death of the leader of a country. This isn't August tenth, but it has the potential to be. Our overriding priority is keeping everyone safe or, failing that, keeping the bloodshed to a minimum. We have others keeping an eye on specific targets that we know will be there, and others still placed to find new contacts. You two will be in the crowd, under the toppled statue of Louis, keeping an eye on the people. Beaumont will be your point of contact if you see something, and he will give the message to one of the other pairs who can handle it. If he's not immediately free, Lisette will be your second option. Both are placed here."

Arno marveled to see a detailed map of the Place de la Révolution, larger and far more detailed than the tiny inch of map that he had in the Café library. Beylier pointed to their position, referencing where their contacts were, what they should look for. Arno stared at the map, eagle awake, soaking up the details, the Assassin placements represented by little sewing pins placed in the map, recognizing patrol routes from his time as a Novice, the charcoal marks of gens d'armes positions, everything he needed was right there...!

Cosette touched his arm again, and he looked up to see Beylier giving him a hard look again. Arno shifted his weight, struggling to justify why he wasn't paying attention. "... studying the map, monsieur," he said weakly.

"He hasn't slept," Cosette said quickly. "Don't worry, he'll have time to nap after we set up position. I'll fill him in once he's rested."

"This all starts in a few hours," Beylier said.
"More than enough time," Cosette said quickly.

Beylier's eyes flicked to Arno. "Why haven't you slept?" he asked.

... think merdeux, think... you never think...

"I read the papers," Arno said after a pause long enough he was certain he'd given himself away. "I thought we might be covering the execution. I was looking through the library for city maps that gave details for the place, trying to study it in case I was summoned." He held in a wince at how weak the excuse was, and how much was left out.

Beylier said nothing. Simply nodded. His dark eyes flit to his pupil. "Feed him, too," he said simply.

Cosette nodded and they departed, passing Pontmercy and Jérôme as they moved up the stairs.

"All right," Cosette said, "We are going upstairs, we are feeding you, and you are going to tell me everything."

Café Théâtre was empty so early in the morning, Arno glanced at a clock to see it was passed three. Yvette and Claudette would be here soon to start cooking, they didn't have a lot of time. Arno made himself a café au lait, never as good as Jacques, as Cosette found some pâté and soupe à l'oignon. They moved upstairs to Arno's room, Cosette sitting him down at the small circular dining table by his bed.

"Talk," she said, crossing her arms and staring down at him.

"I can't," he said, sipping his café. "There's not enough time."

"Well, I can take some educated guesses," Cosette said. "Élise is back, isn't she?"

Arno choked on his pâté.

"No, of course not," he said after much coughing.

Cosette smiled, sitting next to him. "Arno," she said, "You can tell me."

... Charlotte has said that as well, but they were Assassins, they had to report to the Council, and he couldn't get them in that kind of trouble. He already knew what he was risking, but the cost was worth it if it meant getting Germain, erasing Élise's pain and undoing his mistakes, earning his redemption.

"I can't tell you," he pleaded, looking at his best friend. "Please, don't ask."

"Arno," Cosette said, "You always forget that 'everything is permitted.' You can tell me because there's no law against it. I'll understand. So will the others."

"But the Council—"

"Doesn't have to know," Cosette said. "Arno, you were burning the candle at both ends between this place and the heists already, but now that your lover is back I don't think there will be enough of you left to spread around. Look," she insisted, seeing Arno shake his head. "Will she be there? At the execution?"

Arno pursed his lips, saying nothing.
Her face softened, but also showed a hint of pain, and Arno ached that he was doing such a disservice to his best friend. She leaned back and sighed. "Get some sleep, if you can," she said. "I'll explain our roles when we get there."

January 21, 1793

Arno dozed at best, his body was too full of tension to sleep deeply, he kept waking up thinking he had missed the execution, missed Germain, missed Élise. He finally gave up at six and got up, pulling off his rumpled waistcoat and putting on a fresh one, shrugging on his blue surcoat and running a hand through his hair before retying it. His eyes burned, but there was nothing to do about it. He filled every pocket he could with equipment: smoke and cherry bombs, five lockpicks, a full stock of phantom blades, his sword.

Jacques gave him his café au lait, and it was perfect, and he quickly explained that there likely wasn't going to be that much business during the lunch wave because of the execution.

Yvette clucked her tongue. "There's no entertainment in watching someone die," she said. "I'll do much better here cooking for tonight."

"I want to see it," Célestine said. "It's a once in a lifetime event."

"You won't see much," Augustin said, "Even if they put him on a platform, all those hats and guards will make it hard to see."

Jacques said nothing.

"The three of us will be going out," Charlotte said, rising from the table. "Monsieur Grizier is interviewing a potential student who will be moving to Paris soon, god save him, and I'm still looking for a new theater troupe to better suit our clientele. Monsieur Dorian has supplies to get, of course."

"I'll be heading out as well," Paul said. "Someone here should see the execution, of only to explain it to Mademoiselle Vernier so she won't feel left out."

Célestine pouted but said nothing, and the four left Café Théâtre.

"Arno," Charlotte said softly. "Do be careful with her."

Her? Did she mean Cosette or...? He said nothing, afraid to give anything away, and the three crossed over to the right bank before taking different routes to Place de la Révolution.

Designed in 1755 and originally name Place Louis XV, the square wasn't a square but rather an octagon, placed between the Champs-Elysée and the Tuileries Gardens. There used to be a statue of Louis on a horse in the place, but it had been ripped down four years ago in '89 during one of the many riots. Hôtel de Ville had had an execution platform constructed, and that was where Louis was going to meet his end. Arno saw the pedestal, where the old statue was, and saw Cosette already there, sitting atop it with an excellent view of the place. Arno joined her.

"It's amazing isn't it?" she asked quietly. "I watched the sun rise from here, you can see all the way to the Tuileries, and Louis had a perfect view of the sunset from there. This was his place, and now it's ours. The people's."

Arno said nothing, looking out over the square, studying the layout and comparing it to what he had seen on the map. Gens d'armes were already filling the square, forming two lines and making
a human outline of a path for whatever cart or carriage would bring Louis to his death. Arno closed his eyes and asked for his eagle for more insight.

That was a mistake, he could sense several other eagles awake and active, and he hissed as he grabbed his head. "Damn eagle," he cursed.

"Here," Cosette said quickly. "I brought some milk. I remember you saying your eagle brought you headaches."

Arno sipped it, but it sat heavy in his stomach, anticipation taking too much space. Cosette was there, right next to him, and he couldn't leave without her noticing. He couldn't use his eagle, there were too many Assassins here, but he knew he would find Élise in an instant even without it. How could he approach her? He couldn't have the reverse, Élise was so driven she would walk right up to him and demand he come with her, and he couldn't explain to Cosette. But he wasn't sure how he could leave his post – oh, talking about finding a latrine or an outhouse was easy enough, but once the time stretched on Cosette would worry about him; and like with Brasseur, she would ask everyone where he was. He couldn't use the excuse of going off to handle something, either, their job was to report, not respond. Arno shifted in his seat, crossing and recrossing his legs as he pondered the problem.

The crowd was already enormous at nine in the morning, and more people were streaming in. The gens d'armes corrected whenever someone moved into the carriage path, several were already drinking in celebration.

Peletier... he had drunk to the death of tyranny last night. Everyone here was drinking the death of tyranny. Arno had read the trial transcripts – what was published anyway. He remembered how he felt when news came of the flight to Varennes, the keen sense of betrayal, the frustration and anger. He remembered the Estates General, when he learned just how bad things were; the Cour des Miracles and the undeserved poverty there, the desperate things that needed to be done, all the lean months when he or the Café couldn't afford grain for bread or even stews. He remembered learning that he was supposed to be paid for being a houseboy, realizing how lopsided justice was. All the problems in France, they were the result of the decisions of its leader. But... Arno could still remember that rainy day in October, the people breaking into Versailles, chasing the Queen to Louis' bedchambers, the fear of the Queen—no, of the woman. Of the perfectly human, normal, woman, and how she had stood with her son in hand to support the Revolution during the Fête de la Fédération despite being so hated.

Tyrant... seemed a strong word.

Indecisive. Conservative. Desperate. These words suited Louis better. He didn't deserve to be king, but Arno was ambivalent on whether he deserved death. His betrayal was obvious to anyone with a brain, but it was not out of malicious intent but rather desperate fear. Was that worthy of execution?

No, Germain, focus on Germain. Don't get lost in the moment, merdeux, think.

That was when he saw red curls, a pop of bright color in the earth tones.

He turned to Cosette, but she was already looking at him, knowing what he was about to do. "Go," she said simply. "I will cover for you."

Emotion welled up in Arno – surely the result of so little sleep – and he gave her his most grateful smile. "You are my very best friend," he said, before gliding off the broken pedestal and joining his lover.
"I've just come from Rue de Cléry," she said by way of introduction. "De Bantz, the baron who financed Louis' escape to Varennes, just tried to rescue him, but the attempt failed. They're bringing the king up now. Have you seen any sign of Germain?"

"No," Arno replied, "Not yet. And we have another concern. The entire Brotherhood is here."
Élise frowned. "Will they stop us?"

"They here to make sure there's no bloodshed," Arno said. "That makes us a problem for them."

"Not if they don't know we're here," Élise dismissed. Then a thought struck and she turned accusatory eyes to him. "You didn't say anything, did you?" she demanded.

"What? No, of course not!" Arno replied, indignant that she had even thought-! "But one of my friends has figured out that you're back in Paris and that I'm seeing you. She just let me go to come here."

A delicate eyebrow rose. "Well," she said, "At least someone over there can think for themselves. If that's the case then what are we waiting for?"

Arno nodded. "Let's split up. We'll cover more ground that way."

"Agreed."

"How will we signal that we found him?"

"What would we need a signal for?"

"So the other can come and we can take him together."

Her eyes hardened again. "And risk him getting away while waiting for the other? No, the moment the opportunity arises, you take it. The sooner that man is dead the better."

"Élise, that's very risky—"

"And the reward is worth the risk," she replied, talking over him. "Don't forget that. Let's go."

The pair split up, Élise moving north and Arno south, moving to the edge of the crowd and starting to circle his way around. He couldn't wake his eagle, there were too many Assassins here for that; he had to figure out where Germain was on his own, without intuition. He climbed a pennant pole, gaining altitude, and surveyed the crowd again, this time from a different angle than the broken pedestal.

"Germain is a madman," Peletier had said last night – was it really last night? "*He pretends he's powerful, plays to your weaknesses, makes you promises you want... He just wants to see the King burn... he talked all the time about getting the king disgraced and dead.*"

Height. Germain would want height. But the highest place in the square was the execution platform itself, the blade of the guillotine shining in the late morning sunlight. It had to be at the edge of the *place*, where the height wouldn't be as noticeable. That meant a building, perhaps, but Arno doubted it. If Germain was so desperate as to offer allegiance with people on Hôtel de Ville *just* to ensure the King was executed then he would want a front row—there. Someone had constructed an observation platform, just inside the *place*. That was where Germain would be.

This was it. This was his redemption. Killing Germain would erase his mistake. It would relieve
Elise of her grief.

He lowered himself back to the crowds, weaving through the shouts and jeers. Several were singing one of the Revolution songs: *La Guillotine Permanente*, some were Jacobins, drunk on the power they had to call for and then get the execution of the King.

"Look at him: tyrant!"

"Profane of the brotherhood of man!"

"Wretched and false friend of a beleaguered France!"

"Wicked and deceitful!"

"He'll pay through death the debt incurred by his thoughtless reign."

"And think about it: He was the hardest to get, but with him on the block that means all *citoyens*, man or woman, lord of peasant, who would betray the country can be put to death. What a relief that is, no one is exempt!"

"I'll do you one better, *mon ami*, think about all those Royalist papers that muddied the waters, or that slut Théroigne de Méricourt when she was trying to get all those womenfolk to make a club. We can cut them down for tarnishing the gleam of our Revolution, they'll meet the same fate!"

"Serves them right for being Royalists, they can die, same as the King."

"He's not king anymore, remember. He's *Citoyen* Louis Capet, now."

"What we do here today will ring through the vaults of history!"

"I know! Our children, and our children's children, will look back on this as the birth of freedom! Imagine if all mankind could be so liberated!"

But Arno's focus was slowly narrowing. He wished he could call upon his eagle, but he couldn't risk the head-splitting migraine with so many other eagles here. He approached the viewing dais slowly... slowly...

And then, a man stepped out, dress in trendy clothes but with an ancient cloak hiding most of it. Miscolored eyes, grey temples, and heavy stubble.

"Hello, Arno," he said.

"*Monsieur* Germain."

Germain smiled. "*Citoyen* Germain, now, remember. *Monsieur* is too formal, it invokes class differences so readily. It is a relic of the past." He glanced at two men with red feathers in their hats. "Bring him up here."

A gun barrel was pressed into Arno's back, negating any thoughts of resistance, and meaty fists grabbed his arms and dragged him up to the viewing platform. It was just high enough to see over everyone, watching as the carriage moved through the lines of *gens d'armes*. The noise was uproarious, the sound of humanity echoing off every inch of the Place de la Révolution. Arno was positioned next to Germain, gun still at his back, and the Templar *Grandmaître* started talking as if he and Arno were close friends.

"It's fitting you're here to witness the rebirth of the Templar Order," he said. "After all, you were
there for its conception."

"... Monsieur de la Serre."

"There, see? Class distinction. It was obvious just in the way you said 'monsieur' it that you were the houseboy. I saw you as a child, you know. Or perhaps you don't. We all got together after we expelled Cormac for the unsanctioned murder he committed. I argued against it, of course, a maverick like him was exactly what the Order needed, and I hear now he's Grandmaitre in London. His son will likely inherit the position, but the lad isn't seasoned enough yet. Like everything else, François was short sighted in that respect. Ah," he sighed. "I tried to make him see. But the Order had become corrupt, clutching at power and privilege for their own sake instead of the chance to affect real change."

"We've lost our purpose, merdeux! Mirabeau has mired ourselves in politics and revolutions – he's put himself on the Assembly and thought he could lead us all like the director of a play! He thought he could fix everything that was wrong with everything, absolutely blind to what Assassins are really meant to do."

Bellec's words bloomed in Arno's mind suddenly and loudly, and he closed his eyes to the memory of his fight in Sainte Chapelle.

"And you could make it right?" Arno asked, voice low and dark. "Is that it? By killing the man in charge? Will you wax poetic about Templars purging their leadership in the past? Cite examples of various coup d'états?"

"No," Germain said, looking out over the crowd. The carriage had arrived, slowly making its way through the gens d'armes, everyone jeering and cheering and the spectacle they were about to see. "De la Serre's death was only the first stage. This," he gestured. "This is the culmination."

"Killing a weak and desperate man?"

"No, killing a tyrant," Germain said, a hint of emotion in his voice. "The Bourbon family was responsible for the death of Jacques de Molay, the last public Templar Grandmaitre, and this is restitution for that act."

"Justice," Arno replied, voice dry, "For something that happened hundreds of years ago?"

"Not to me..." Germain said. He pressed a palm to his temple, shivering in the January air. "I remember," he said, and his voice changed, his tone dropping and his language shifting to something... older. "I still remember what it was like when they set me on fire. I still remember the curse I gave to Phillip. I knew I was different, back then, but I had not yet lived long enough to understand what I was. I do now, and petty creatures like him are unworthy of the blood they spilled."

The crowd roared very suddenly, and Arno watched as Louis, dressed only in white, exit his carriage. Rifles were waving with hats on them, hands pumping in the air, curses and exultations all mixed together in a cacophony of noise. Louis was led up to the platform, scuffling slightly over something Arno couldn't see at the distance he was at. The gun barrel pressed into his back again, and he hadn't realized he'd leaned forward. The King's hands were bound with a handkerchief, and Louis faced the crowd, saying... something. Between the executioner drums and the shouting, Arno couldn't hear it.

"People, I die innocent," Germain quoted, "I am innocent of all the crimes laid to my charge. I hope that my blood may cement the good fortune of France.' That was the speech he was to deliver
as his last words. That tyrant still thinks he can sway the people, but this, here, this is the truth: they can no longer hear him to listen. Louis may be a 'weak and desperate man,' as you claim, but his position was a symbol. The King is merely a symbol. A symbol can inspire fear, and fear can inspire control – but men inevitably lose their fear of symbols, as you can see. This was the truth that de Molay died for: The Divine Right of Kings is nothing but the reflection of sunlight upon gold. Julius II knew this, too; he orchestrated miracles to get himself elected Pope so he could use the symbol of his station to do his work until you Assassins did away with him. We can no longer rely on the divine right of aristocracy to maintain control. We need a new system, something much subtler. After all, there are no gods in this world, only men, and men cannot rule without those transitory symbols. Why, then, seek to control the reflection of the gold when you can control the gold itself? When the Crown and Church are ground to dust, we who control the gold will decide the future. De la Serre could not see that. It was as simple as that."

And then, the drums stopped, the voices quieted, and the lever was pulled.

The sound of the guillotine sliding down was a sound Arno would never forget, loud and ominous, and the sight of something round falling made his stomach turn. There was a collective intake of breath, everyone realizing just what had happened, the dawning of what they had just done, just witnessed.

They had killed a king...

Then, unbridled joy.

And next to him, Germain, smiling. "Jacques de Molay," he said softly, "vous êtes vengé."

One of the executioners held up the head for everyone to see, blood still leaking out of it, jaw hanging open, and it was ghastly; there was no righteousness to it, no vindication or catharsis. Arno wondered how he had ever thought Louis deserved to die.

"I must take my leave," Germain said. "Good day to you." He turned, stepping off the observation platform, and turned to the guard at the base of the four steps. "Kill him."

Merde, not like this...

The gun barrel pulled away and Arno immediately turned to try and meet it, except it wasn't a gun but rather a rifle, and the barrel was making a direct path to his chest. Arno twisted, but too late, the manufactured wood and metal pounding into his shoulder, and he felt a sickening pop and a flare of pain. It was his hidden blade arm, and he staggered back and instinctively tried to undo the damage, to unpop whatever had happened to his shoulder even as his good arm drew his sword. Where was the second man?

His answer was a death gurgle, his eyes spinning to the edge of the platform where his second guard had a sword emerging from his belly. As he fell: red curls and hard eyes. Élise.

She lifted her gun and fired at the guard with a rifle.

"Go!" she shouted, her eyes locked on something behind him.

Arno turned again, seeing Germain shrugging off his Templar cloak and giving a better display of his trendy clothes as he stepped into a waiting carriage. There were also a swarm of men making their way towards them. Bon dieu how were they supposed to get out of this with Arno down a limb? Cursing, he lifted his sword to block an incoming blow, adjusting his stance and twisting his wrist to push the blade away, making an opening for a downward slash at the shoulder.
"What are you doing?" Élise demanded, parrying a blow from one of the others. "Go after him!"

"I'm not leaving you here to die!" Arno shouted back, backing up to be closer to her. She was M. de la Serre's daughter, he wasn't going to fail his second father twice, and he wasn't going to lose the love of his life. They were in this fight together, and if needs be they would die together too. He blocked a blow meant for Élise, his own blade sliding all the way to the pommel of his opponent's sword, and he moved to shoulder the man only to realize he struck with his wounded shoulder. Cursing he punched instead, the guard of the handle breaking his opponent's nose. He tried to lift his bad arm – he could move it at the elbow but not the shoulder – what had they done to it? – and tried to fumble for his pockets.

Élise had felled two people, but there was still a dozen more. Arno wouldn't have worried if it weren't for the injury, he would be able to hold his own and he couldn't afford to hold Élise back. Finally, his arm functioned enough to grab one of his bombs and he threw it to the ground.

It was a cherry bomb.

*Merde!*

Arno couldn't reach for another as a new target stepped into his line, and a second perpendicular to him. He couldn't face both, the odds were against them.

"Élise, it's time to go!"

"Then go! I can handle it! Go after Germain, the carriage is leaving!"

"Don't be absurd, you can't fight so many on your own!"

"Go! I'll buy you time!"

"Élise...!"

"No, dammit!"

Arno was forced to *drop his sword*, ducking under one blow and back from another, so he could use his good arm to get the bomb he desired. The smoke exploded, thick and dark, and Arno finally called on his eagle, feeling the explosion of so many others filling his senses, head splitting wide open. Grunting, he grabbed Élise's hand and ran, nearly blind from the sensory overload, pell-mell through the smoke. He could hear someone shouting, "Hold your position! No friendly fire!", but he was too busy dodging every shadow that was the red of an enemy, clearing the smoke and turning for an alley to lose them.

Élise, however, faster and now able to see through the smoke, took the lead and pulled him down the boulevard Germain had ridden down. Arno struggled to keep up as his eyes watered from all the information the other eagles had given him, and Élise finally twisted out of his grasp and pushed ahead, making Arno run even faster to keep up with him.

His eagle couldn't trace where the carriage had gone, as far as he knew they were running blind.

"Élise," he called out, "It's over!"

"No, it's not! I'm not letting him get away!"

"Élise—"
"Tais-toi, Arno!"

"Hey, citoyens!" Arno turned and saw two city guards, blue uniforms and bicorn hats. "Bloody swords!" one of them said, and Arno cursed as he realized they were drawing attention. He wrenched his bad shoulder to try and find another smoke bomb, hurting with every move and trying desperately to keep up with Élise and not suffer any more overload of eagles that weren't his. Instinct made his eyes drift slightly to his left, and he saw Cosette running towards him. What...?

"I've got this!" she said as she passed, before shouting, "Citoyens! Citoyens! It was horrible! There's murder over that way!" distracting the guards.

Arno kept running, around a corner and up an alley, exiting back out to a small street that ended on a square. There was the carriage. How had Élise known it would be there?

"Empty," Élise said as if it were a curse. "He must have gone on foot." She ran all of three steps before realizing how packed the place was, people buying and selling, stalls, wares, cafés, tables. "He's gone," she whispered, the realization hitting her slowly. She turned around, horror blooming on her face, and Arno ached for her, knew what a blow this was. He held his shoulder, mourning the defeat.

"He's gone," she said again, louder this time. "He's gone! Bon sang! Our one chance...!" Her voice broke, and Arno reached out to touch her shoulder.

"It's not over," he said, reassuring, "We'll find another lead—"

"No, we won't!" she shouted, voice cracking again and drawing the eyes of a few onlookers. "You think he'll be so careless now, knowing how close at heel we are? That connard will fall to hiding again and we'll be back with nothing! Less than nothing, because we won't have a meeting that you eavesdropped on to give us a list of names or locations or anything valuable!" Two tears fell down her face, leaving wet tracks; she was shaking.

Arno closed the distance to hug her, but she pushed him away.

"Don't," she hissed. "Don't! Not when you're the one who's ruined it!"

"Me?" Arno asked, confused.

"Don't play dumb with me, Arno," Élise insisted. "You're not that slow. You were given a golden opportunity to end his life and you refused to take it! You just stood there, next to him, like you were old friends!"

"He had a rifle at my back," Arno explained, confused.

"That shouldn't have mattered!" Élise countered. "I'm willing to risk everything to put Germain down, and even after I saved you, you still shied away from the chance!"

"There were two dozen men bearing down on us!" Arno insisted. Why was he defending himself? How did this get all twisted? "Neither of us would have survived a fight that big, I stayed to save your life!"

"It isn't yours to save!" Élise shouted.

For several seconds, the world stopped. Everything fell away, sound, pain, sensation, as the words echoed in his mind: isn't yours to save... isn't yours to save... isn't yours to save... How could it not? Weren't they partners? Lovers? Bound to fight the world to avenge M. de la Serre? Didn't they
share the same ambitions? He was hers, body and soul, how was she not his, as well? What did it mean, what... what...?

"What are you saying?" Arno asked, voice barely audible.

"I mean we should never have taken you in!" Élise shouted. "After Cormac was expelled for killing your father I insisted that we keep you, and now I see that was a mistake! We should have left you on the street if this is how you repay my father! Repay me! If your priorities are so backwards as to let Germain escape, if you don't have the stomach for revenge, then I don't need you!"

She turned and she left.

And Arno's world shattered.

Chapter End Notes

(deep breath) Intense ending is intense. Oh, Arno...

We can finally peel back the curtain a little bit and talk about two characters we've avoided talking about. First: Germain. We gave a couple of nods to him being de Molay reincarnated, and we couldn't ignore the famous line, "Jacques de Molay, you are avenged." The game seems to think Germain can gut his Rite and still control the Revolution. We only took the half that made sense. Even ignoring our distaste for the faked populous revolt conspiracy theory that the developers took from Royalist survivors after the Revolution, it's stated at least twice that Templars are winding up dead without Assassin involvement. The book has Élise nearly strangled as she tried to gather with her allies. The Assassins are being gutted in the Revolution, but so are the Templars - by Templar hands. Honestly, the Templar Revolt more closely mirrors the Revolution than anything else in the game and it's only handed out in like two bits of dialogue.

Anyway, instead Germain is building his power base: hoard money as the new means of power, purge anyone who isn't as radicalized as him, and recruit new blood. Far simpler to manage without deliberately inflating grain prices to incite a revolution in order to kill a king and make the populous desperate for a leader again.

Next: Élise. She is what Ezio looks like if things went slightly differently. Single minded, dismissive of anything that doesn't get her closer to Germain, self-absorbed in her own pain and indignant of anyone else's, impatient, impulsive, and just a little bit manipulative of Arno to get what she wants. The game paints these qualities as tragic. It's not. It's abusive.

There are three lines from the game that we always go back to: "Stop being such a baby," from the beginning, "Don't you dare take that tone with me," from a scene coming up, and her visceral verbal beat-down here. We didn't notice it the first time we played the game because she and Arno have really good chemistry, but the second time the two of us felt uncomfortable with those lines, because they were signs that she didn't acknowledge Arno's feelings. Even here, "You'd better come back to me," during Bellec's betrayal had a tinge of manipulation to our ears, and it was these feelings that spurred us to do the rewrite, because after the second play-through and
especially during the research for the fic, we came to the conclusion that she doesn't love Arno.

When we started talking about mental illness as a theme instead of flacid love story, a lot of our ideas stemmed from this conclusion and, well, it's all up there on the screen.

Any other notes are small in comparison: we start to see the Council is a little divided over Arno's progress to this point, Peletier's assassination is completely overshadowed by history - but we again try to show how chaotic the Revolution is by making a completely separate party the one responsible for the assassination. (I think that's the third time we've done that to Arno. Huh...) The map Arno's reading before he's pulled underground is one of the reference maps we used when writing the fic, Bellec's language is still in Arno's head even years later - Arno's self-worth is falling off a cliff the longer he's awake and he's yet again pulled a couple of all-nighters in a row and is completely strung out when all of this happens.

As for Cosette and the others, well...

Next chapter: Dust and falling apart.
"And don't waste our time again."

"Oui, Citoyens, oui, I'm so sorry for the confusion," Cosette said quickly, nodding and keeping her gaze down. The two city guards left, and as soon as she felt safe she moved to the roofs. Marcel was there, having played the body coming miraculously alive. "Where is Fabre?" she asked.

"Over there," Marcel pointed, his green surcoat smudged. Cosette could just see the thief, at the edge of a square of some kind, and the two moved quickly to him. "What's happened?" Cosette asked.

"Some kind of fight," Fabre said, palm rubbing his stump. "Couldn't hear it from here, but it didn't look good. She left ten minutes ago; he's still in shock."

"I wonder what she said..."

"Who goes down?" Marcel asked.

"That's obvious," Fabre answered, "Cosette."

Cosette climbed down to the ground behind the square and pulled her petticoats back on, looking more like she was in a gown and hiding the culottes underneath. She stole a shawl from a stand and wrapped it around her shoulders to look more womanly, and entered the square. Arno stood off center, stock still. "Citoyen Dorian?" she asked gently, but got no response. She looked to the spice stand nearby in askance, and the businessman made a gesture akin to don't ask.

She circled around into Arno's line of vision, and he was ghastly: his face was white to the point of ashen, eyes bloodshot again. Blood splatter peppered his blue surcoat, too small for people around to see, and his left arm hung at an odd angle. Oh, this was bad. She had seen this before, when Mirabeau had been murdered. The Café and Charlotte had hidden him away for the most part, but she still knew. Cosette touched his arm gently, giving him time to get used to her presence, but he just stared at nothing, face sunken in and death-like.

"Arno?" she asked.

Slowly, his gaze turned to her, and his eyes were haunted and moist. He finally registered she was there, Cosette could tell as it bled onto his face, and all to suddenly the shock wore off and the emotion came back in a rush. His face went from ashen to bright pink, and then his legs buckled. Marcel and Fabre were already there, helping Cosette to keep him from falling, and someone pulled a chair up for him to sit in. "Wine," someone said, "Get him some wine!"

"Cosette," Arno said, and he was utterly broken.

Propriety be damned, she wrapped her arms around him, but he moaned in pain, hand coming up to hold his shoulder.

"Diable," Marcel cursed, "It's popped out of its socket."

"Let me in," Fabre said, "I know how to set it. Cosette, keep him talking, Marcel, help me grip him."
“Arno,” Cosette said, keeping her voice down in the crowd. “Arno, tell me what happened.”

“She said...” His words were low and so lost, there was an air of confusion and sadness and hopelessness. “They should have left me on the street...”

Marcel hissed, fists curling into tight balls and shaking, and the three of them started to realize how bad this was going to be.

“She said... someone named Cormac killed my father...”

“She said I don't have the stomach...”

“She doesn't need me...”

“She's not mine to save...”

Fabre, poking and maneuvering around Arno, finally wrenched, and Cosette watched the shoulder slide back to where it was supposed to be.

The strain was too much, and Arno fainted.

The three looked at each other, worried and uncertain. “What do we do?” Marcel asked quietly.

“We take him back to the Sanctuary,” Fabre answered, more experienced. His face was hard and closed off. “We don't have a choice. The entire Brotherhood was out there and saw him fighting Jacobins and running with de la Serre. We can't sweep this under the rug.”

“But he was avenging his father,” Marcel said, hands still shaking. “Family is everything. He should be allowed that right.”

“Should be and are, are two different things,” Fabre said. “We might not be able to stop the blow, but we can try to dull the blade. Marcel, go to Café Théâtre and let Charlotte and Augustin know what's happened. If they're not there yet, wait for them, don't let them go underground until you've explained everything. Charlotte might have an idea. We'll get him underground. I'll go get some smelling salts.”

The two men disappeared, and Cosette was left with the unconscious Arno in a square that watched discretely but, in the end, didn't care about the events. Cosette wished she could carry Arno's weight to an alley where he could have some privacy. She wrapped an arm around his good shoulder, holding him as her mamem had when she was a child, wishing she could help him through the trial he was about to endure on top of everything else.

The failure to get Germain was blow enough, but his lover clearly didn't handle it well. That, Cosette could forgive, she knew what frustration of that level could do to a person, but the things she said in her anger... never taking Arno in? Not needing him? Cosette could think of no sharper words to use to cut those bonds, and she worried that Arno wouldn't recover. He was a romantic, and Cosette had known from when they first met that he had loved someone with all his heart.

... Maître Beylier. She would have to talk to Maître Beylier, try and get him to see. Her teacher was reserved but always gentle. He would have to understand. Anything to lessen the punishment.

Fabre came back with salts and held them under Arno's nose. He stirred slowly at first before his eyes snapped open and he turned to the side, heaving and finally expelling the food Cosette had given him early that morning. His entire body was rejecting what had happened to him.
"Easy, easy, Arno," Fabre said, patting his back. "Here, drink this."

In his hand Fabre placed a glass of wine. It took several seconds for Arno to put the thoughts together, but once he did he downed the glass in one long gulp, gasping as he finished. Fabre gave him a second glass, and then a third, but refused when Arno held out his glass for a fourth. "You'll need your wits," he said simply. "Come on, let's get you home."

"... I don't have a home..."

Cosette's heart broke to hear him say that. "Yes, you do," she corrected, helping him stand. "You have one with us."

They got Arno vaguely walking, and they started moving him to the nearest entrance to the sewers.

This is what the Council knew before the execution of Louis XV:

Arno Dorian was following the rules. He did as he was told, and was slowly – very, slowly – ingratiating himself amongst the Brotherhood. Jérôme Tissot – not an easy man to sway – had expressed gratitude that Dorian had come to the brotherhood, as did his wife Camille for the advice given to her husband on how to cope after her near-death.

There were unconfirmed sightings of Élise de la Serre being back in Paris. Sophie had asked Charlotte directly if the Templar woman had sought out Dorian, and she had been told no.

Then, today:

The sun set, the last of the Assassins reported in, and all of their reports said the same thing:

Arno Dorian was back with Élise de la Serre.

Chasing François Germain and shedding blood at every turn.

Sophie and the others were beside themselves, and left trying to piece it all together.

They looked back over every report that Arno had made in the last four months, trying to glean anything from them, only to discover that the tenor of his reports had subtly shifted; that is to say, his normally detailed reports suddenly had segments of time that were unaccounted for. His ledgers from Café Théâtre showed that he took more time off – something he had never, ever done before. Without context, it implied that he at last felt comfortable enough to take time off, but now they knew it was to meet with de la Serre.

Next was the mission at Palais Luxembourg. Guillaume, now out in the front trying to mitigate the war with Austria, had not been there to dole out assignments for the better part of two weeks. Sophie and Hervé had both assumed the other had given out the mission, but neither had. That led to pulling in Marcel, whose fists were shaking, to question how he had come about the mission.

"Arno recruited me," he said with confusion. "He said that we were after Thomas Lobit-Lévesque and trying to track him through his wife. The mission went off without a hitch."

"Except that we did not assign the mission," Hervé had said, lips thin and voice hard. "What exactly was your assignment? What was Dorian's?"

The debrief had taken over an hour: find Lobit-Lévesque, except it turned into rescue Lobit-Lévesque, lockpicking and climbing that he was never more than adequate with – a mission like
this would have been better assigned to one of the more physical members of the Brotherhood. They asked why Marcel thought he had been chosen, and his answer was thus:

"He saw me. After August Tenth, he saw that my bookshop had been raided and that I was... well, I was in a state. He gave me a chance to make a difference, to pull me out of my *malaise* and remind me why we do what we do. *Maîtres,* please, don't turn this into something it's not. I cannot express how much that mission helped me. He single-handedly got me back on my feet and my head on straight. He looked out for a Brother, he looked out for *family,* don't turn this into a conspiracy."

"Then tell us what his assignment was. Tell us where he was and what he did."

But Marcel couldn't do it. Dorian gave lip service to looking for papers, but they all knew what had actually happened – Templar Marie Lévesque had been found dead of "food poisoning."

Once they understood that they looked back over the disappearance of other known Templars. Frédéric Rouille had been lost in the September Massacres earlier, but at the time they had assumed it was because of the nature of the massacres. Now they wondered, now they had to determine if Dorian was accounted for that evening.

They checked with Cosette first, and she resolutely tried to plea to Guillaume. "*S'il-vous plaît,*" she begged. "More has happened to him in the last twelve hours that can be reasonably endured."

"Why?" Guillaume asked. "What happened last night that you tried to cover?"

Cosette shook her head. "He wouldn't tell me, he didn't dare."

"Because he knew he was breaking his restrictions," Hervé said.

"Because he knew how you would react!" Cosette countered. "None of you have trusted him, even after learning what horrible damage Pierre Bellec had done to him, and he did not want us to be in trouble with him – if you think about it, he was looking after the Brotherhood – he was following the Creed!"

"No," Guillaume said, gently, "He was protecting himself."

"*Maître,* please! De la Serre has rejected him completely, he is distraught!"

"As he was when she rejected him before," Sophie said, "And he came here."

"*Maître. Maîtres!*

Guillaume had to escort her out and speak to her, and Sophie rubbed her face.

"He's manipulative," Hervé said. "Turning his friends against us like that."

"Not necessarily," the Mentor replied.

"Sophie, you can't seriously think there's anything to salvage after this, is there? He's defied the Creed at every turn. Killing people without sanction, running around in public where all could see him, he's compromised the brotherhood more than once. He broke all three tenets *just* today – what other sins has he committed since returning to de la Serre? Remember, Peletier was brazenly murdered just last night, we can't rule out that he was the one with the sword – and we know he lied about it; he said to our faces that he was studying maps under the assumption that we were going to summon him. He was studying maps – assuming he was – because he and de la Serre were going to look for Germain."
Fabre stared at the Council, giving them a long, level look. "Il a foiré," he admitted. "And he fucked up bad. Nobody is going to question that. He consorted with a Templar and went after someone he wasn't assigned to. I don't want to admit that, none of us do, but he did, and that can't be ignored."

"... But?" Sophie prompted.

"There isn't a person in this room that doesn't know his circumstances," Fabre said, rubbing his palm against his severed elbow. "Raised in ignorance under a Templar household, abused by the Steward and favored by the Maître, uncertain of his place and then held responsible for the death of said Maître. He comes to us thinking he has nothing and is instead given Bellec – and you all already know my opinion of what that bastard did to fuck that boy up even more. He suffers even more abuse – this time by our own hands – and now that he's gone to the only person who was consistently nice to him we're all going to act surprised that he aligned himself with a Templar."

"Are you actually trying to argue clemency?" Hervé asked, incredulous.

"No," Fabre said, putting his hand on his hip. "But that boy has so many conflicting messages and lessons in his head that he'll take who knows how long to sort it out. He wasn't grabbed as a child like I was, given time to untangle the knots in his head. He was underground for barely a year and we tossed him out to the world thinking he knew what he was doing, and we kept him above ground thinking he knew what he was doing even after we learned what Bellec had done to him, because he can pass as functioning. He's not. I repeat: il a foiré, but he's not beyond saving."

After that was Charlotte and Augustin, they were forced to admit that they had known de la Serre was back and hadn't said anything, trying to give Arno the trust he'd worked so hard for.

"I wish you were in a position to see what I see, Sophie," Charlotte said, "See how long it took to call us all by our given names, how long it took for him to feel worthy of being Steward, how badly he took the death of Honoré and Bellec affected him. I wish you could see how much he's grown."

"But he hasn't grown enough."

"We concede that," Augustin said, "He is a slower learner than most, but the progress he has made absolutely must be considered in his sentencing."

"Should we discount the lies, as well?" Guillaume asked. "Not only by him, but by you, two, as well? Élise de la Serre enters the Café Théâtre – you, Charlotte, have café with her – and neither of you report it back to us?"

"He was finally trusting us," Charlotte said. "He was finally feeling comfortable. If I'd had more time, he would have come to us."

"But now his time is up."

The Council was not heartless. Sophie listened to all of them and took their words to heart, understood the points they were making. She didn't want to let Dorian go.

But they couldn't afford the damage Arno was capable of, either.

It was after dark when he was finally dragged to the chapel, where Interviews were held, where Memorials were held.

And where trials were argued.
"What in God's name happened at the Place de la Révolution today?" Sophie demanded, taking an aggressive tone to elicit reaction. "You were ordered to watch from Louis' statue. That is not what happened. Why did you leave your post?"

Cosette and Fabre had said that Dorian had been in a state when they brought him underground. Now, hours later, it seemed his wits were about him. There was a madness in his eyes, a desperation in his frame and anxious energy that kept him far from still. "The Templar Grandmaitre was there," he said, "Germain. He's the man who killed Monsieur de la Serre and—"

"You were told to leave that investigation to others," Guillaume said. "I have told you that for almost two years, that that investigation was being handled by others."

"Yes, but listen—"

"No," Sophie interrupted. "You listen. After Mirabeau's death you and I had a long conversation about rules. You flaunted them under de la Serre because you thought you had his favor. You flaunted them again when you killed Chrétien Lafrenière without sanction. You were told to learn the value of rules, to follow them. Now we know that you have failed yet again, and this time there is no excuse of improper training. You found and murdered someone under the covers of the September Massacres, you infiltrated and murdered known Templar agent Marie Lévesque, and we've just now received reports that you were there when Louis-Michel le Peletier died. That is three targets that you were not given permission to take."

"They were Templars!" Dorian said. "They plotted with Germain to kill Monsieur de la Serre!"

"I knew this would happen," Guillaume said with a sigh. "I told Mirabeau that you were too obsessed with your personal vendettas."

"But this is why I joined the Brotherhood!"

"Do you not mean the 'cult'?" Hervé asked, voice low and disappointed. "Did you think we would not know your opinions of us given how loose your tongue is? You did not join the Brotherhood, you joined a cult: Not because you shared our ideals, or felt called to service. For revenge."

"For redemption!" Dorian pleaded, very nearly begging. "Please, I don't have anything left! I have nowhere else to go!"

"You should have thought of that before liaising with de la Serre," Hervé countered.

"And you should have trusted me!" Arno shouted right back, anger taking over. "I came here starving and desperate and all any of you did was stand up there like you are right now and judge me a Templar and a traitor before I'd even done anything! Now Germain is out there shifting the entire structure of the Templars away from the Second Estate and to the bourgeoisie and use all the money that he's been amassing to orchestrate his schemes from even further in the shadows!"

"Do you think we did not know that?" Guillaume demanded, unforgiving. "We banned you from the investigation, that does not mean we sat idle."

"This is what you don't understand," Sophie said. "Our work is multifaceted and multistaged. When you told us about the silversmith Germain we started getting someone into his confidence immediately. We learned what he was and have been spying on him for months. Did you not notice that once you threw a smoke bomb the attacks stopped? That was the result of Jean-Louis Rivière. He is dead now, from you or de la Serre we don't know."
"Except it was your flouting of the Creed that resulted in this," Hervé said, pressing the point. "Germain didn't die today, but he would have at a later date if you had done as you were told."

Sophie watched very carefully: Arno staggered back, eyes wide as he realized a Brother had died as the result of his actions. She didn't have the intuition that Charlotte did, but the shock was real. It was as she surmised – he had been lost to the emotion of the moment, his love for the de la Serre girl.

She sighed. Arno had made so much progress – it was slow, sometimes teeth-grindingly slow, but he was showing loyalty to those he was close to, and by extension loyalty to others. If they had had more time, if de la Serre had not returned, then he would have grown into the Brotherhood, but now it was obvious: he would always choose Élise de la Serre first. Every time. Without fail.

"I didn't know..." Dorian said softly, acoustics of the chapel making the words drift up to the Council. "I didn't know!" he repeated, louder. "How could I have known if I was banned from the investigation? What was I supposed to do?"

"Let go," Guillaume answered. "Your name was erased from history for that very reason when you Died, so you could let go. Let go your vendetta, let go your guilt for de la Serre, let go of the past."

"But I can still change it!" Arno shouted. "I can erase that mistake! I can fix it! I can—"

"Call it what you will," Sophie said, making her voice dismissive. "You have defied the orders of this Council repeatedly and for months. You have pursued targets without sanction. You have flouted the Creed at every step."

"Please!" Arno shouted, if possible even more desperate. "I beg you! Give me another chance! I have nowhere else to go-!"

"Then recite the Creed," Sophie said.

This was it, this was his final chance. If he had learned anything, anything at all, about the Creed then they would keep him, pull him underground and teach him. It would take an unbelievable amount of work, as long as a decade, but it could be done. They had saved people from the brink before, and Sophie knew how close Dorian – Arno - was to giving up on everything. This was when the Creed could save him, if he could even say one thing vaguely close to the Creed, she was willing to try. Please, Sophie silently prayed, please have learned something.

Dorian recognized the test, pursed his lips, but he had no idea what to say.

Oh, Dorian...

"Then I have no choice but to call for a vote of expulsion. Maître Beylier?"

Guillaume stared for a long time, the smallest of tells showing his regret over this. Finally, he closed his eyes and nodded. "Agreed."

"Maître Quemar?"

Hervé answered much more readily. "Agreed."

"Arno Dorian," Sophie said with a heavy heart, "You are attainted. Your rank and title are stripped from you, and you are hereby exiled from the Brotherhood of Paris. Take his hood and hidden blade."
They had picked a sister that Dorian didn't know, sparing both he and his friends from having this particular ceremony being done by a friend. Beaumont and others had volunteered, but Sophie was not so heartless as to pour salt into an open wound. The sister, spoke quietly, Dorian shaking his head and backing up.

"You cannot be serious. Please, s'il-vous plaît! I have nowhere else to go! I have nothing without this! I am nothing without this! Don't turn me out, don't turn me out!"

"The decision of this Council if final. We give you leave to go."

And Arno's shattered world turned to dust.

Charlotte had only had her eagle united with Arno's once, on a mission with Lysette. Arno had tried to describe her eagle as emotions and he wasn't far off. Her eagle wasn't overly strong, but she had dedicated years to learning all its subtlety and how to use it to her best advantage. That was why she was best as an information gatherer at the Café Théâtre. Between studying body language, facial expressions, speech patterns and her eagle, she often had the best grasp of feelings at any given moment. Her understanding became better and better the more she knew someone. Augustin, for example, didn't even need her to use her eagle to know how he was at any given moment. Years of knowing him and his habits, their closeness, meant she often understood without her eagle. If she needed her eagle for him, it was because Augustin was unconscious.

It was how she was able to observe Arno and know that he was becoming more and more like an Assassin. There was a fundamental responsibility he felt, which over time, she knew was from the guilt he felt over his father's death. He worked hard, and once he understood why something was important, he would double his efforts to improve. It was his ultimate flaw. He needed to know why something needed to be learned. It was why Arno was so successful in the physical aspects of being an Assassin. It didn't take much explanation to understand why a cherry bomb or aiming with a phantom blade was necessary. And so, Arno became proficient in it. Once he saw the value of climbing and getting out of crowds, Arno became proficient. Once he understood finances for a café, he became proficient in it.

Philosophy, however, was always his downfall.

It was clear that Sophie didn't understand. Charlotte watched from the shadows as Sophie asked Arno to explain the Creed. Oh, Charlotte saw what Sophie was going for. A last chance to redeem something that could make them keep Arno from the punishment he earned. But Sophie didn't see what Charlotte did, because she wasn't working with Arno from day to day.

Charlotte watched with her eagle, as Arno, already suffering from de la Serre's rejection, a tenuous hold on something that helped him understand his place in the world, and watched as that last grip shattered. It tore through her heart the same way it tore through Arno's, and she had to silence her eagle before she was brought to tears.

This was it.

Arno was now at rock bottom.

Charlotte watched him stagger as his hidden blade was removed. She could see the downward spiral, had seen shades of it already, and her heart bled.

The Council had retreated back up to the Observatory, and the woman that had removed Arno's hidden blade quietly and gently started to guide him. Charlotte stepped forward to take over.
Arno followed along listlessly.

Augustin joined on the other side, and together they kept others from getting to close as they brought Arno up to the Café, and then to his room. The staff saw Arno's insensate condition and soon Yvette was bringing up pâtés and Jacques was bringing café-au-lait. Charlotte shooed them all out. Arno would need time and people hovering over him wouldn't do.

Augustin gave her one look, then risked leaning in to kiss her before he disappeared to deal with the staff and keeping them occupied.

Arno sat by the window, looking around like everything was unfamiliar. It likely felt that way, now that he'd been attainted. Charlotte sat at Arno's breakfast table by his bed and decided how to best proceed.

Arno might not be able to recite the Creed, but he was on his way to learning it. It was why Charlotte had argued so adamantly to let him stay. Élise de la Serre was the only reason Arno was regressing. She had established very clear patterns of behavior and patterns were always so easy to fall back into. Clean breaks were best in breaking those patterns. It made one have to think of new patterns. It was how Arno had improved when he'd first arrived, she wasn't there to keep reinforcing old patterns.

Maybe, once, Arno and Élise might have been a good match. It was clear to anyone with eyes how much Arno loved her, but the de la Serre that Charlotte had met was so broken that simple love wouldn't be enough to fix her.

If she wanted to be fixed.

Because one had to want to change.

Charlotte had sought change and her life was now a vast improvement to what it once was. She had Augustin, the Café, and Arno and the staff as her children. Arno wanted to change as well. It was why he had sought out the Assassins, though he wasn't aware of it on a conscious level. But seeking change meant cutting away what hurt, and Arno wasn't aware of how badly de la Serre could hurt him. She sighed softly.

"I need to go," Arno said, looking straight to Charlotte.

"You will always be our steward, Assassin or not," she replied. S'il vous plaît, let this child heal here.

Pure gratitude flashed across his face in a heartfelt smile before looked down. "I can't stay," he replied softly. "We're... it's too close."

Charlotte nodded. Being above one of the many sewer entrances to the Sanctuary, and having many Assassins frequent the Café, would be difficult. To Charlotte's mind, it would be for the better, but if Arno couldn't see it...

"You will still always have a place here."

His eyes watered.

She stood. "For the staff, it might be best if you disappeared tomorrow morning. Stay up here, think about what you'll take with you. Augustin and I have things we need to give you as well."

He nodded.
Late that evening, after the staff worriedly left, Charlotte and Augustin headed up to Arno's room. Unsurprisingly, he already had a bag packed. He had clearly eaten everything the staff had brought up, numerous dishes at his little table sat empty awaiting the trip downstairs for Célestine to clean. And he was dressed to leave.

*Please, don't leave...*

Charlotte, her hair down and unpinned, merely offered a suggestion. "Get some sleep here, tonight," she said softly. "You're exhausted now. You won't get as far."

Arno offered a broken smile. "I don't think I could," he replied. He shook his head. "I couldn't."

Sadly, Charlotte understood why.

So she took a silent breath and stood forward. "Some money," she said. "Both to give you passage or to get a room, or meal, or whatever you need."

Arno stared openly. "But the Café—"

"We're making enough money that we can afford this," she replied firmly. "You've earned this. And more. We wouldn't be in our standing now if it weren't for you."

"But—"

Charlotte ignored him and placed it in his bag.

Augustin stepped forward and held out the most important of their gifts. "No Assassin should ever be unarmeed," he said. He laid a simple, but sturdy, sword across the bag as well. "You should become a teacher, wherever you end up. It will earn you money and keep you healthy." Then he pulled out one more item.

"That's—"

"What you've earned," Charlotte replied gently. "I don't use it much," she said lightly. "Most of my work is here at the Café. You may be banished from here, but you *are* still an Assassin."

"I can't take your hidden blade."

"You can," she said sweetly. "I insist."

"Keep thinking of the Creed," Augustin said heavily. "You may not understand it yet. But we believe you will. *Rien est vrai. Tout est permis*. Your room will still be here when you return."

Arno looked pained. "I doubt I'll ever return."

"You will," Charlotte replied. "We believe it."

"You two have done so much..."

"We believe in you, Arno," they both said.

"Be safe," Charlotte said. "Above all, be safe."

Arno nodded, and left out the window-doors to climb down the façade of the Café.

Charlotte finally let her tears spill.
"You really think he'll be back?" A voice from the door said. Augustin and Charlotte turned to see Claude there. "He's sleeping with that Templar."

Charlotte merely smiled gently.

Augustin smiled as well, squeezing her tight. "He will."

Claude grunted. "Then he will be an Assassin."

The following morning, after spending the night holding Augustin close, Charlotte sat down in Arno's usual chair with the staff for the morning meeting. There were immediate frowns as a result. Charlotte let her eagle flicker to get a read of the room, seeing how there was disappointment, sadness, and very little surprise.

Paul, their intendent, was the first to speak up. "How long for this tryst?"

Yvette scoffed. "You weren't here when that woman came the first time. If Citoyenne Gouze is sitting there, then Citoyen Dorian is gone."

Paul shook his head in disagreement. "Citoyen Dorian has far too deep a sense of responsibility to abscond with that woman for days or weeks on end. He'll be back as soon as he's straightened out."

"Arno packed all of his personal possessions that he could carry," Charlotte said softly, "and emptied all the money he's saved for himself. He will not be back for the foreseeable future."

Paul's jaw dropped, Yvette offered a soft "hrmph", Célestine's eyes widened, and Jacques muttered a soft curse.

"She broke his heart, didn't she?" Célestine looked around. "That b—er, she broke his heart. She must have."

"I told Citoyen Dorian that she was no good for him," Yvette frowned deeply. "But first loves never see that."

"She doesn't love him," Jacques said quietly. "She was just using him."

"I think," Charlotte interrupted, "from what I've heard from Citoyen Dorian and from the very brief conversation I had with her, that she did love him, once. But something happened. And now... her heart is ice."

Augustin, usually so quiet in these meetings, let out a sigh. "I spoke with him before he left. That young man is hurting. He needs to deal with that pain first. He can't see past it."

Charlotte smiled softly.

"He will be back," Augustin continued. "I think we all know that. Going over why won't change anything. But he will return."

"So," Charlotte looked to the staff. "We need to plan on surviving without him. But we'll keep a place for him. This is his home now. He will always be able to come back."

From there it was discussed how to divvy up Arno's responsibilities.

Charlotte buried her sadness deep and simply stole a moment with Augustin after it was all over to just hold him and be held. From there, it was time to bury herself in her work.
She spent her days in the Café, surrounded by ledgers and books, seeming to be an overwrought widow trying to handle a business left to her. She worked intensively with the drama troupe (would need a new one soon) to put on plays that reflected the times, but also had her subtle touch to try and nudge at least their customers to less bloodshed and less radicalism. But mostly, she listened. She listened to opinions, if a small play sparked conversation, she took notes on what she heard. At the end of the week, she wrote up her report and sent it down to the Council. Marcel, Fabre, anyone who ran a shop, did something similar. With newspapers like Marat’s being incredibly biased, they could provide a far more accurate read of the pulse of the city.

February 5, 1793

Élise, after everything that happened at Place de la Révolution, had broken past the ice in her heart and felt a dark, burning, consuming rage. Germain had been right there, she had seen him casually talking to Arno, and now he was still alive. There were not enough words to express her rage, she had returned to her quarters and had kicked and punched and banged at everything until the innkeeper had knocked on her door, asking if she were alright. Her response was to hold a gun to his head and declare that if he bothered her again she would use it.

The anger burned in her for days, days.

Germain had escaped. He was still out there. Still free.

Arno had failed her!

She couldn't believe him, couldn't believe the one person in all of France – indeed all of Europe – who could break through her malaise and make her feel had betrayed her so completely.

First the letter to her father and now this...! Where were his priorities?

It was the better part of two weeks before she could calm down enough to breath. To think. To plan.

She was back to square one. Only it wasn’t completely square one – she had a name, a face, a history. She didn’t have a location, but she had a direction: Germain’s accomplices. The man might be hidden from the world but the heads of his hydra were not, and it had been through them that she had gleaned his appearance at the execution to begin with. She merely had to find more accomplices.

That thought brought her calm, the fire in her spirit ebbing at last. She would have to have Arno tell her where to look next.

... Where even was he?

Always, as children, when the inevitable happened and Arno got them in trouble he would seek her out later, apologize to her, and the pair would make up and get back to their mischief. It was the natural order of how their adventures ended: Arno would slip up or give them away, they would both be punished, and he would come to her with his sorrys. She determined her forgiveness based on the size of the offense, and then the next adventure could be had.

Only now, two weeks later, he had yet to return to her, begging forgiveness. What did that mean? Surely not that he thought he was right, betraying her wishes like he had. But then... where was he? What was keeping him?

That was why she was marching through the winter flurries to the only place she knew to find him:
Café Théâtre.

She entered the small establishment, stamping her feet to rid them of muddy snow and shaking out her coat. A small wisp of a serving girl gasped upon seeing her, dropping a tray and very nearly running down the hall to the servants' wing. Élise ignored the child, instead moving into the theater proper to find that woman. Only two tables had customers, midafternoon as it was, so she marched to a counter to find a man on middling years openly staring at her, towel and dish forgotten in his hands.

"Tell Arno that I am here," she said.

The serving man stared at her, gaping, and Élise couldn't understand the reaction.

"Have you lost all semblance of speech?" she demanded. "I'm here to see Arno."

"Ah, mademoiselle."

Élise turned to see the woman from before, in her ornately feathered hat and green gown. "I'm here —" Élise started.

The woman held up a hand. "I know why you are here," she said. "Let us take a walk. You will find the staff not particularly receptive to your... approach."

"I've neither the time not the patience to make small talk," Élise corrected.

The madame said nothing, simply smiled and turned, moving out of the theater. Élise had no choice but to follow; the man at the counter and that child of a serving girl were not going to speak to her. She followed the madame through the foyer she had entered and heard a hissing whisper from the servants' wing.

"That's her all right. Just let me at her – I'll give her a piece of my mind!"

"No, Madame, you can't solve this with your spoon..."

"I can see why Citoyen Dorian was so besotted..."

"Not besotted, Monsieur Mercier, I tell you that woman is a curse!"

Élise ignored the comments, following the madame, what was her name...? The snow was still falling, and the woman moved outside the main driveway of the café, around the corner and to a small side street before stopping and turning to face the redhead.

"I warned you his heart would not survive a break," she said calmly.

"I have done nothing to break his heart," Élise said, not in the mood for whatever point this woman thought she was making. "He's the one who betrayed me."

"Of course," the woman said. "Telling him you should never have taken him in, that you should have left him on the street to die as a child, that was all the result of him 'betraying' you."

Élise didn't have time for this. "Whatever is said between us is private," she said, "and none of your business."

"It is when you drive one of Paris' hardest workers and gentlest souls out of the city to drink himself to death."
Élise blinked for a moment, processing the words. "You mean he's not here?" she asked.

"Gone. He left for supplies the morning of the execution and was back half drunk and packing his things. He had disappeared like smoke by the morning."

"That has nothing to do with me."

"Doesn't it?" the woman asked, tilting her head, her feathers flopping about in the winter breeze. "What betrayal could have possibly been so bad that you revoke his very right to live by saying you should never have taken him in? What horrible thing did he do that precipitated you tearing his heart out and ripping it to shreds, for him to think his has nothing and is nothing?"

"You've no idea what you're talking about," Élise said, the anger inside her starting to grow. It had never bloomed so fast before. "You weren't there, you've no idea what he's done, and I will repeat: it is not your concern. He drove me to it."

"I see," the woman said. "So, he is responsible for your saying something so damaging."

"You haven't lived my life," Élise countered. "You've no idea what I've been through, you've no right to judge."

"Why? Will I 'drive' you to point a gun at my chest and demand my silence? Are simple questions justified for such an exaggerated response? Are you so incapable of controlling your own emotions that other people – no, simple questions – trigger a completely hysterical response?"

"I'm not the one being hysterical here!" Élise countered, fed up. "Where is Arno?"

"I already told you: gone."

"You're lying; you think you're protecting him from some vile harpy, when he's the one who's betrayed me twice over!"

"Then why would you even want to see him?"

Élise growled. They were talking in circles. The malaise was burning away, the only emotion she had left – the anger – was bubbling up faster than she ever knew was possible, and all she wanted to do was hit this stupid woman. "Where is he?" she demanded.

"Nobody knows."

"Where is he?"

The woman smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

Fed up, Élise grabbed a shoulder and shoved this harlot into the stone behind her. "I'm getting tired of repeating myself."

The bitch kept smiling, bland and not at all intimidated. "I can't tell you what I don't know," she answered.

Élise saw red at that point, as bright as she had when she realized Germain had escaped two weeks ago, and she snarled, pulling back and shoving the bitch into the wall again before twisting away and powering up the street, passing by a tall dark man at the entrance of the alley and cursing in every language she knew.

If the bitch wasn't going to help her, then she would just find Arno herself.
As February progressed, Paris held elections for a new mayor. Jean-Nicolas Pache, a Girondist hated by other Girondists. Bitter and cantankerous, Pache was supported clearly by Marat and Charlotte couldn't see any good coming from that at all. The Girondists were in charge of the Convention and were a moderating force, but the sans-culottes were supporters of the Jacobins and both were huge in numbers and always gaining more when change didn't happen fast enough for the citizens of Paris.

But it was at the end of February that was interesting.

"Cosette," Charlotte greeted with a smile. "This is a pleasant surprise. Come, we'll talk in the library."

"Merci," she said softly, face scrunched up.

Charlotte gave a glance to Jacques and he nodded. Soon, the two of them were sitting by the fire with warm café and a few pastries.

"Now," Charlotte said gently, "what has you so upset?"

Cosette was staring down at the cup in her hands in her lap. "I found him," she replied softly.

At first, Charlotte raised a brow. Who had she been assigned to find? Why would an assignment upset her? Why was she—oh...

Charlotte sank back, suddenly feeling very old indeed. "And where did Arno run to?"

"Versailles."

Charlotte let herself wince. Years ago, when the Women's March stalked through the rainy October to bring the King back to Paris, Cosette and Arno's friends had checked in on him frequently afterwards, quietly explaining that Versailles was apparently a painful place for Arno to be. It didn't take her eagle to see why. Versailles was where his father had died, where Monsieur de la Serre had died, where Arno's life had initially fallen apart before the Assassins took him in. And now that Élise de la Serre had rejected him and the Assassins had attainted him, with all that suffering, of course he would go back to Versailles. Arno likely believed he belonged there.

Charlotte needed something far stronger than coffee at the moment.

"How bad?" she asked softly.

"Bad," Cosette replied, tears welling up in the firelight. "He's... he says he's teaching fencing, but he works as a laborer and spends his nights drunk."

Not good. Not good at all.

"I tried to talk to him..." Tears started leaking. "But he just smiled politely and offered me a drink. I don't think he heard a single word I said."

"Likely not," Charlotte said softly. "We always hid the wine when Arno was hurting. No one there will do that and he'll just keep falling into the bottle."

Cosette looked up, tears glistening. "We have to do something! I don't care if he was cast out, he's still one of us! What kinds of friends are we if we let him destroy himself?"

Charlotte reached out and placed her hand gently over Cosette's. This child was so young. She had
seen hardships, any who came to the Assassins had survived hardships, but she had never seen self-destruction before.

Some people were happy to destroy themselves. And outsiders could never stop someone truly set on that.

"We support Arno in any way we can," Charlotte said gently. "But we don't help him destroy himself. That is a very fine balance."

"He can stay with me, or Marcel, we can help him get back on his feet," Cosette said fiercely. "He doesn't have to do any assignments, just let him grieve. Help him through it."

Charlotte shook her head sadly. "We offered that for him here," she explained. "We were happy to keep him as our steward. But he did not wish to stay. We gave him money, but it is clear he's using it for drinking. Even if you were to take him in, it would be impossible to keep him from the wine if he's so set on drinking."

"I can't just sit back and do nothing!"

"You've done all you can," Charlotte replied. "You've intervened. You've shown you care. You've shown you want the best for him. He has to choose. As a member of our little political club, you of all people should understand that. Self-determination. Even if one chooses to waste away, that is still their choice. We await humanity to learn and grow. France is in the middle of a growth spurt. We don't know if we'll grow smarter or revert to worse, but France has chosen to learn."

"So, we just let him fall apart?"

"We pray that now that he's at the bottom, he will see us as the ladder to get back up. If all he's doing is staring at the ground, we can't lift his head for him."

Cosette let out a broken sob. "But that's just so sad!"

"I know," Charlotte replied heavily. Then she stood and pulled Cosette into a tight hug. Because Arno had to want to get help. If he wasn't there yet, the best they could do would be to wait.

As long as it took.

March dawned and Charlotte started to get worried. The National Convention created the Revolutionary Tribunal, a court dedicated solely to prosecuting political enemies. Things went downhill from there. Enragés were targeted swiftly with the death penalty for any reforms they put forward. Vendée revolted against the mass conscriptions because there was a war going on against Austria and so the death penalty was decreed to all the uprisers in Vendée. This led to a civil war going on at the same time as the war with Austria. Charlotte could not see how fighting two wars at the same time would do any good for France. To make matters even better, the Convention started a Revolutionary Surveillance Committee, to spy on their own people to find enemies of the Revolution.

No doubt what would happen to them.

And as April dawned, the day after Marat became head of the Jacobin club, Committee of Public Safety was formed, designed to be the chief executive body of the government with both a war and a civil war going on. Looking at who was on the Committee, Charlotte was grateful that it was both large, at twenty-five members, and while it was clear that the Montagne had the largest numbers, there were enough centrists and Girondists to balance. But giving all the war-time powers to that
Committee struck Charlotte as a bad idea. The Convention was supposed to be the government. So why was it making a committee the seat of power?

This couldn't go well.

Late in the evening, after everything in the Café was finally locked up for the night, Charlotte returned to her home wanting nothing more than to go straight to bed. What she wasn't expecting was to hear raised voices in the parlor once she came in.

Augustin was there, trying to calm down a shouting Marcel Pontmercy.

Charlotte gave a little sigh and headed to the kitchen to warm up something to drink. Raised voices continued, and she listened carefully. It seemed that Pontmercy had gone to find Arno at Versailles and he hadn't liked what he had found.

Tray loaded, Charlotte stepped in to the parlor. "Let's have a seat and talk," she said sweetly but firmly. They didn't need the neighbors hearing anything.

Manners settled over the men and they all sat by the fire.

Augustin sat by Charlotte and put an arm around her. He was frustrated, it seemed.

"Now," Charlotte continued after refreshments had been handed out, "I have only just arrived. Why are we shouting at each other like children?"

Pontmercy had the decency to blush and glance away.

"Ah... desolé, Augustin."

Imperceptibly, Charlotte felt Augustin sigh in relief. "Forgiven, Marcel. Please, start from the beginning."

Pontmercy took a sip, then pulled at his goatee. "I just came from Versailles. I had an assignment there, and that was finished swiftly."

Charlotte leaned back into Augustin's arm. "I doubt that the assignment was the problem," she said dryly.

Pontmercy actually snorted. "No. Just confirmation of rumors. That sort of thing. A Templar toady is setting up operations there. No, while I was there I thought... I'd talk to Arno."

"And it didn't go well, obviously," Augustin offered lightly.

"That would be an understatement."

"What happened?" Charlotte asked gently.

"He didn't talk. He ignored me," Pontmercy reached up and ran a hand through his hair roughly. "I never thought I'd see him like that. I know he uses wine when he's hurt, I did too after... well, after. But Arno is turning into a drunkard. He's getting red in the face like a heavy drinker does, much of his speech is slurred. Yet even as incapacitated as he was with all that wine in his veins, he still wouldn't talk to me. I tried for four days."

Oh yes, Charlotte reflected, frustration would build for that.

"It's like a child having a stubborn sulk," Pontmercy continued, anger returning to his voice. "I got
angrier and angrier. Arno is so much better than this."

"I think it's safe to say that Arno doesn't see himself as better than that," Augustin offered.

"That's what I don't understand!" Pontmercy set down his cup roughly and stood, stalking back and forth. "I kept trying to tell him to come back, to stop drinking, to be who he was! And for days he ignored me! Then, when he was blind-drunk, he told me to fuck off, and punched me in the face."

Charlotte choked on her sip. After a quick wipe of a napkin she looked to Augustin and noticed the fading bruise on his cheekbone, almost invisible in the candlelight. "Hmmm," she hummed. "I suppose a direct confrontation wasn't the best strategy."

"What else could I do?" Pontmercy shouted. "That's not Arno anymore!"

"For now, we leave him be," Augustin said. "Arno has made a decision, and we Assassins always let people make their own decisions. We don't act, we react. Arno is choosing to drink himself insensate. We have intervened as we can. The rest is up to him."

"But he's still choosing wrong!"

"And that is his choice," Charlotte said sadly.

And things just kept getting depressing. A scant week after Marat became the head of the Jacobins, the Convention called for his arrest for using his paper to incite violence and murder (they were just now noticing that?) and demands to suspend the convention. Marat was currently in hiding. Three days after that, the new mayor of Paris, Pache, called for the expulsion of twenty-three deputies of the Convention, all of whom were moderate Girondists. And just a week after that Marat was dragged before that Tribunal court and acquitted of all charges. Unsurprising given how many Girondists were just purged, even if many were found innocent, the point was made.

Keeping up with the news in Paris was difficult to say the least.

May came and things got even crazier. Paris demanded the Convention set a fixed maximum price for grain, which Charlotte just knew would leave farmers and grain exchanges in an uproar, Danton was getting more and more fed up with the Girondists and was just trying to make everyone focus on the war with Austria that was threatening their borders. Then the commander that Danton so publicly defended deserted, making many in Paris and the Convention lose all respect for him. The Revolt of Vendée was still ongoing, peasants digging in. France was splitting at the seams.

Charlotte worried when Yvette didn't come in after her day off. She bustled off to Yvette's apartment, and found their beloved cook puttering around her home incredibly upset.

"Citoyenne," Charlotte asked gently, "how are you doing?"

"It wasn't right," Yvette replied harshly, slamming down books she had been moving.

"A great deal in the world currently isn't right," Charlotte replied lightly. "Which part this time?"

"—in front of everyone!" Yvette kept walking, too much energy in her to sit and talk. Charlotte did her best to be understanding.

"Forgive me, but what happened?"
Yvette whirled, anger in her every line, mouth in a snarl. "You didn't hear? How does all of Paris not know this? Everyone had to have been there!"

"Then explain it to me," she said. "I was trapped with Paul helping to balance this month's budget yesterday. Neither of us left his office. What did I miss?"

Yvette sat down brusquely. "Yesterday, I was taking a walk. I try to stay fit and walk when I can. I thought yesterday I'd go by the Jardins de Tuileries. The weather was so nice, and that's where—Argh!"

And Yvette was up and pacing around again. "Citoyenne de Méricourt, she was at the Jardins, yesterday. Giving a speech."

Charlotte gave out a heavy sigh. "Let me guess, because she was speaking of giving women more rights, she was dismissed and ridiculed? Because she's a Girondist?"

Yvette turned with enough force to make her skirts swirl around her. "The Jacobin ladies, they stripped her naked and beat her! In front of everyone!"

Charlotte's jaw dropped. Anger rose in a surge and she desperately wanted to throw something or scream or just hold Augustin close. "Merde!" she swore.

"Exactly!" Yvette shouted. "She's been working so hard and they humiliate her like a whore!"

The two spent the rest of the afternoon raging about injustices.

Less than ten days later, the Girondists who controlled the Convention ordered the arrest of the extremist enragés Hérbert and Varlet. The following day Pache demanded that twenty-two Girondists be removed. The Convention, Pache and the Paris Commune and the Committee were all arguing constantly and ignoring the civil war in Vendée and the war with Austria.

It was a mess.

And no one seemed willing to back down on anything. No comments were ever walked back, no one ever tried to find a middle. It was all shouting and anger and rage. Everyone wanted things done now and no one seemed to understand that changes took time.

Charlotte was getting a headache from all of it.

So, she decided to spend a day away from the Café. Augustin gave her a warm hug, promised that he would keep the staff in order and wished her luck in relaxing. Granted, it might be better if she wasn't out on the streets with all the chaos, but she needed to be away from the familiarity of the Café and her home. She mostly spent her time on the Right Bank of the Seine. Her attire better suited amongst the wealthier citizens than crossing to the Left Bank where a number of the poorer residents resided. She wandered mostly, just looking around, studying, getting a feel for the people that was different than when she was listening to customers who were sipping or eating or being entertained.

She walked by several cafés, checking their prices, what they offered, and tried to determine how to keep a competitive edge. Hmmmm, outside seating... She didn't do that because she then wouldn't be able to hear anything, but Charlotte was currently enjoying the sun outside a small café with a light, chill soup against the warm day.

To her surprise, a small child, barely nine, covered in dirt and rags came over.
"Hello, enfant," she said gently. "How may I help?"

"You own a café?" the boy asked, eyes far too old as he watched her carefully.

"Oui," she replied. Without a word, she turned back to her meal, took the scant bread that came with her soup, and handed it to him, whole. "What can I do?"

The boy's eyes had widened, before returning to his shrewd, calculating look. "The king wants to see you," he said shortly.

She smiled sweetly, not letting anything the boy expected to show. "Ah, I was wondering. Tell him one hour at the old spot. He'll understand."

The boy was still perplexed, frowning far too severely for so young a face. But Charlotte pulled out a small sum of money, enough for a meal, and handed it to him. "Now be on your way."

Now, what did Fabre want?

An hour later and she was sitting at a bench just watching people as they walked by and listened. It would have been better if she had a book to read and be more unobtrusive, but this was fine. Fabre came by, looking around twice, before setting a blanket on the ground beside her and holding out his one arm to appear as if he was begging.

"Very good," she said lightly. "Your bodyguards?"

His head ever so slightly indicated direction, and without moving, Charlotte darted her eyes around to spot them pretending to fish.

"I take it you went out to see Arno," she said softly, looking across the street. "Citoyen Pontmercy was most distraught, as was Citoyenne Cosette."

"I thought I knew him," Fabre said without moving his lips. "He was learning. He was finally asking questions."

"And now?"

Fabre spit. "He's a shell. Town drunk. Not even trying to work properly, just taking odd-jobs to drink. Doesn't even have a place to stay. He's been wallowing at rock bottom."

Rock bottom indeed.

"He'll be back," she offered confidently.

"Don't see how," Fabre growled. "He could have been the best of us."

"He may yet still be so."

"Tch."

"When we die," Charlotte said softly, adjusting her petticoats to straighten invisible wrinkles, "we are reborn. Arno was dead, but I don't think he ever finished the rebirth. He didn't know how to leave his old life behind and how to be 'dead'. His time underground was too short."

Fabre grunted. "Wish I'd had a word with Bellec. I would have killed him myself."

"Hindsight," she said softly. "We all suffer from it. I should have been more insistent when I knew
de la Serre was back. I should have been more approachable. I should have gone to the Council sooner for an intervention. I should have gone to any of you, his friends. I should have, I should have."

Fabre gave a dark chuckle. "That about sums it up."

"Arno is dying again. We just need to wait for his proper rebirth."

"What I saw, he's content to die."

"Perhaps," Charlotte replied lightly. "I don't think so." Too many pieces of him were ingrained Assassin. He would be back. She was certain. It might be a year. It might be a decade. But he would be back.

And she would welcome him home like a lost son.

Author's Notes: Alternate Title: 20 pages of not being in Arno's headspace because the twins did not want to live there for more than absolutely necessary.

Before we go into the chapter, there were some interesting points brought up in the reviews for the last chapter, particularly over Élise's comments to Arno at the end of the chapter. After the two of us came out about our abuse, we found that people fell into two distinct categories: people who understood what had happened and people who didn't. One person - we kid you not - said, "I've met your (abuser) and I really can't believe they did the things you say they did."

The person who said that has clearly lived a hale and healthy life, and for that the two of us are honestly envious, that they have no concept of what our abuser was really like. Similarly, there were/will be people who read the last chapter and think, "Well, what so wrong about what Élise said?" In light of that, we want to help educate people so that they understand why Élise was so emphatically out of line. One: whatever Élise thinks this is not a frightful parent yelling at a wayward child for disappearing, that's a false equivalency. Élise is a grown woman who is berating Arno for what she thinks is a decision he made. Arno has not acted like a reckless child and nearly gotten people killed, Élise has by bursting into Arno's hostage situation and shooting first and asking questions never, and yet she does not take culpability for what she's done and rather instead blames Arno. Élise in this scene is abusive.

It has been pointed out that the word abusive is somewhat contentious. On reflection, we understand why people might feel that way. In the last few years, it has (FINALLY) become okay to label certain behaviors as abusive, and as the word becomes used more frequently and people hear it more, the word will become used inappropriately or inaccurately. We are using the following definition: treating badly or injuriously; mistreating. Élise, to be clear, in that moment of anger takes her position as Arno's lover, childhood friend, and confident, and uses it to hurt Arno in any way she can: she insults his intelligence, she blames and gaslights Arno into being the one who made the mistake, she blames him for wanting to live and not sacrificing his life to kill Germain, and revokes her love of him because of it. Meaning, Élise's love for Arno is conditional instead of pure, and it can be taken away if Arno isn't a good boy. And worst of all, she take something Arno never knew, the identity of his father's killer, and launches it at him like a nuclear missile, just to make him hurt. No parent would do that to a child who wandered off - or if they did then they were being abusive.

Which is why did didn't want to spend any time in Arno's head after that debacle.

Instead we focus on what friends of an abuse victim who is not mentally healthy can and can't do
when the friend is in a downward spiral. Literally everyone had a moment to shine. Cosette continues to hold the title of Best Friend (TM). All three members of Arno’s little squad have a moment to validate him and make him know that he has the right to feel the emotions that he’s feeling (something Élise never does in this fic). Pontmercy has empathy to spare to share with Arno and Fabre tries to handle Arno’s physical injuries and give Arno a small crutch to get through the next few hours with a bottle of wine - but he knows when to cut Arno off, as well. All three of them try to plea with the Council, as does Charlotte and Augustin.

And the Council, too, are not evil in this. This is a messy, complicated situation, and while Quemar as the most conservative member of the Council might want to cut all ties Trenet tries very, very hard to give Arno a way to stay. But, in the end, Arno is a danger to himself and to the Brotherhood, and he has to go.

One of the hardest lessons we’ve learned - are still learning, in some ways - is that you cannot help someone who doesn’t want to be helped. Élise doesn’t want to be helped - indeed she doesn’t think she did anything wrong. Arno doesn’t think he needs help, and hasn’t taken full advantage of the resources that were around him. Even with everything thrown to pot, Charlotte and Augustin try to help him, give him a sword and a hidden blade, but Arno doesn’t take the help and thus he really starts to fall. This is "tough love," letting the loved one plunge over the edge because they have to figure it out for themselves, which is a very Assassin thing to do, now that we think about it. All of them give their support to Arno, even in Versailles, but he’s not in a place yet where he can accept it or even understand it.

Élise meanwhile has had a complete break with reality. She no longer lives in the real world, no matter how close her world is to the real one it is now a fantasy that she has constructed to justify what goes to those around her. This is something we sadly know intimately well. For the rest of the fic Élise will have every excuse, every argument, every gaslight one can think of to make sure the world knows that she was in the right, and we’ll talk about THAT next chapter. Speaking of:

Next chapter: Rock Bottom.
"I mean we should never have taken you in!"

"He should be allowed that right."

"Should be and are, are two different things."

"Diable, it's popped out of its socket."

"Took you long enough, merdeux."

"There. Safe and sound, and only slightly delayed."

"What in God's name happened at the Place de la Révolution today?"

"You were told to leave that investigation to others."

"Yes, but listen—"

"No. You listen."

"After Cormac was expelled for killing your father I insisted that we keep you, and now I see that was a mistake!"

"Never should have plucked you out of the Bastille! You father'd be ashamed of you!"

"But this is why I joined the Brotherhood!"

"Do you not mean the 'cult'?"

"You did not join the Brotherhood, you joined a cult: Not because you shared our ideals, or felt called to service. For revenge."

"For redemption!"

"I found that in my father's room. Unopened."

"I didn't know..."

"Neither did my father."

"It's not Mirabeau that's poisoned your mind. It's her."

"We should have left you on the street if this is how you repay my father! Repay me!"

"And you should have trusted me!"

"Reasonable men don't treat with Templars, boy."

"Did you not notice that once you threw a smoke bomb the attacks stopped? That was the result of Jean-Louis Rivière. He is dead now, from you or de la Serre we don't know."
"I'll return when this hand reaches the top. And Arno, no exploring, hm?"

"You're weak!"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Let go."

"If you don't have the stomach for revenge, then I don't need you!"

"But I can still change it!"

"Then recite the Creed."

"Get up, petit merdeux. I'll show you what conviction looks like."

"Then I have no choice but to call for a vote of expulsion."

"You didn't even look for me!"

"Haven't you done enough to repay my father's kindness?"

"Arno Dorian, you are attainted. Your rank and title are stripped from you, and you are hereby exiled from the Brotherhood of Paris. Take his hood and hidden blade."

"Don't turn me out, don't turn me out!"

"The decision of this Council is final. We give you leave to go."

"We should never have taken you in! After Cormac was expelled for killing your father I insisted that we keep you, and now I see that was a mistake! We should have left you on the street if this is how you repay my father! Repay me! If your priorities are so backwards as to let Germain escape, if you don't have the stomach for revenge, then I don't need you!"

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**June 4, 1793**

A bell rang, somewhere, loud enough that Arno's unconscious woke enough to ponder what it was, and once he woke up all he could feel was pain.

Pain was all he knew, all he had ever known, really. Reflection was proof of that, all he needed was five minutes of sobriety and the litany of all his wrongs would cascade through his essence and remind him that every inch of pain he ever felt was deserved. He caused everything that happened to him, it was all his fault, and he had no right to feel bitter about everything that happened to him.

Being expelled from the brotherhood? He'd been consorting with a Templar. He knew what he was doing, tried to spare his friends from the fallout, because he knew there was going to be a fallout, but he did it anyway. He deserved it.

Élise rejecting him? He'd failed to sacrifice his life to kill Germain, should have used his hidden blade regardless of the rifle in his back, because her pain was all that mattered and his was meaningless. He deserved it.

The death of Mirabeau? He wasn't observant enough to see what was coming, had caused it to begin with by bringing Élise to the Council to make an alliance. He deserved it.
Bellec cursing him? He was little more than *petit merdeux*, thoughtless and therefore worthless. He deserved it.

The death of M. de la Serre? He was irresponsible and derelict in his duties. He deserved it.

The death of his father? He was ten minutes late. He deserved it.

It was all his fault. He deserved it all. He was nothing but *merdeux*.

He uncurled from his position, head splitting as he tried to make sense of where he was this time. He was on the floor, *parquet*, a crate of wine bottles next to him. Burgundy. Ah, breakfast... At least the wine would make the pain go away. His eyes, bleary and burning, swept around the room, and he recognized his old quarters at the de la Serre estate. How had he managed...? Arno turned his mind laboriously back to the previous night, but nothing was able to come of it, the space was completely blank.

Nothing new there...

Arno rubbed his forehead as he reached for the crate of burgundy. The first bottle he grabbed was empty, as was the second and third. *Diable*, there was no mercy in this world. Grunting, he got up onto unsteady legs. They wobbled and didn't take his weight, making him collapse back onto his old pallet. His gaze drifted to it, remembering the actual bed he had in the Sanctuary, the blankets and comforters he had at Café Théâtre. For someone who had idolized M. de la Serre, all he was worthy of was a pallet and no pay and *Olivier*.

Did he really deserve...?

No, of course he did.

But something in his mind always came back, always pointed out: he had a stipend at the Brotherhood while he was underground... Charlotte, his direct superior, never discouraged him or reminded him of his place. She and Augustin were... but his thoughts fragmented as a spike of pain bloomed in it. Moaning, he covered his eyes against the dim light and bent his head down to his knees. Wine. He needed wine.

Once the throb subsided he went back to his original task: finding burgundy. But all the bottles were empty, and Arno did not relish the idea of getting up. He slumped back to his pallet and sighed, reaching into his pocket for the watch.

The watch...

The watch...!

Arno's eyes snapped open, and his other hand rushed to his other pocket. The watch... where was the watch... He sat up, ignoring the spike of pain through his head and pulled apart his pallet. Nothing. Nothing, what... the crates were all empty, and so was the rest of his room. Where was the watch? He couldn't get rid of it, as much as he hated it he couldn't lose it! *Père*...!

Arno stumbled out of his room, picking apart the servants' quarters, the kitchens, the main wing of the estate. He overturned empty wine crates, pulled at cushions of the settee, struggled to remember where the watch had gone. Oh, why had he drunk so much last night? Every night? Why now when he needed to remember what he did with that *damnée* watch? He looked under desks and couches and bed, flipped through books and pages of paper, knocked over candles, suffered the blinding light of outside when he pulled open the drapes, wincing and holding his head for time interminable, just so he could have enough light to see where the watch went. He moved upstairs,
having the thought in his head that he never went upstairs but so much of his mind was empty he didn't trust the thought. Balance was difficult, every motion sent agony through his mind, worse than when too many eagles were in his head. He asked his own for help and fell over for the pain it caused, the fireworks he heard reverberating and burning out every other sense, insensate.

He didn't know how long it was before he could come back to himself, before the music of the fireworks disappeared and he could see and think. Pops of color were now oversaturated blurs of nonsense, and he regretted ever thinking his eagle could help him. It had betrayed him like everything else.

... Had he been betrayed?

The Council never trusted him, and he had gone behind their backs, there was no way he wasn't going to be expelled and he had known that the moment Charlotte had told him Élise was back. He had betrayed them.

Élise... she would never betray him.

"We should have left you on the street if this is how you repay my father! Repay me!"

Élise...

Arno moaned, flat on the floor, as the memory swept over him. A drink. He needed a drink.

No, he needed the watch.

Merde...

He forced himself back to his feet, looking up to see he was in the waiting room before M. de la Serre's office. The clock was missing, as were several books from the shelves; the floor was littered with scraps of cloth and garbage, the looters had not been kind. Several of the paintings had been taken, the seats twisted out of place, one missing a leg. The writing desk in the corner had drawers pulled out and emptied, and the room was just as broken and empty as Arno. The poetic thought made him wince, and he moved over to the remaining books in the bookshelves. The only volume in serviceable condition was Les Tragiques. How appropriate.

Sighing, Arno looked at the door to M. de la Serre's office, seeing it open when it was so often closed. He did not step inside, would not set foot in holy ground when he was so unworthy of it. His eyes traced down to the floor, imagining the letter. He could still remember the logic: if slipped under the door, he would see it the instant he returned... safe and sound, and only slightly delayed...

"Haven't you done enough to repay my father's kindness?"

"I found that in my father's room. Unopened."

... How could he have known?

There it was again, that traitorous thought. Arno shook his head, knowing better than to question the facts of the matter and mad at himself for daring to think otherwise. The watch wasn't in the estate, that's what he had to focus on. That meant looking outside.

Outside a misty rain fell, the clouds white-grey and murder on Arno's headache. The air was thick and humid, his shoes and hose wet with mud and muck and he traced his way through Versailles, trying to remember what taverns he preferred. The hangover did him absolutely no favors, he felt
unsteady on his feet, and the very act of seeing caused pain. Deserving the pain or not, he needed to see enough to figure out where he had gotten drunk last night. The last several nights. The last...

Arno stilled, hand reaching out to brace himself on a derelict carriage. When was he last sober? When... when was his last memory? His last clear memory?

"The decision of this Council if final. We give you leave to go."

Merde, everything hurt. He needed a drink.

... he needed the watch more...

A ripped flag, red, white, and blue stripes muddy and worn, lay wounded across the roof of the carriage, and Arno's thoughts drifted to studying it: the frayed edges and ripped hemline. His eyes wandered out to the street, and there was no noble finery: no top hats, exaggerated lapels, walking canes. The Second Estate was nowhere to be seen, and all that was left were the Thirds, like him (he wasn't even a Third, he didn't even deserve that...). Cotton, wool, earth tones, no silk to be had; wide hats or caps, simple bonnets for the women, barely two petticoats. Another sign, Liberté ou la Morte, hung forgotten from—that was the smithy. Victor and Hugo, did they have the watch?

But the building was empty, most of the tools gone, the place as ransacked at the de la Serre estate. Was that why the Liberty or Death sign hung there? He moved outside, spying a tavern that looked almost familiar. He walked in and moved to the counter.

"Non, I told you: no coin, no wine," the man at the counter said.

"Non, I'm sorry, I'm not here for that..." Yet. "Was I here last night? Did I leave a watch...?"

"Diable, how drunk have you even been? I threw you out two weeks ago when you said you didn't have any more coin. Haven't seen you since. You going to pay what you owe now?"

Arno blinked. "... owe...?"

"Nom de dieu, get out!"

That was his answer in several establishments: Arno drank and drank until he ran out of coin or ran up a bill, and was kicked out until he could pay. The hangover hit Arno again, and he was sick in an alley, vomiting in the mud as the humid mist turned to outright rain.

... he was so pathetic...

When the nausea passed he straightened, empty inside and out, and wiped his mouth with a dirty sleeve. He didn't even have any clothes, just his sheaf and ripped culottes, his hose as dirty as the rest of him, a hole in his left shoe. Rain making his vision even worse, he moved to the next tavern, empty instinct guiding him from one to the next to the next. He at least visited places that knew him, but that had less to do with luck, it seemed, and more to do with how desperate he was to get away from the pain.

"You really do run away from everything, don't you," Arno muttered to himself, disgusted. "Bet you sold the watch ages ago to get more drinking money."

Only... that didn't sit right with him. He hated that watch, but every time he had sold it or lost it to cards or buried it... he always went back to it. He was doing that right now, wasn't he? He was desperate for that last reminder of his father—even if he lost everything else, he still had that, his last good (tainted) memory of... of time without pain. God, he needed to find that damn watch...!
"Oh, Christ, not you again."

Arno blinked, seeing the tender at the bar making a face as he walked in. "Didn't you do enough damage last night?"

"No, I... I just..." Arno sighed. "My father's watch. Have you seen it?"

"I've seen nothing, saouls," he replied, "Try asking one of the four men you picked a fight with, bète saouls."

Stupid drunk indeed, Arno tried to ask what had happened but the bartender would give him nothing, telling him to pay damages first. Arno was forced to leave without knowing where to go next. He had started a fight with four men? Not knowing what else to do, he loitered around the door of the tavern, sitting in the rain and watching people as they came in, hoping he could recognize someone. The hours passed and his hangover did not go away, twice he had to run to the alley to be sick, the humid air and smell of manure making him determined to choke up his entire stomach, and when it was over his head was little more than a throbbing mess, all he could do was crouch in the mud and wait for the pain to pass, but it never left completely, and all he wanted was another drink to numb the pain.

Stupid, pathetic, useless merdeux.

He still didn't recognize anyone as they came in, but as night fell and more people arrived, more than a few gave him a second look, a dirty glare. Two spat on him openly. Anger flared up and then burned out of him just as quickly when that happened. Whatever he did the prior night probably warranted the scorn, god knew he deserved everything else that happened to him... But one came in with a black eye and swelling on his jaw. Arno stood, head splitting even hours after waking up, and moved towards the injured man.

"Here to try again?" the man asked, voice dark and threatening.

"Look... I'm sorry for whatever I did last night," Arno said, keeping his gaze down, trying to appear docile. "I just wanted to ask if you saw a watch, a broken watch..."

"I saw nothing but your fist, saouls, for little more than bumping into you when I was getting a drink."

Arno didn't remember any of it. All he could offer was, "Desolé..."

"Yeah, sorry isn't good enough, saouls."

The man went from dark to belligerent, grabbing Arno by the scruff of his neck and shoving him down into an awaiting knee. The impact purged all air out of Arno's lungs and he crumpled to the floor, coughing and trying to breath. Merde, everything hurt... A brutal kick to his ribs followed, and all he could do was curl into himself as the man he assaulted the previous night took his revenge.

Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic merdeux.

You deserve this.

You deserve all of it.

The pain eventually stopped, or at least Arno dimly became aware that it stopped, and when he looked up he saw the bartender shoving the belligerent out of the tavern. Then the man grabbed
Arno and started throwing him out as well. Arno's ribs shouted at the disruption, and he couldn't get his legs under him, he was so weak he was literally being dragged out, and Arno splattered into the summer mud, coming up coughing.

And he still didn't have the watch.

And it was gone. He would never find it now.

He moaned, head sinking back into the mud. His father was gone... His father was gone... his father was gone...

His grief came out in a long wail, the pain pouring out of him in great cries as he curled into his misery. He had nothing left now. Not the brotherhood, not Mirabeau, not Élise, not M. de la Serre, and now not even his father. He was lost, he was so lost, and he didn't know what to do, he just wanted to fix it. He just wanted to fix it. He just... He just...

He just needed a drink. He had to make the pain go away. How was he supposed to bear the pain? Burgundy, he needed burgundy, even if he had to steal it...

"What are the charges?"

"Theft, Citoyenne."

"Fine. I'll pay the damages."

"I'll release him right now, then."

"No. Keep him here until he's sober. I don't care how long it takes."

Ooooooh, his head ached. His stomach ached, his ribs ached, he was so sick he was going to—

He turned over and gagged into a bucket, the stench of vomit telling him he had done this before, and it only made him wretch more.

His next memory was rolling over on a cot, and the thought struck him as strange, because he had been sleeping on... He opened his eyes and saw cracked plaster. Wasn't Jacques trying to fix that...? No, he wasn't at Café Théâtre... Nausea hit him again.

Then he remembered his head and the all-encompassing pain, and all he could do was moan, couldn't even look at the light. How many eagles had he seen...? Then the sound of keys jangling and why did it hurt so much...! He passed out.

Sometime later he heard music, something like music, "Ah, ça ira, ça ira..." and good god make it stop Mirabeau he'd killed Mirabeau and killed M. de la Serre and killed his own father! He'd lost the watch! They couldn't take anything else from him...! Make it stop! Please make it stop! Make the pain stop...

June 11, 1793

And then, somehow, he opened his eyes, and there was no bucket under his cot, no stench of sickness, and his mind... was clear...?

He frowned, utterly unfamiliar with the sensation, and almost wasn't sure if he was dreaming. He
reached up to rub his forehead, his ribs twinged but there was no stabbing pain, and the only feeling he had was dry sweat. He sat up, slowly, uncertain if any of this was real, but he did not feel light-headed, did not feel a throb of pain, did not feel anything other than... awake.

Arno broadened his focus, looking up to see he was in a cell of some kind. Prison?

He stood up on steady legs and finally he felt something: weakness. When had he last eaten? He pressed himself against the bars and saw a marshal sitting at a desk.

"Excuse me," he asked, still surprised to be so clear minded. "Might I ask as to how I came to be here?"

The marshal looked up, eyebrows raising upon seeing Arno, and the man got up and moved to stand in front of Arno's cell. He stared. He stared long and hard, long enough for Arno to worry he had said something offensive in his... in his delirium. His sickness. His...

He sighed. In his gueule de bois. In his hangover. In his drunkenness.

_Nom de dieu_, he had a problem.

"You sober, _saouls_?" the marshal asked.

Arno nodded. "I'm present of all faculties," he answered.

A snort. "Finally. You have a problem, _saouls_."

Arno winced. "I was just thinking that myself," he admitted. His stomach rumbled, loud enough for both of them to hear it.

The marshal looked at Arno again, frowning. "Food's not until tonight, if you can call it that."

"I understand," Arno agreed.

The marshal started to go back to his desk, before he turned right back around. "You gonna wail again?" he asked. "Sob over your lot in life?"

... that bad... Arno shook his head, and the marshal went back to his work. Arno sat back down on his cot, uncertain what to do with himself. There wasn't a book or newsheet in the cell, no clock to mark the time, though he could hear ticking down the hall, no other inmate to talk to. Frowning, Arno looked around again – this wasn't a prison on reflection – not like the ones in Paris. This was a holding cell, meaning he was at some local police station. Did that mean he was still in Versailles?

Versailles...

"Guards! Help! Murder!"

Arno bit back his groan, hand covering his mouth in case he needed to muffle the noise. Damn it... of all the places he'd picked after his expulsion he'd picked Versailles. He leaned back, bumping into the wall of his cell, and closed his eyes. There were images, blurry and ill defined: gagging in an alley and thinking himself pathetic, lying on his pallet at the estate sobbing and drinking, barely able to breath between gulps, sitting in the rain begging for coin. Panic over losing the watch.

The watch...!

Arno checked his pockets, possessed of sudden energy, but there was nothing.
Brasserie Garceau... the bartender... being thrown into the mud and realizing he'd lost his father...

The loss flooded Arno all over again, realizing he'd lost absolutely everything. A fresh tear rolled down his cheek, and his mind turned over every dim memory of his father he had: hot days in Africa, sitting in his lap, the sound of breathing against his ear as his father laughed, sitting on his shoulders while the boat rocked...

"Arno..."

"Can't I go with you, père?"

"Courage, my boy. You just wait here. I will return when this hand reaches the top."

"... That's forever."

"Hmph, not as long as all that. And when I get back, we'll see the fireworks."

... Arno? No 'exploring', hmm?"

"Oui, père."

Ten minutes late.

Arno dipped his head into his hands, acknowledging the mistake. If he had not gone exploring, he and his father would have left on time, and his mysterious murderer would not have—

"After Cormac was expelled for killing your father I insisted that we keep you, and now I see that was a mistake!"

Arno looked up, eyes wide, as the memory filtered through his mind. That sentence... the words had washed over him when he'd first heard it, too much had happened by that point that he physically couldn't take anymore. The words had buried deep in his mind, and now, sober, his mind provided them. Élise... she knew who had killed his father? Even the Brotherhood didn't know...

She... she had kept that from him...?

What did that mean? What was he supposed to feel...?

Dinner came and Arno ate day old stew that was little more than flavored mud. He ate it mechanically and without much thought, as he lay back on his cot and closed his eyes: now that his mind was clear, what else could he remember?

He asked for paper the next morning, started jotting his thoughts down – not quite a letter to his father, not much of anything other than stray thoughts as they flittered through his mind. He worked on it for two days before asking for more paper and better organizing it. The more he wrote the more his mind started to put things together, the more it was able to provide. Most of it he already knew: he had decided, of his own volition, to talk to Élise even though he knew he was risking expulsion from the Brotherhood. That was his mistake, he earned their ire, he could admit to his culpability. Tucking Lafrenière's letter under M. de la Serre's door, that was his mistake, too. He had been remiss in his duties and M. de la Serre had paid the ultimate price for it. It tore him up so badly it made him who he was – made him turn to the Brotherhood and try to erase the mistake.
But... the past was the past, and erasure was simply impossible.

"... So what have I been looking for?" he asked himself, staring at his scratches of ink.

"Just go..."

Élise. More than anything else, he had wanted Élise back. He wanted her back in his life, to forgive him. To love him.

"Don't be such a baby..."

"Tais-toi, Arno!"

"Haven't you done enough to repay my father's kindness?"

"You're not that stupid."

"You're a fool."

"We should never have taken you in!"

"After Cormac was expelled for killing your father I insisted that we keep you, and now I see that was a mistake! We should have left you on the street if this is how you repay my father! Repay me! If your priorities are so backwards as to let Germain escape, if you don't have the stomach for revenge, then I don't need you!"

He looked up as the marshal gave him breakfast. "Did you ever wake up one day," he asked, "to realize someone you thought you knew you really didn't?"

"Can't say as I have," the Marshal said, always sparse with his words. "Then again, bad as things get, I don't fall so far as to end up here."

Arno winced. "I never thought I would, either," he confessed. He looked up to the marshal. "Thank you, for what you're doing."

The marshal shrugged. "Not my doing. I was told to keep you here 'til you're sober."

Who...?

Then came the red curls and the round face.

Élise stood there as the marshal went back to his desk, staring down at him with a face completely closed off. Arno had seen this face before, but now it was like seeing it for the first time, because this face was never, had never, been meant for him. Arno had never needed to see her guarded face, but he realized, looking up at her now, that she had used that face since seeing her at Hôtel Voysin. That made sense of course, she had been surviving Germain's repeated attempts to kill her, but now Arno wondered...

She held up the watch.

What...?

He surged to his feet, hands outstretched. She jerked it from his hands, and Arno stared at it from the other side of the bars. It was back... it was back... his father was back... How had she found it?

Wait... how had she found it? Did she...?
He looked up, and he didn't see the warm smile, the pride that she had done Arno a good deed. Her face was still closed off, still guarded. She was waiting. Waiting for what?

… Oh. She really was different than he had ever believed. Arno's heart sank.

"You look like hell," she said.

"You look like you want something from me," he said, sitting back down on his cot.

"That's a fine thing to say after you up and vanished," Élise countered. "Do you have any idea how long it took to find you? How much money I've just spent to pay off your debts? Have you any idea the trouble you've put me through?"

"Then why are you even here?" Arno asked, tired. "You made it fairly clear you no longer required my 'services.'"

"Don't be like that," Élise said, voice hard. "Don't go pretending you're so stupid."

"Élise, you said your father should never have taken me in. You told me you didn't need me. You told me who killed my father. How much clearer could you have possibly been?"

"Don't talk to me like that," she said over his last sentence. "Don't twist this around into blaming me when you're the one who failed."

"What do you expect me to say, Élise?" Arno asked. *Diable*, he was so tired, he'd only been sober for two days, he wasn't ready for this confrontation. "Am I supposed to say 'Forgive me; for not letting you die?' 'I'm sorry I care more about you than killing Germain?'"

Her face finally changed, an expression ghosting over it. She opened her mouth, thought better of it, closed it.

"I know..." Arno almost didn't say it, had never admitted it out loud before – not to Élise. "I know I've wronged you," he forced himself to say. "I can't bear the fact that my carelessness got your father killed. Everything I've done since that night has been to fix that mistake. And I can't even do it right. I let Germain trick me into thinking he was a victim, killed the wrong man before I realized the truth – you almost died—" Say it Arno. Say it. Admit it, face your mistake. He grunted and shifted his weight, struggling to get the words out. "You almost died because Germain set me on Lafrenière, all because I can't even determine friend from foe." He realized he was looking at his shoes, that he wasn't even looking Élise in the eye. Damn it, face her. He forced his gaze to look up. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice embarrassingly small. "I'm trying. I'm trying so hard, and it's never enough." He sniffled, but his eyes remained dry. He took a deep shuddering breath for admitting it, had to look down to compose himself. When he did, he held her gaze again, strength in his voice: "But Élise, no matter how I've examined it, how many ways I've looked at it, that day, that I did right. Because you're still alive."

The guarded face was down, a thousand thoughts were playing across her face. Her lips pursed, in then out, opening and then closing, trying to assimilate what Arno had just confessed.

He had broken her.

He had admitted that now.

His attempts to fix her had hurt her.

He admitted that as well.
But no matter what, *no matter what*, he was responsible for fixing her, and she had to be alive for that to happen. Even after however many weeks of drunken misery he still came to that conclusion. No matter how many mistakes were made *that part had been right*.

She left. Without a word.

Well, he couldn't really blame her.

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**June 15, 1793**

The marshal released Arno from detainment that day, but with nowhere else to go and nothing else to do, Arno asked if he could sweep up, do chores for the right to spend the night. The marshal gave him another long stare, as he was wont to do it seemed, but allowed it.

Arno spent several days on his knees, scrubbing and mopping the floors, hauling buckets of water in and out, in and out, cleaned out the hearth and restocked the firewood. When that was done, he went to every tavern in the whole of Versailles and forced himself to look the bartenders in the eye and apologize for any disturbance or inconvenience he had caused during his – and he would bite his lip every time, try to find a different word, but he forced himself to say it every time – during his drunkenness. He explained he had no money but offered his services to clean the establishment in whatever manner they deemed fit. Six places took him up on that offer, and he cleaned everything from blood to vomit to... other things... off the floors with mops and rags, on his knees and the rhythmic motion of moving back and forth, back and forth, the sensation comforting.

He had done this at Café Théâtre, too, when he felt particularly low. Charlotte would cluck her tongue and remind him he was steward, not houseboy. Augustin made a point of him teaching advanced classes on those nights, letting him demonstrate his superiority of the sword to anyone who dared think less of him. "I hope someday it teaches you not to think less of yourself," he would say.

Being in the taverns was hard. The alcohol was there, sometimes right in his face, and his stomach would cramp to smell it. A shaky hand reached out more than once, but the tenders who let him clean the messes he'd made would swat his hand away, encouraging him to keep cleaning himself. The entire town called him *saouls*, drunk, and slowly Arno realized he had no other name to them. Nobody recognized him as Arno Dorian. But, then, he would catch glimpses of himself in the mirror: thick and uneven beard, oily unkempt hair, sallow cheeks – he hadn't realized how much weight he had lost until he'd pulled off his *chemise* to wash some sweat off.

"You're little more than a disaster, aren't you," he asked himself. He splashed the water, disrupting the reflection and dunked his head into the barrel of rainwater. He slept on the roof of a *café* that night, away from any tavern and listening to the songs, murmuring the words to *Ça ira* under his breath. It'll be fine, it'll be fine...

His willpower would not be enough, he knew that. But he had suffered the worst loss imaginable: his father's watch. It was now locked away with Élise, along with her heart and good graces, and he had most effectively ruined any chance at restitution with admitting his murder of Lafrenière. Everything was lost to him, and he knew he could not fall any further. The only place to go was up, and he would make it one step at a time. He would make it right.

"*I'm tired of running from my mistakes... Monsieur de la Serre... my father... I want to make it right.*"

Arno paused in the middle of sweeping an entryway, looking up. His induction swept over his
senses, the emotion filling him so suddenly it startled him.

"You have perished under the weight of these mistakes. Now you are to be reborn."

"And now, that part of you is dead. And now, you are absolved of your sins."

For the first time... the first time in years... Arno realized what the Brotherhood meant about dying and being reborn. He looked out at the muddy street, the city that didn't remember him, didn't recognize him. "I really am dead," he murmured, leaning against his broom. "I could... I could be anything I want, now."

"Now you are to be reborn. What canvas would you use?"

Arno hardly had any idea. He could be anything, literally anything. He had the skills, he could pose as high or low born, rich or poor, bourgeoisie or something else entirely. The sheer amount of options was terrifying, and the fear drove him to the nearest tavern, and the bartender firmly told him no drinks until he'd cleared the rats infesting the attic. The menial task was mindless, it gave him the chance to breathe, to calm down, and when he was done he sat on the roof, looking down at Versailles, finding the distance and releasing the anxiety in his chest.

What did he want to be?

... He wanted to be home.

But what was home?

... He expected the image of Élise, even though he knew she would never return for him. Her red curls did not fill his mind, however, but rather the scent of café au lait, pâtés, soupe à l'ongoin. The sound of swords late at night, the sound of ink scraping over paper to fill out ledgers and counting the day's earnings.

... that home was lost to him, too. He had been expelled, no fault other than his own, and there would be no going back. Arno leaned back and looked up to the stars.

He had squandered his chance there, but they were...

He sighed. They weren't Élise.

But... they never wanted anything of him, either. Charlotte, Augustin, they did everything they could to make him feel safe and welcome and secure in his position until he'd ruined it. Cosette disobeyed the Council to help him, Fabre had been a patient teacher, and Marcel a good ear. None of them expected something of him. Not like the Council. And not like Élise.

Élise...

Why did he still think of her? He knew, now, that she wasn't the happy girl of their childhood - hell, he was starting to realize the happy girl he remembered had secrets. How did she even know who killed his father? She had been a child same as he... but why keep that from him? Why not tell him who that man... Cormac? Why not tell him that name. Were there other things she had hidden? And why did he still miss her? Why did he think on their nights together, sneaking through the house, or that time in the orchard with the dogs, why did he think about the games and the smiles and the love making? They had spent their entire lives together, surely... surely...

But no... that door was closed now. She had left and taken the watch with her, leaving him dead and able to be anything he wanted.
Maybe that was it. He wanted to be a good man. A good person. The way Charlotte and Cosette and the others were. He had aspirations, then, a goal to reach for. Next was a job. He looked out at Versailles, where everyone knew him as the saoul, drunk. ... Maybe not here.

He awoke the next morning on his pallet at the estate and felt... he didn't have the word for it, but he thought maybe he had turned a corner. He washed his face, deciding he would have to find a razor to shave his beard, and left the estate to see what other odd jobs he could find—

"What are you doing?"

Arno turned, blinking. "Élise?" he asked, surprised.

"Don't look so surprised," she scoffed.

"But I am," he said, rolling up a sleeve in the summer heat. "I thought I wasn't going to see you again."

An eyebrow quirked, face still so guarded, and she crossed her arms. "Germain is still out there," she said simply. "By your own admission you want to make that right. And here you are, happy to sweep steps and do nothing. I thought we wanted the same thing."

That was a low blow. "What I wanted was you," Arno corrected. "I said as much before, and your reply was to leave without a word."

"What did you expect me to say," Élise said, "I wasn't going to stand by while you tried to manipulate me into feeling sorry for you falling into a bottle. Am I to forgive you for killing Chrétien in the same breath you confess it? Come at this from my position: you are not the Arno I knew growing up. You failed to prevent my father's death, and you joined my blood enemies. You're an Assassin, now, and try to win me to their side right when their leader is murdered, leaving me without allies all over again. Germain has tried to kill me three separate times – four now, with Louis' execution – and you dare to assume I'll just... just trust you after everything that's happened?"

"Maybe we can't go back. But... moving forward isn't necessarily an ending."

"Was it all a lie, then?" he asked, afraid of the answer. "Did you ever really lo—"

A finger pressed against his lips, Élise filling his field of vision, looking up from under her red curls. "Arno," she said softly. "Ever since my father... I've been under a malaise, locked away in my own heart. In spite of everything that's happened, you – and only you – can make me feel. I can't lose that."

Her scent was in his nose, he could taste her finger it was pressed against his lips so firmly, and her free hand was tracing down his arm. So many memories flooded his mind, sweet and sweaty, but also soft and sentimental. She still had his heart. Even after everything... she still had his heart...

Merde...

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, needing to know even as he knew he would say yes regardless.

Élise smiled. "The Arno I love wouldn't have to ask that question," she said. "You're better than that." She pulled away, and in Arno's hand was the watch. He looked down at it, surprised, looked up at Élise.
"I'm going back to Paris," she said. "Are you coming?"

Back with the woman who hid deep secrets from him? Back with the woman who hurt him so badly? Back to the woman who wanted Germain dead more than either of them alive?

... Back with the woman who he still loved?

"... Yes."

"Good. I'll see to our transportation. Meet me back here in two hours."

And like that, she was gone again.

Arno stared, trying to figure out how he felt, what he felt.

... she still had his heart...

He sighed, going back to his room in the estate, pulling apart blankets and seeing if he had any possessions left to pack aside from the shirt off his back.

And that was when he found the hidden blade.

"You may be banished from here, but you are still an Assassin."

Charlotte... He shook his head. He wasn't worthy of this, he threw it into a satchel. He wasn't an Assassin, he'd never been an Assassin. They had never accepted them, and his chance to be so had been squandered by his own choices. He wasn't an Assassin then, and he certainly wasn't one now.

That hidden blade was a reminder of how badly he had screwed up his chances with the brotherhood.

... That hidden blade was a reminder that there were good people in the world, that some few out there hadn't given up on him.

... Merde... it was just like the watch.

It came with him to Paris.

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**June 28, 1793**

Sardinia had been an absolute disaster. Oh, the idea was simple enough – dare Napoléon think, idealistic enough. Austria wasn't the only country interested in the goings on of France, and to protect itself France in turn needed to let Europe and other countries know that everything was perfectly fine. (It wasn't, but appearances were more important) Taking Sardinia was strategically important, it let people beyond the island know that French Republicanism was going to affect more than just her own house, they would free all countries from the tyranny of monarchy. On paper it was nearly poetic.

In practice it was an absurdity. Government was not the only thing undergoing severe upheaval, every noteworthy military commander had fled France as émigrés, so people were being promoted left and right to fill in the gaps – not because of their house or their title – but by their ability. Napoléon thought it would be the perfect proving ground for him to move up the ranks, go as far as he could, show everyone what he was capable of.

But it also took months to raise the manpower needed, months for the Catholic island to take a look
at France's systematic disassembly of all forms of religion and declare themselves counter-
revolutionaries and look for aide elsewhere. Bad weather, lost ships, irregulars trying to snipe the
French, Sardinians *goddamn cavalry*, and – inevitably – treachery from that damned idiot Paoli. By
the end of it Napoléon and his troops were very nearly abandoned, had been forced to spike their
cannon and leave the guns behind. That was when Napoléon knew: Corsica was no longer safe for
his family.

Now he was French in every way that counted.

It had taken him the better part of two months to get his family into France and settled, and now he
had to go back to service. He reported first to Hôtel de Ville to finalize his family's papers and then
to the Champs de Mars to report for duty. He was crossing Pont Royal, eyes flitting over the Seine
and wondering what his next campaign would be. Nîme, Avignon, perhaps Marseille, they were all
revolting against the new centralized government. The politics of it were of course complicated,
and Napoléon was curious to see what people outside of the city and the army felt about the
Revolution – he hadn't exactly had the chance to ask the Sardinians.

Wait... what?

Napoléon's eyes moved to the far side of the bridge, where he saw... was that...?

"Ah, Citoyen Buonaparte. Or should I say Capitaine, now?"

"... Citoyen Dorian," he said, reaching out to shake the man's hand. "It's quite the surprise to see
you."

A friendly smile and roll of the shoulders. "I've been away for a while," he said brightly. "I was...
injured, for a time, and am only now slightly recovered."

"Injured" didn't begin to describe what must have happened. Dorian was significantly thinner than
the last time they had met, his clothes ill fitting, his face gaunt. There was a redness to his cheeks
that suggested recent drinking, and a stiffness to his movements. And yet, somehow, Dorian still
commanded courtesy and posture, back straight and tall and an easy smile that almost – almost –
hid whatever ordeal he had been under. Napoléon could tell that in a few weeks' time the event
would be completely erased from his countenance. The man was a veritable chameleon, and
Napoléon marveled the man's ability to adapt.

"Are you recovered enough to join the military?" he asked, putting on a grin as smooth as Dorian's,
straightening his own back, trying to match this man beat for beat.

"No, no," Dorian said. "Still not one for following orders. *That* has been beaten in me very
thoroughly as of late." He smiled, small and... Napoléon didn't have an immediate word for it, but
it was the most real he had ever seen Dorian. "I've decided to fight for myself, for a time, instead of
fighting other people's battles."

"A journey of self-discovery?"

"More like..." Dorian frowned, looking for a word. "Completing a goal that I've lost sight of."

"Admirable," Napoléon replied. "Good luck with your endeavor."

There, a purse of the lips, the smile changing just slightly in texture. Dorian tilted his head down,
his gaunt cheeks becoming more prominent, a lock of hair falling out of his tail. The slightest
change and Dorian now looked more sickly, sallow, and how had Napoléon not noticed how dark
the circles under his eyes were? "Injured," the man looked as if he'd just come from death!
"I thought, perhaps, I could ask a favor," Dorian said. "For certain reasons, I can't go to my colleagues for help. After my injury they no longer require my services."

Napoléon raised an eyebrow. "Poor colleagues indeed, if they don't recognize your obvious talent."

"On the contrary," Dorian said, and his face went from sickly and sallow to softly sad. "Some bridges may have been burned that day."

Napoléon blinked, something sparking in his heart. Burned bridges...? "Were you cast out?" he asked, he question falling out of his mouth without the appropriate amount of thought.

Dorian stiffened, looking away – a real reaction.

The empathy that welled up in Napoléon was so sudden and unexpected he had to huff a gulp of air. "I find it fascinating that our stories continuously intersect like this," he said, looking out over the Seine. "Our first meeting, well the less said about that the better. But I remember our second meeting, at l'Hôtel de Ville up the road, and we both had the same objective in regards to that former captain. And now, here we both are, expelled from our homes and forced to move on without a safety net."

"Did someone fail to see your 'obvious talent'?" Dorian asked.

Napoléon pursed his lips, keeping his face blank. "Corsica is no longer safe for me," he said finally. "I've just spent two months settling my family here."

"... I'm sorry," Dorian said, and the sympathy in his voice was genuine and profound. "Are they all safe?"

"Yes."

"Then you've been blessed with good fortune." The two looked out over the river, Napoléon glancing as his acquaintance surreptitiously. What shadowy deeds had he performed in the last year? What was his position now? He seemed to look more haggard every time Napoléon met him, and he wondered if "injury" was too light a term for whatever he had been through. Dorian took a long, slow breath through his nose, exhaling and looking at his hands. "Meeting you wasn't chance," he said finally.

Napoléon blinked, looked at the other man more fully. "Your pardon?"

"As previously stated," Dorian said, "Some bridges were burned. If I'm to fight for myself, to reach that goal I forgot about, then I can't call upon them to reenter society, as it were. And so, I'm here to ask a favor."

"Citoyen Dorian," Napoléon said, "Prior experience with you has made it very clear that doing you favors is beneficial for me. You need but name it."

Dorian shook his head. "No, I want to do the appropriately. Correctly. I was hoping for a letter of recommendation as I... establish myself in my new profession."

"You shall have it."

Dorian looked at Napoléon, a wry grin on his face. "Based on what, exactly?" he asked. "We've only met once before, remember?"

By God this man thought of everything. Napoléon coughed upon realizing his error, and frowned
as he thought of a more "appropriate" way to give a recommendation. "Well," he said finally, "I'm on my way to l'École Militaire at Champs de Mars. Perhaps we can find a way to thoroughly test the abilities that I 'suspect' you have."

Dorian smiled. "I thank you," he said warmly. "We'll see how out of shape I am."

Napoléon was surprised to see the Black Legion at the Champs de Mars. Formed late the prior year, it was a free legion made of gens de couleur libres, of free men of color. Mostly they were stationed north of the city compared to Napoléon being in the southern army, but then there had been rumors of their general hoping to attempt a coup d'État. Pah, he and everyone else in the entire country. He reported to the duty master and asked if a sword exercise could be arranged to test the mettle of someone. He spent the next hour filling out paperwork, Dorian quietly waiting next to him, still and placid instead of charming and smooth. 

*How* did the man change auras so quickly?

"Have you had much experience in swordsmanship?" he asked as he filled out the forms.

"I was trained by an Englishman as a child," Dorian explained, "but my true teacher was an unknown master."

"Unknown master?"

Dorian nodded. "That was how he liked it," he said. "He told me once that he had no interest in teaching ungrateful Seconds who would spit upon him and his discipline. No, he wanted to teach the Thirds how to defend themselves, especially when the Revolution started."

"Where is he now?"

Dorian smiled. "Exactly where he wants to be."

"Citoyen," said a new voice. Napoléon looked up and immediately stood to attention when he saw the bars of a lieutenant colonel. "Capitaine," the man added. Napoléon noted the ebony-dark skin, a member of the Black Legion, then. "I saw the most curious request for a swordsmanship bout," he said.

"That would be me," Dorian said, genial smile on his face. "Capitaine Bonaparte and I have known each other for a few years, and I'm looking for a recommendation as I change careers."

"Looking for a place in the army?" the lieutenant colonel asked.

"Non, merci," Dorian said politely. "Napoléon suggested the same to me several times, but following orders is something of a fatal flaw of mine. Hence my career change."

"Then what are you looking for?"

"A thorough assessment of my combat prowess," Dorian said, utterly serious, weight in his words. "When I realized I needed a new profession, I thought long and hard about how I could best help the Revolution. Self-reflection... it has never been my strongest quality but I knew I wanted to protect the people in whatever way I can. I am not learned enough or of proper temperament for politics however closely I follow them, but I am good in a fight. The best course if for me to join the gens d'armes, and to do that I need a recommendation."

"You're insane," Napoléon said.
"No," the lieutenant colonel corrected, "You're interesting. The internal structure in the gens d'armes is changing as radically as it is here in l'École Militaire. I'll be curious to see what you could do there with a recommendation. Very well. Capitaine," the officer said, making Napoléon salute.

"Sir!"

"You'll be his partner. Let me get some sergeants to act as witness. It will be a good lesson for all the new young bucks. Tell them Lieutenant Colonel Dumas is ordering it."

"Sir!"

In the span of twenty minutes Dorian was stripped to the waist, as was Napoléon in the late June heat. There was an old scar on the man's bicep, and his ribs were just visible. "Injury" ... more like "illness." Dorian held his practice wand, giving it a few test swings, and Napoléon saw that the form was still there, the physique may have diminished but the ability was still there. Napoléon wondered if he might actually have a chance now, and frowned. The Black Legion was watching, men of color just as exiled as he, just as exiled as Dorian. He had a stake in showing them what he was capable of as well.

The more people he could impress, the better.

Arno was covered in sweat, panting as he braced his hands against his knees to suck in air. Bonaparte fared little better, though the massive bruise on his arm and shoulder were blooming beautifully. Arno held his ribs, knowing he had a bruise of his own. He was so out of shape. Augustin would have been disappointed in him for how much he had let himself go. Muscle memory had been his only saving grace, instinct giving him only the slightest of edges against his military contact. The bout had lasted an hour, Arno pushing himself to his very limit to see how long his body could last. Napoléon gave no ground, set to prove himself as well. As an artillery man he had far less experience in hand to hand combat but it was obvious he studied his craft with gusto. He, too, had something to prove, as did Arno, and he wondered briefly if the man – he forgot the rank already – Alexandre Dumas, had sensed that to make the bout.

The sun beat down on him, doing nothing to cool him off, and when he straightened he needed a minute for his vision to black out and come back. Food, he needed food. Someone guided him to a covered tent, and he saw Bonaparte already there, guzzling a cup of something Arno took his own up and tasted it was wine. His stomach cramped with need, and he pushed it away. "No," he said politely. "Wine doesn't agree with me."

"Weak constitution?" Bonaparte asked. "I'm surprised."

Arno almost let it stay at that, but that would be denying the problem and he had silently promised himself that running solved nothing. He didn't want to learn the lesson a third time. "Not so much a weak constitution so much as an unhealthy proclivity," he admitted.

Bonaparte studied him discreetly, as he seemed to study everyone, judging their value to him and to his goals. Arno let him, soaking up a canteen of water that someone had given him. His breathing was coming under his control now, and the shade of the tent was miraculous.

"Well," Dumas said as he entered the tent. "That bout was a sight to behold. Several men lost some bets. Very impressive." His dark eyes turned to Arno. "I'm curious who your teacher was. Your form is excellent, but you favor your left hand most curiously."
Arno looked down to where his hidden blade was supposed to be. He would have to work on that. "Augustin Grizier," he said, straightening and looking up to Dumas. "He teaches swordsmanship at Café Théâtre. I was in his classes."

"Bien, a name to look out for."

"You would like him," Arno said with a smile. "He has a deep commitment to freedom of all peoples." Dumas gave him a quizzical look, but Arno didn't feel saying "he's the same color as you" was appropriate for the setting.

"Well, his work with you is obvious," Dumas said. "I'm sure Capitaine Bonaparte has more than enough of an assessment to give you a recommendation."

"Bien sûr. Merci beaucoup."

"Think nothing of it," Dumas said. "We all have our parts to play. Let's see if we can settle the hearts of France in our respective jobs."

Arno nodded, and in the span of an hour Bonaparte had drafted and then written his letter of recommendation, citing excellent prowess with a sword and demonstrable endurance, amiable nature and thoughtful deliberation. It positively glowed, and Arno wondered what he'd done to impress the other man so much. He wiped more sweat off his brow and adjusted his cravat, leaving his surcoat off in the summer heat. "Will you be in Paris long?" he asked.

"No," Bonaparte admitted. "Now that my family is safe I must return to my post. Army of Italy."

"Well, then, best of fortune. Next time we can talk politics."

"Yes, perhaps."

The next day, Arno headed to the station. He and Élise were sharing a room in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Arno appreciated the irony of it. Originally an agriculture suburb of Paris, by nature of being on the Left Bank of the Seine, it started to become more populated after 1670, when, two Louis' ago, Les Invalides was built for injured and aged soldiers. Thus, during the 1700s, men of the Second Estate started to leave the Marais to build lavish mansions to leave the pollution and the crowds. By this point, much of les ors de la République, the golds of the republic, had already been plundered and deposited into the coffers of the government, be it the Assembly or now the Convention, but the rooms still had style, like parquet floors, clean plastered walls, and large windows. It was the closest Élise could get to the style of living she was accustomed to, but with the Revolution having ransacked so much of the area, the prices for a room were... not as exuberant as Arno had initially thought. It was still going to take a decent pay to afford it.

Arno arrived at the station with his letter of recommendation and was guided to the Captain of the station, Charles Cochon de Lapparent. Lapparent looked Arno up and down, assessing, and Arno knew he still didn't look impressive yet. He'd had only three weeks since Élise had found him to start getting back into condition, and he wasn't even close yet. Better than he was, certainly, but still working so hard to get back any of his old strength. He still looked gaunt and like he hadn't eaten in ages. Élise had been able to scrounge up a decent coat for him, but his clothes were still threadbare and worn. Still, he had to try.

Lapparent glanced back at the letter of recommendation. "Bonaparte," he read out the name. "Some captain in the army." He looked up to Arno again. "He's nobody to me. But he writes of how well you fight. And I got a letter from someone named Dumas, saying you'd be a worthy hire,
also in the army."

Arno nodded, standing straight.

"With so much love from the army, why aren't you there?"

"My skills aren't suited to the army," Arno replied honestly. "They expect you to follow orders
without question. I tend to look around me and make plans based on what I can see. I thought
catching criminals would be better suited to my talents."

"Hmph." Lapparent stood and walked around Arno, still assessing. Then he sat down again. "Not
many actually bother to try and prove themselves before coming here. They just think asking for a
job will make me hire them. Even if I don't know the caliber of the two men who wrote of you, you
at least put in effort."

Lapparent leaned to the side, his chin on his hand, fingers rubbing at his face. "I'll hire you for now. We'll see how long you last. You stand and talk like Second Estate. You
won't last if you are."

Arno actually had to hold back a snort. "Third Estate," he replied. "Raised in a noble house as a
houseboy and trained to guard the heiress. My job has always been about protecting people."

"Hmph," Lapparent snorted. "This job isn't about protecting people, boy. It's about keeping things
stable. Paris is eating itself apart. At this point, it wouldn't surprise me if we got a new government
next year the way everything keeps changing. Our job is to keep things stable and even. Anyone
who doesn't belong in this district gets kicked out. Prostitutes and beggars get thrown in jail till we
can kick them out. We see a theft or murder, we drag them in. Courts are at least faster than they
used to be. Once convicted, most get their head chopped off the same day." Lapparent narrowed
his eyes. "We don't torture any more. If you get off on that sort of thing, get out now."

Arno shuddered. "No worries about that, sir."

Lapparent nodded. "Orders keep coming from the Convention to keep an eye out for moderates and
Royalists. Make sure your listening. Don't go hassling anyone, we have some nobility still around
who haven't up and fled like an émigré, and we don't want to upset them. Not unless the
Convention is going to back us, but they're such a mess that that won't happen. So, we need to keep
things quiet and calm here."

"Understood, sir."

Lapparent scoffed. "You don't. No young buck like you ever does."

Arno was swiftly brought to a lieutenant who logged prisoners and the next week, Arno spent
watching and learning the basics of how the police worked at the station. During this time, he was
given a uniform and he spent a great deal of his free time exercising to get back into shape. He
doubted he'd be behind a desk for long.

One week later, Arno met his partner for patrolling the streets, and Arno had to work not to stiffen
upon seeing him.

"Bonjour," the man said, friendly smile on his face. "I am Giraud Durand."

"Victor Dorian," Arno replied. He wouldn't be using his actual given name again. He was dead and
now he was choosing his rebirth. Best to not use his old name. Particularly since he couldn't
remember if Durand had heard his name when he had been arresting Gretel before the September
Massacres last year. What was he doing here instead of Île de la Cité? "Ah, how long have you
been a gen d'arme?"
"Ten years," Durand replied, smiling. "Just transferred here after the king's execution. Previous precinct was getting too expensive to live in. Too close to Hôtel de Ville and everyone who wants to walk to work. I've liked it here." Durand gave a low chuckle. "Who'd have thought I'd ever get to live and work in the faubourg?"

"Indeed," Arno managed to reply. "I've been here for just about a month. I've a good idea of where things are, but..." he let the question hang.

Durand smiled brightly. "Don't worry. I'll show you the patrol route, where the usual trouble is, and how things go."

Durand was bright and cheerful with Arno, smiling and genial, and Arno couldn't help but slowly let go of his first impression. Indeed, that flat, no-nonsense look only came about when they were dealing with the poor.

"Look at the corner there," Durand gestured. "Whore. Barely has her corset on. Our job is to keep those types out of the area. They can sell their bodies elsewhere, and we need to convince them to move along."

Arno looked at the prostitute and noted that she was a teenager, and had shadows of bruising along her arm. "She's a child," Arno said softly. "She can't be doing this willingly. What if someone is making her do this? Shouldn't we go after that person and help her get out of such a life?"

"That's politics, Victor," Durand replied sadly. "We don't deal with that. You deal with the poor long enough, and you realize that the poor are just animals who don't want to be saved. They just want what's easy, don't care how." Durand straightened, his lighter demeanor gone and instead his face was a flat mask of professionalism. "Now, we need to get her to leave. We'll arrest her, drop her in jail, and then they can cart her off somewhere else to spread her legs."

Arno frowned heavily, but stayed by Durand's side as they walked up to the prostitute. Up close it was even more obvious how young she was, and that her bruises were hidden by powders. She turned and saw them, and then hitched up her skirts and ran.

Durand turned back to Arno with a smile. "That's usually enough. She'll find a different corner for her work, and as long as it's not in our area, all the better for us."

"... Bien sûr," he replied, watching where the girl had disappeared to.

"Now," Durand continued, eyes sweeping the street again, "did you hear about Jacques Roux, that crazy priest who says that the poor need to be given food and money from the rich? He's getting an énragé movement going."

Arno half listened, wondering if something else could have been done for that girl.

**July 13, 1793**

Durand, Arno learned, did not have a good opinion of the poor and destitute. He was friendly, warm and welcoming, and he always did his job, but that looking down his nose to the most vulnerable... Arno had been that person. The penniless town drunk that someone like Durand would have chased or carted off. And it was the only part of Durand that Arno couldn't stand. But he did admire the professionalism that Durand always showed, even to those he detested. Durand would often flatly state that he was just doing his job. If you didn't like it, take it up with the Convention, he just enforced the laws, he didn't make them. Most of their time on patrols were
shooing out the destitute or mediating when people were arguing in the street. Once, Arno watched a pickpocket lift a purse off a woman who was in the market. He pointed it out to Durand and the two gave chase. Arno was pleased to note that he was faster than Durand, and his endurance had clearly been improving as he kept getting stronger. He tackled the cutpurse into the mud, and was surprised when some of the people, despite their initial shock, applauded him for catching a cutpurse.

"Where did you learn those acrobatics?" Durand asked, pulling off his hat to wipe sweat from his brow.

Assassins, Arno knew. But he couldn't answer that. He just shrugged, unable to explain it. It wasn't like he was going to see an Assassin ever again.

"Well, you've had your first capture," Durand said, clapping him on the back. "How about we go out to eat after shift. I know this place in Sorbonne, cheap but with good wine."

Arno found himself saying yes, Durand friendly and persistent. They walked the left bank slowly, Durand talking about his wife and four children and sickly mother. Arno mentioned he was newlywed, he and his wife still learning about each other. It was fantasy, of course, but trying to explain his relationship with Élise... he was still learning about it. They cut around a corner, Durand explaining he knew a shortcut, when there was a very sudden cry from above them.

"Aidez-moi, ma chère amie!"

The two men stared at each other, followed by a shrill female scream. Arno looked around, there were no other gens d'armes. He darted to the door, pounding on it. "Police!" he called out. "We heard a cry, open the door!"

"Dorian, what are you doing?" Durand asked, grabbing his shoulder. "We're off duty!"

"We're also the only uniforms here," Arno said, pounding again. Frustrated, he backed up slightly, spying the open window on the upper floor that they had heard the cry from. He was about to take a running leap to get up there when the door opened, a woman Arno's age sobbing. "She's killed him! She's killed him! She's killed my husband!"

"Simone!"

"Get a doctor!"

"Jean-Paul!"

Arno barreled his way through the crowd, shouting to Durand, "Keep them back!" as he dashed up two flights of stairs. He entered a bathroom, a man covered in sores and blotches slumped in its waters, a custom table of some sort lay over the lip for writing. The man had a puncture wound in his clavicle, blood leaking out and sliding into the water, filled with the scent of medicine. He checked for a pulse, but there was nothing. A kitchen knife was on the floor, bloody, and standing at it, perfectly calm, was a woman in country bonnet. She was his age, brown hair, gray eyes, dimples.

"Let me in, I'm a surgeon!"

Arno stepped back, letting in two men, who pulled the body out of the bath to try and save it. Arno knew the truth of it and turned back to the woman, so perfectly calm even with a corpse in front of her. She reminded him of...
"Citoyenne," he said, "Please tell me what you saw."

The woman smiled. "It is very simple, Citoyen. I killed him."

"Restrain her! That bitch killed Jean-Paul Marat!"

Arno turned, surprised to realize that the blotchy disfigured body was the famous Jean-Paul Marat, author of L'Ami du Peuple. Someone moved to grab the woman, but Arno stepped forward, letting his blue uniform coat stop him. "We'll handle it from here, Citoyen," he said firmly. He turned and looked at the woman again. "I'm afraid you'll have to come with me."

"It's quite alright," she said, still so eerily calm. "I know what becomes of me now."

He escorted her out of the overcrowded bathroom and down a flight of stairs to some kind of sitting room. "Are you certain you want to stand by your statement?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes," she replied as Arno sat her down.

"Could you explain it?"

"I shall explain whatever you need," she said, adjusting the pleats of her dress and pulling at the hem of her sleeve. That was when Arno noticed it, the scars on her palm, right at the base, almost at the wrist. He blinked, knowing that scar very well, as a hand involuntarily went to the ones on his own. He stiffened, looking around, acutely aware of how many people were in the house, aware of how many stray ears there might be. He frowned, trying to decide the best course of action.

"Your name?"

"Charlotte Corday, Citoyen. Enchantée."

"Victor Dorian. Enchanté." He frowned. "Are you a part of a... political club?"

She nodded, still so calm. "The Girondins."

Damn, not what he meant. "Any other affiliations?"

"No."

Arno worked his jaw, wanting to try a different track. He opened his mouth to speak again when Durand came in.

"Dorian, we have a hell of a crowd out there. They'll be a mob soon, and that's beyond just two men to deal with this. We have to go."

"Go?" Arno asked.

"We're off duty," Durand said, eyes dark and insistent. "This has to be left to the gens d'armes of Sorbonne, it's not even our faubourg."

"I can wait," Corday said, voice serene. "I don't mind."

Arno stood. "She's confessed to the murder," he explained, "If there's a mob out there, there'll be a lynching."

"This isn't our job—"
"Yes, it is," Arno said, voice dropping an octave and turning into a dangerous hiss. "This is why we have a Revolution to start with, to make the laws fairer, the punishments more equitable, and to make all people accountable. It would be barbaric to leave her to a bloodthirsty mob, and we've had more than enough lynching's and heads on pikes to last us until the turn of the century."

Durand stared at Arno, and he at Durand, before his partner sighed. "Merde, Victor," he said, "you don't have to play the idealist card so quickly. Come on, girl, let's get you somewhere safe." He straightened. "We go out one at a time, one of us to talk to the crowd, the other to escort her out. Keep a firm grip on her – first if she tries to bolt."

"I won't."

"—Second if the crowd tries to grab her. Hopefully I'll keep them at bay."

Arno nodded. "Lead the way."

Arno and Corday stood at the door as Durand addressed the crowd, shouting several times before anyone would think to listen to him. "You are ordered to disperse!" he said. "We have the situation well in hand! Go about your business that we my do ours!" As he spoke four more gens d'armes arrived and helped push the people back. Arno took his cue and stepped out, helping Corday to the street and keeping a firm grip on her arm.

"If things go bad," he said, "Follow me. I know you'll keep up."

"Whatever you say, sir," she said calmly.

There was no incident, however, as they moved to the Sorbonne station. Corday was locked up immediately, Durand giving the report as Arno tried to find five minutes to speak to the woman in private. It never happened, Durand pulling him over to give his own report, which Arno did in great detail – save the mentioning of the scars at the base of her palm. It was dark when they finally finished, they hadn't eaten yet and neither of them were in the mood. Arno said his goodbyes and was up on the roofs minutes after he knew he was alone. He waited in the humid air until well after midnight, pulling off his uniform coat and bicorn hat, leaving only his brown waistcoat. He moved around the station, eyeing it from every angle, before sneaking into an attic crawl space and making his way down to her cell. She was awake, writing something by candlelight, and Arno took a stool to sit across from her, the bars separating them.

"You're back," she said softly.

"I am," he said.

"You're not in uniform," she observed. "Is that important?"

Arno had spent hours determining how to start this conversation. "It takes a certain amount of skill to kill a man in one blow," he said.

A small, serene smile. "It was sheer luck," she answered. "No, it wasn't," Arno corrected, "But I understand that that kind of training isn't spoken of to anyone. Unless one underwent the same kind of training."

"I've no idea what you're talking about."

Arno leaned forward, showing his left palm, the blade scars at the base of his wrist. "Did Maitre Beylier give the assignment?" he asked, "Or is he back with the Black Legion?"
There, her eyes widened, and her gaze immediately darted around, an intensity to them that hinted she was using an eagle. Arno didn't dare use his, he didn't want to know how many Assassins were nearby, watching. "I do not know your face," she said. "When did you join?"

"The Bastilles."

"I see. I had just finished and was assigned to my home in Caen. Were you trained here in Paris?"

"Yes."

"Abbaye au Dames convent."

A natural pause fell between them, both of them staring.

"Was he a Templar? Marat?"

"No," Corday said, shaking her head. "He was not a target. I tried, several times, to get the Maîtres to see the damage he was doing, but Mentor said there were too many damages to stop all of them. Ever since the insurrection things have only gone downhill, and Marat inflamed everything. I've broken the Creed to do this, I pursued a target on my own."

Oh.

Oh...

Arno took in a deep, deep breath. "Chrétien Lafrenière, Frédéric Rouille, Marie Lévesque, and Louis-Michel le Peletier," he confessed. "You're not the only one who worked without sanction."

"Oh," Corday said, eyes widening again. "You're the one that was expelled. They sent letters out."

Arno winced, hand going up to his forehead. Bon sang. He needed a drink. It hurt to talk about all of this.

"They didn't go into detail," Corday said, leaning in. "Only that you had broken the Creed. What did they do?"

Arno looked up, sensitive. But the placid serenity had finally left her face, now there was a gaze of intense curiosity, mixed with... empathy. He hesitated regardless, he was so used to people shaming him for doing what he thought was right, and he knew that going behind the Council's back had been wrong; he just needed to do what was right, no matter the cost. He didn't need someone else telling him he was wrong, but... the way she watched him, face open, even accepting. She had killed a target without sanction... perhaps...

"After my father died I was raised by a man," he said, "Monsieur de la Serre. On paper I was a houseboy but..." his gaze drifted to memory: horseback riding, hunting, acting as a page when M. de la Serre was locked away in his office. "He was like a father to me." And then, that night: the stagger, the blood, trying to free the airways, help, guards, murder! His face hardened. "They played a part in his murder."

"The Germain investigation," Corday said, nodding. She breathed in through her nose and leaned back, hand covering her mouth as her legs shifted under her country dress. "We're the same, then," she said. "We take one life to save thousands." She looked to Arno again. "Marat, did you read his papers?"

"Daily," Arno said.
"Then you know what he's been doing since the Revolution started," she said. "He attacks everyone, calls for executions, decries people he doesn't like as enemies of liberty. We have the invasions, civil uprisings – no, civil war – depreciation of the assignats, and no more grain circulation. Vendée has declared war on Paris after all their suffering, Toulon is under siege by our own forces because now even England is interested in getting their foot on our soils. The king was executed, and the power vacuum we suffer while all of this is going on meant nothing to Marat. He thought changes would somehow happen instantaneously. He thought that no change meant treason. He was responsible for the women's march on Versailles that broke into the palace, the insurrection last year in August, and all the prison massacres in September." Corday sighed, a low, long exhale that described the weight of everything she had said. "He fed off of paranoia and anger, wielded it like a blade. If he lived—" Her voice cracked. "If he had lived he would have slaughtered half the country."

"So he had to die," Arno said, "no matter the cost."

"Yes."

The pause enveloped them again. Corday... it wasn't personal, for her. She had killed one man to save thousands, and Arno was uncomfortable to have her think he was doing something similar – he wasn't pursuing Germain to some honorable, ideal end. By contrast, for him it was personal – a tangled incoherent knot of feelings and desires, tied up with M. de la Serre, Élise, Germain, his own psyche that he was only just starting to examine. He felt somehow less when he sat across from her.

"May I ask," he said, "Why stay?" he looked at his hands, turning one over. "You could have gotten away with none the wiser. You could have used something other than a kitchen knife."

"It's like you said," Corday replied. "He had to die, no matter the cost. Including my own life. It's like my teacher said, the Levantine approach sends a powerful message."

Arno stiffened, eyes snapping back to Corday. "... I'm sorry?"

"My teacher," Corday repeated. "He said a public execution sends a powerful message. The Third Crusade was filled with such public assassinations."

"Your teacher..." he said, licking his lips, "Pierre Bellec?"

Corday's eyes widened, the grey looking almost blue. She reached out, touched the bars. "How...?"

Arno pursed his lips, connecting to this woman on a level he didn't think possible. "He was the one who found me in the Bastille," he said.

She sucked in a breath through her nose. Arno wished there weren't bars between them. The realization was heavy – someone else had had Bellec as a teacher. Was he the same with her as with he? He was afraid to ask, afraid to think he was the only one, afraid—

"Did he have a nickname for you?" she asked.

"Petit merdeux."

"Petite salope."

Arno winced at the slur.

"Did you hang by for fingertips for hours?"
"Yes. Did he take you above ground?"

"We were at the abbey, but yes; he took me out to the surrounding villages at least once a week."

"That rare?" Arno offered. "Almost nightly for me."

They shared a smile. "Did he curse you out for not thinking?"

"Oh, god, yes."

"Then you know," Corday said, leaning back, her breath shaky. "You know what he was like."

"Say one thing wrong..."

"And die from the blood he drew with his words," she said, nodding. "The turn was the worst. Just when you thought you knew what to say..."

"You found a new wrong thing to say," Arno agreed, not quite smiling, but unable to believe how much lighter his shoulders felt to know that someone out there knew. Not in the way that Cosette listened and was uncomfortable or upset, but someone who had been there, who knew what it was like, how quickly the air would change.

"Mirabeau," Corday said, looking at her small hands, "He called me to Paris a couple of years ago. He wanted to talk to me about Bellec, asked after my training, my experiences. I... I couldn't tell him everything. How can you explain what being under him was like?"

"A fellow apprentice, Cosette, she never liked what was happening. She said it wasn't right, what he was doing."

Corday nodded. "After Mirabeau interviewed me... I started to wonder. I asked after the training of the others at the abbey. None of them went through what I went through... what we went through," she added, looking Arno in the eye. "I was a child," she said, "I had no way to protect myself from what he did. He would tell me what men would do to me in explicit detail, describe his conquests. He said it was to harden me against the horrors of the world. I never felt comfortable in my own body."

"You're weak."

"You disappoint me, merdeux."

"Your father'd be ashamed of you."

"Stubborn little baise, aren't you?"

"Never should have plucked you out of the Bastille."

"... I know the feeling," Arno said. "Monsieur de la Serre was the Templar Grandmaitre, any time I spoke of him, he would tell me what I ought to think and send me to hang by my fingertips. I wasn't allowed to be fond of him, and when I did it enough he would send other novices to challenge me."

Corday shuddered. "He always drank on missions."

"And you would have to write the reports."

"And he denied ever letting that happen."
Arno reached through the bars, taking Corday's hand. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry that happened."

"I've come to wonder," Corday said. "The reading we did as children: Plutarch, Voltaire, Rousseau... even Shao Jun and Altair. So much time is spent talking about virtue, physical health, societal structures. But, how is there no care for the mind that is so lauded? Why do we not have earmarks for a mind overtaxed or abused, as we do for the body? Why do we not have standards for how to treat our children and students that keeps their precious minds healthy for the wealth of information we fill them with? How can we discipline one who beat's a person's very soul? And then I thought: how can one see a beaten soul? There are no scars or wounds for one to note. And how do we judge what is right and what is wrong when we are all so different? I keep reading, trying to find an answer."

Arno was breathless to hear Corday speak. He had never met anyone so pensive, so thoughtful of the very nature of... of everything. For the first time he understood why people like Rousseau and Locke and Descartes were so important, the kind of problems people like them turned their minds to. He admired why the Assassins cultivated their kind of knowledge, and he envied Corday for having had the training since she was a child, that she could appreciate the great thinkers in a way that he never could. He turned inwards, looking at himself, wondering if he even had anything to contribute.

"I suppose..." he said after a long pause. "I supposed people must first admit that there's a problem."

Corday blinked, then smiled, soft and warm. "They must see past the illusion," she said.

Arno groaned. "Not the Creed..."

And Corday laughed, a small, quiet giggle, and she squeezed his hand.

"Merci," she said, "Merci for coming to see me. It will make my last days on this earth full in a way that I didn't think I would have."

"Citoyenne Corday... Charlotte... you don't have to die for this."

"Yes, I do. And I do it gladly."

Arno couldn't take the days off to watch the trial, he was forced to walk the streets with Durand, who sensed his partner's mood and kept relatively quiet. The papers had a hundred things to say, details to express, ideas to posit. Corday was cross examined three times, including the chief prosecutor and the President of the Revolutionary Tribunal. Everyone wanted to know what other conspirators there were, who's idea was it to kill Marat. No one could believe that a passive citizen, a passive woman, could conceive of such an idea on her own. Everyone thought it was a Girondins conspiracy given Marat's concerted efforts to evict them from Hôtel de Ville.

But the verdict was only ever going to be one: she was guilty. And she was sentenced to death.

Arno and Durand were commandeered for guard duty, as was most of the Saint-Germain and Sorbonne. A summer shower drenched everyone as they waited for the execution, the crowds bloodthirsty for Corday to arrive.

But she was calm in all things, serene with what she had done, prepared for what she was about to experience. She wore red, not the traditional white. White symbolized equality in death, and Corday was not equal: she was a condemned traitor who had assassinated a representative of the
people, hence the red.

(Arno kept his thoughts about what Marat "represented" to himself.)

He watched as she walked up to the platform, watched as she was placed into the guillotine, watched as the lever was pulled. The sound burned his ears as the blade fell, and he would never unsee Corday's head falling into the waiting basket, and he would never unhear the cheer of the crowd.

And, to add insult to injury, someone on the platform pulled the head up and slapped it, saying something under the cheer that Arno couldn't hear. Corday's severed head made a face, and the executioner shouted at the man, whoever it was, to get off the platform. Arno turned in disgust, unable to see more.

"Durand," he said, leaning over to his partner. "Let's get a drink."

"Sure," Durand said, sensing Arno's mood. "Never did show you that place in Sorbonne."

Arno drank until he couldn't see straight, then drank some more. He woke... later. Midmorning. Élise stared down at him with her arms crossed, already dressed for the day.

"Are you quite finished?" she asked, her rich alto reverberating through Arno's hangover.

"Élise, please," he moaned. "I had a bad day yesterday."

"And you'll have a worse day today," she said, louder to cut over him and sending waves of pain through his skull. "Neither of us have time for you sobbing into a bottle about a 'bad day.' Get over yourself and get back to work. You're supposed to be keeping an ear out for Germain on the streets, and you can't do that when you're like this."

Arno, needles stabbing his entire cranium, managed to report to the station. Durand gave him the silence he needed, took him through streets that were shadowed until the hangover lessened.

"You all right?" Durand asked several hours later.

"Just dandy," Arno said, rubbing his temples.

"... you always going to be like that when you say you want to go drinking?"

Arno looked to his partner. "Be like what?" Durand opened his mouth to reply as Arno thought better of it. "No, never mind, I probably don't want to know," he said quickly, holding up a hand. "I just... had a bad day."

"I noticed."

They walked through the streets for another hour, Arno feeling better and worse by the second. Better as the headache faded, worse as he realized what he had done. Bon sang, he owed Durand an explanation. "I... have a problem," he finally said. "If I ever suggest going out drinking, tie me up somewhere and empty every bottle in a mile radius."

Durand whistled. "That bad?" he asked. "My father was like that. Don't ever recall him being sober. Always laughing over something, he was, or sleeping it off. I've seen mean drunks and angry drunks. Never saw your kind before."

Arno pursed his lips, trying to find a tactful, private way to put it. "Let's just say... there are demons
"I fight."

Durand... Giraud, nodded. "We all do," he said. "And we all face them alone."

Chapter End Notes

Everyone say it with us: ARNO WTF ARE YOU DOING?! Get away from her!

I'm not sure we should admit the amount of debate we had over what Arno would do after the last chapter, because in real life something like this could go either way. Though the two of us talk about the Escape, there was one time, over a year earlier, when we just... left. Grabbed our keys and left right when our abuser was abusing one of us. We went to a friend's house who knew about our situation, but our abuser called us and sounded very... calm and rational. We'd never done anything like that before. And the two of us decided to go back instead of making a clean break. Even after the Escape, we were in email contact with our abuser just to make sure that person knew how to cook their meals and do the chores and where to shop.

Another person Mirror knows, had a lover who cheated on her and, years later, they met again. Mirror asked why she was considering going back. The reply: "he has my heart."

People outside of these toxic relationships can make objective decisions like, "Never go back." But that's really, really, hard to see when you're the one IN the toxic relationship. It took the loss of our father and a few months of secretly going to therapy before we started planning the Escape. Granted, we didn't have an earth-shattering revelation about Élise knowing the identity of our father's killer, but ...

We decided to lean into Arno's headspace when he had nothing. There are no illusions, now - his lack of self-esteem, his belief that he is merdeux - shit - and deserves all the bad things he's going through - his self-loathing is at full volume, and it's not until he loses the watch that he finally hits rock bottom. The two of us read up on the Twelve Steps, and one stuck out to us - in effect it talks about apologizing for the harm one committed and admitting that one did something wrong. Arno kind of knows he did something wrong, but he was surviving on the idea of undoing the mistake - he was holding off his own culpability until he would explain it away with a, "But it's all fine, now." In effect, he was running from his problem. It's only now when he's sober and after falling so far that he can engage in real, honest, self-reflection.

His first real decision is to admit the problem - something many, many people in real life can't or won't do. It takes soooooo much energy for Arno to even do that much - he has to physically force himself to look people in the eye and use correct terminology: "hangover. drunkenness." Even small things like this are a miracle, and he has a long, long way to go.

In the end he's only just realizing he needs to come to terms with the death of his father and M. de la Serre, he's only just realizing that he doesn't really know Élise, he's only just realizing that something needs to change, and it needs to be on the inside. That's a huge mountain of subjects to process, let alone tackle, and before he's even had a chance to sense the scope Élise comes back and manipulates him some more. It's really
too soon for him to make a healthy decision, and "she has his heart." Bad habits are more familiar than good habits he hasn't even had the chance to make yet.

However, if you notice, he has finally, FINALLY, started to grow. He realizes he doesn't "know" Élise, and in the next few chapters there'll be a difference in their relationship, i.e. Arno's self-blame when things happens has finally been reduced. More on that later. In the meantime:

Hello Napoléon! Haven't seen you in a while! He continues to be impressed with Arno, even after everything, and moreover seems to connect to Arno in a way that keeps surprising him. It's too bad Ubisoft never gave Arno a sequel with the Napoleonic Wars. That would have been really interesting.

Also, Hello Corday! If anyone noticed her cameo earlier in the fic, that was the tip off that this scene was coming in some way. Though we as always played close to history - even quoting Marat's last words, we did what Ubisoft didn't and made Corday an Assassin. Moreover, we made her Bellec's student, and the first real chance for Arno to grow is presented: he now has someone who know exactly what it was like to be Bellec's student, pratfalls and all, and the sense of isolation is wiped away almost immediately to know that someone out there "gets it." Charlotte also presents one of the central tenets of the fic: how to you recognized damaged people, and how do you help them?

And, finally, pay attention to the references to the Creed. Just as an FYI.

Next chapter: Two Different Bridges

Author's Note II: And props to a certain reviewer who correctly diagnosed Élise!
The day after Robespierre was placed on the Committee for Public Safety was the day that Lapparent met with all the men.

"We have a new type of person to keep an eye out for," he explained curtly. "There is now a death penalty for anyone who hoards sparse goods. Grain and flour being chief among those that's scarce. You see anyone like that, you arrest them. We have some decently well off people here. They can afford bread and grain. We just have to make sure they're not stockpiling it."

Arno immediately saw a problem with this. "How do we know if they're stockpiling without going into everyone's kitchens and storerooms? Are we to search every house in the district?"

"Hmph." Lapparent stared intently at Arno. "Dorian, that's asking for trouble. Our goal is to maintain stability. If you see someone offloading a large amount of grain, you investigate. If a citizen comes to report something, you investigate. Otherwise, let sleeping dogs lie."

Arno frowned heavily, but Giraud nudged him firmly and he kept his mouth shut.

Once they were out on the streets, Arno turned to Giraud. "Why didn't you let me ask more questions? That order was incredibly vague. How are we supposed to enforce something without even a basis of what constitutes 'hoarding'? What if someone bought extra for a party or function they're hosting? How do we count restaurants or cafés compared to a mother buying grain for six children to a single man with a servant? There's no way to actually handle that."

"Exactement," Giraud replied. "It's vague. The more you ask clarifying questions, the more we're expected to follow through. Do what the captain says, look for the glaringly obvious, let the citoyens do all the snooping. Most police work depends on people coming forward. Since most don't, we have quiet days. Believe me, I was a young idealist when I joined up, same as you, Victor. You learn, over time, that it's best to just do what you can and ignore the rest. The world is merdeux and will keep being merdeux."

"A somewhat fatalistic approach," Arno offered dryly.

"One that lets me sleep at night," Giraud replied lightly. "One man can't change a damn thing. Best we can do is survive, keep our family happy."

Arno remembered thinking like that, growing up under the de la Serre house, when he was an ignorant houseboy. He... couldn't really think like that anymore. His time learning under the Assassins had made him far too aware that one person could change things. Even before being an Assassin, one person could change things. Ten minutes late... Safe and sound, only slightly delayed... one person could change things disastrously. So why wasn't the opposite true? That one person could change things beneficially?

August dawned and the Convention kept moving faster and faster. Anyone rebelling against the Convention would be facing a scorched-earth policy. In Saint-Denis, the tombs of the Kings of France was profaned by a mob on the Convention's orders. The Queen was transferred from the Temple to the Conciergerie, Marseille was captured by the Convention, the chaos of France kept swirling as once one conflict was settled paranoia was building tensions elsewhere.
One day, just before Giraud and Arno headed out, Lapparent pulled them to his office. Lapparent was grim-faced, staring at the papers on his desk. Then he let out a heavy sigh.

"You two need to make an arrest today."

"Bien sûr."

"Pierre Thibodeaux. Word from the Cabinet Noir is that he's wanted for questioning. He's supposed to be some sort of baker."

Giraud nodded, "We know where his shop is."

Lapparent nodded. "Go get him."

"Yes, sir."

Once on the streets, Arno asked the obvious. "Cabinet Noir?"

Giraud actually looked over, surprised. "The Black Office? You've not heard of it?"

Arno scowled. "Non, obviously."

Giraud shook his head. "Victor, whatever did you do before joining the gens d'armes? You chase down criminals like you have wings, notice the smallest of details, but you don't know how we often get our information?"

Arno raised a brow and said dryly "I seem to recall you telling me, repeatedly, that the citizens come to us."

Giraud chuckled lightly. "Yes, I may have mentioned the limits of our job from time to time. But the Cabinet Noir has been around for a long time. It's a tiny room at the post office. Suspects get their mail read there before being sent to the intended recipient."

That... that was just appalling.

When Arno went home, he mentioned it to Élise.

"Can you believe it," he growled. "Our mail, being read by a third party. Just because someone is a suspect. I can't believe how this is allowed!"

But Élise had a spark in her eye. "Cabinet Noir..." Her eyes glittered as she looked to Arno. "That gives me a new path to pursue. Germain has to be keeping in touch with his supporters by mail. Perhaps I can find—"

"Élise," Arno turned, surprised at what she was saying. "You can't be serious. You can't think that this Cabinet Noir is a good idea?"

But Élise stood and kissed him thoroughly. So hard, so insistent, pressing him against the wall, pressing herself all along him, and then she tilted her head back and laughed. Actually laughed. "Finally! A direction!" Then she kissed him hard again. "I'll be visiting the post office tomorrow. Now. Arno." She pulled back and her smile was beaming. "I need some help getting ready for bed. Do be a dear, my stay is so tight."

September started with the sans-culottes occupying the Convention to demand the arrest of people
against the Revolution and the creation of a new Revolutionary army.

"I'm very glad to be on this side of the Seine now," Giraud said during rounds. "We don't have to deal with that or get conscripted to deal with that. We're so close to L'École de Militaire that we aren't clocking more hours than we need to."

"That may be true, but don't the people understand that things aren't instantaneous? I want a lot of the changes that are being proposed," Arno replied, eyes always sweeping the streets, "I know that making two or three people agree on something is difficult, never mind all the members of the Convention. No sooner are we looking for people stockpiling scarcities, but now they've instituted this 'Terror' and this Law of Suspects is a joke. We're to arrest anyone opposing the Revolution? That's so vague."

"But it sure sounds good to the politicians," Giraud replied. "Look out, another beggar taking a corner. Let's go chase him off."

It was later that week when a boy barely fifteen and still not grown came running up to Arno and Giraud saying that someone had died.

"Take us there, boy," Giraud ordered, and together the three of them were off into the darkening evening. The home they were brought to had three stories, and the boy took them right through the front door and then out a back door to the garden terrace, with a portico that had some sort of vines interwoven in the lattice work.

Under the portico was a body. A woman's body, somewhere in her forties, in a stylish evening gown, if in an older fashion, face twisted in some sort of convulsion with foam leaking from a corner of the mouth.


"No, it doesn't appear that way," Arno agreed. He kneeled down by the body, sniffed carefully by the mouth and foam, but didn't smell anything. He looked carefully at all the exposed skin for any sort of puncture marks, and checking the clothes for any sign of tear or blood smear to indicate a poisoned stabbing of some kind.

"Victor," Giraud hissed, "What are you doing? We need to question—"

"Just a moment," Arno replied. "We can't question without knowing what questions to ask." Good, no sign of an Assassin's dart or stab. He wasn't meddling against the Council. The last thing Arno wanted was to deal with the Brotherhood in the course of doing his job. He glanced around the garden, reaching for that back corner of his mind where his eagle slept. There were distinct pops of color against the deep shadows of the still setting sun, and Arno made sure he was looking around more than what he was immediately drawn to before he moved for a cup.

"Look," he said quietly. "A cup." He lifted the fine porcelain and the hand painted pattern seemed to be of... blossoms of some kind. The light was too dim. "At least I think it's a cup. There's no handle."

Giraud looked at it carefully. "Japanese, I think. My wife saw a set in a window last year. She's been enamored by them, letting your hands warm with tea in the winter, or something."

Arno nodded, narrowing his eyes. He brought the cup carefully to his face and sniffed, but still nothing out of the ordinary. Just traces of what smelled like chocolate. He looked more carefully about the garden, again trying not to draw suspicion that his eagle knew exactly what he needed to
"Look at those plants," he gestured, and together they leaned over one of the flowerbeds. "Oh, not good."

"What?" Giraud asked.

"Look at those plants," Arno said, making sure he didn't touch any of them. "Foxgloves, belladonna, larkspur, bon sang, even wolf's bane."

"I take it those are bad."

"Very deadly," Arno replied, stepping back carefully. "That is one very deadly flowerbed. God only knows how it's been tended so well."

Giraud looked back at the woman. "So we can safely say poison was used."

"Yes, I think that would be a decent guess," Arno replied wryly. He deliberately stepped so that his boot almost landed on the other item his eagle fireworks had pointed out. He shuffled, making it look like he had felt like he stepped on something. Perfect excuse to kneel. He dug under the bushes and pulled out a jeweled ring, more woman's than man's given the delicate diameter, but more importantly...

"Is that a vial?" Giraud asked.

"Yes, an empty vial behind this jewel." Arno looked to Giraud. "It doesn't take a genius to figure out what happened here."

Giraud nodded solemnly. "We need to start with the staff."

"No," Arno replied, "we need to—" he interrupted himself, turning on instinct as he heard the pops of fireworks behind him and a woman, dressed very nicely, if not as expensively, came storming out. "This is private property! What's going on out—Oh!" She looked to be maybe ten years older than Arno.

"Bon soir, Citoyenne...?" Arno greeted, keeping the ring in his gloved palm behind him and the strange handle-less teacup in the other.

"Ah, oh, bon soir," she greeted with a proper curtsey. "Er," she shook her head. "If you must know, I am Amélie Monvoisin." Monvoisin? Where have I heard that name before... She looked past them to the body under the portico. Arno watched her face carefully. She didn't pale, but her face was arranged in perfect surprise. "That's... mon dieu, that's my elder sister, Madame Valérie Duclos."

"Nous vous remercions," Arno thanked her. "It would appear she's been poisoned."

Monvoisin's eyes narrowed and she was quiet for a moment. "Non," she insisted. "I refuse to believe Georges poisoned her! Even after what she said!"

"I'm afraid you need to clarify that statement," Giraud said flatly, fully into his professional demeanor.

Monvoisin turned her nose up at them. "Valérie and I are... were quite close. But my sister... she was terrible this evening, drinking far too much, saying the worst things. She insulted everyone. She was even talking about going to the Committee of Public Safety about Georges. She said she would say he was a counter-revolutionary."
Almost imperceptibly, Giraud winced. Arno silently agreed. Ever since the Terror had started, citizens came forward to mention people who were counterrevolutionaries. Already the prisons were filling faster than ever before and both Arno and Giraud knew that the trials were so fast as to not be more than a ceremony before the guillotine was applied. If this Duclos was threatening that, it meant that she wanted this Georges person dead. Depending on the level of insults that Duclos was levying and how sensitive her victims were, there might be several who were interested in poisoning her. This wasn't good at all.

"Come inside, Citoyenne," Arno said softly. "We need to question the staff. Perhaps a lady of your standing can keep an eye on them when we go up to speak with the dinner guests?"

He didn't like the glint in her eyes. "Bien sûr," she stated.

Monvoisin guided them to the kitchen and immediately started to show them where everything was before Arno held up his hand. "Please, Citoyenne, this is our investigation. Wait here."

"As you wish."

Arno squinted, looking around the candle-lit kitchen and silently called for his eagle.

"Mortar and pestle," Giraud said, pointing out one of the items Arno's eagle had pointed out. He handed it to Arno and he took a sniff.

"Cocoa, like the tea cup," he said, keeping his back to Monvoisin to place the ring and teacup in his coat. Arno jutted his chin. "Cocoa paste over there, sugar and milk."

"The drink was definitely made here," Giraud agreed. He leaned in to Arno. "I don't like how that woman is watching us."

"She can watch all she wants. As long as she doesn't interfere." The cook, who had silently gone to a corner once she saw the uniforms, kept glancing around, scared. Her face was lined with a number of decades. Arno walked up to the cook, putting a polite expression on his face. "Citoyenne," he greeted politely. "I regret to inform you that Citoyenne Duclos is dead."

The old cook's jaw dropped before she said a very impolite word. Frowning heavily, the cook let out a heavy sigh. "I never liked her. Ever. Even when her late husband was alive."

"Oh?" Arno asked politely.

The cook glanced around, seeing Monvoisin at the door, and kept her voice low. "He was a true gentleman. Monsieur Georges was his friend and confidant. He'd come over for a meal and eat and they both always spoke well of my cooking. If I were a good thirty years younger, I think I would have turned either of their heads and gotten a better deal."

"Our thanks," Arno said softly. "And Citoyenne Duclos?"

The cook's face immediately scowled. "Madame lounged around all day and either yelled at her Monsieur Pierre or acted like some princess to Monsieur Duclos. And poor Mademoiselle Amélie! She doesn't have a penny to her name but Madame just berated her day in and day out. Lord only knows what will happen to her. She's thirty-five, far too old for any man to have her."

"Thank you," Giraud said. "Is there any other staff here?"

"Just me tonight," the cook replied. "What with the Revolution and all, most of the wealthiest are
being punished for being wealthy, so a lot of staff had been let go." The cook turned to Monvoisin. "Come here, Mademoiselle. You must be so upset. Let me make you some tea."

Monvoisin looked surprised, but came in.

"Do stay here," Arno said gently, flicking his eyes to the cook. Monvoisin nodded.

"Dining room is probably upstairs," Arno murmured. "Overlooks the garden. Third floor will likely be bedrooms. Down here just for the servants."

"Let's get going."

In the dining room were three people. An older gentleman, impeccably dressed, a young man roughly Arno's age, richly dressed, and a woman, close in age to Monvoisin. Arno looked with his eagle, noting that the strange handle-less Japanese cups were set about the table, along with a silver decanter. Arno and Giraud both offered polite greetings and Arno checked both the cups and the decanter. Cold chocolate in all of them, and the cups were down to the dregs. Poison was likely put in specifically Duclos's cup. Hmm.

"We regret to inform you that Citoyenne Duclos is dead," Giraud explained while Arno kept checking the cups. "Out of necessity we must ask several questions. It has been mentioned to us that Citoyenne Duclos said some cruel things tonight?"

The youngest of the three sighed. "My mother is often difficult," he explained. "I am Pierre Duclos. Tonight she was particularly viscous and volatile, particularly to Citoyen Villiers-Segonzac," he gestured to the elderly gentleman, "and my beloved Lucille. Before our guests even arrived, she was most vehement in chastising me for how I choose to spend my inheritance. She seemed to think that she should have inherited instead of me." The young man, Pierre, gave a small humored snort. "As if a woman could ever inherit. Citoyen Georges has well managed the funds, especially with his trade in the Orient."

Arno absorbed all that, filing it away, but redirected Pierre from the verbal abuse his mother seemed to have been spouting. "And at dinner?"

Pierre winced. "She received a letter shortly before dinner. She was... furious. Even more so than usual."

"That's putting it mildly, dearest," the woman, Lucille said with a faint smile. "She called me a harlot and a money-grubbing vulture. She called you an incompetent idiot who never should have been born, and she called Citoyen Villiers an old coffin more interested in Japanese geisha than managing money and she called her own sister a penniless leech who thought jewelry was more important than money. And those were the mild insults this time."

Arno blinked. Then blinked again. Those were mild insults? Why even bother coming to dinner to subject one's self to such vulgarities?

Arno turned to Lucille. "So you two weren't friends?"

Lucille actually gave a small laugh. "Oh, we got along fine, by my view. She didn't like the age gap between me and Pierre. Most don't. But I've known her since before her husband died. Poor man took ill and asphyxiated. That was a shame. But he did manage to make Citoyen Villiers the executor in charge of the family finances. That made Valérie furious. I found it amusing. But threatening Citoyen Villiers with the Committee, that was a first. It takes all kinds, I suppose."

Arno turned to Villiers. "Citoyen?"
The old man sighed deeply. "Yes, she did threaten me at dinner. I don't think anything of it. She was always making baseless threats. She has been for years. Tonight I retired to the parlor for some brandy to get away from it for a while. She's been getting angrier and more bitter over the years, but for Pierre's sake, I always feel I should come and show good company. I was just coming back into the dining room when Amélie handed me some hot chocolate to bring to bring to Valérie as a peace offering."

"That was my idea," Pierre said. "I thought if Lucille brought some that she and my mother might talk and come to an understanding. Tante Amélie took it instead. She said that my mother didn't need to see Lucille as that would upset her further. I knew that was a risk, but I hoped... But Tante Amélie could usually read mother's moods better than the rest of us."

Arno nodded. So Pierre suggested some hot chocolate. Lucille went to give it, but Monvoisin interceded and instead gave it Villiers. Somewhere in that chain it was poisoned. Arno turned to Pierre. "You mentioned a letter?"

"Yes. It's likely still in the study."

"Merci. Excuse us for just a moment."

Arno nodded. He and Giraud went to the hall.

"Damned if everyone in there doesn't have a reason to kill that woman," Giraud said softly. "Son wants to escape her, his beloved would like to marry him, accusations to the Committee of Public Safety for that executor. They all would benefit from her dead."

"Let's not forget the penniless sister," Arno added. "We need to find that letter and see what angered her so."

"You search the study," Giraud said softly. "I'll keep questioning them. Learn more about how dinner went."

Arno nodded. Parfait. That way he wouldn't have to hide using his eagle. Arno headed down the hall to where the study likely was and then called on his eagle again. Several fireworks caught his eyes, and the first he investigated was a crumpled letter clearly thrown to a corner.

"My dear Mme Duclos,

"I myself was witness to the signing of your late husband's last will and testament only a few months before his death. He left the sum to be managed by his friend Georges Villiers-Segonzac, with the bulk of the estate to go to your son, Pierre. We discussed the matter over cognac, and he seemed most reasonable.

"Madame, I would thank you to not call into question my thoroughness and professionalism. Neither your husband nor M. Villiers-Segonzac disclosed the document you have brought to light. I prefer to think they were unaware of its existence.

"Regardless, the document appears to be genuine and gives you an indisputable claim to the assets. There is, however, one obstacle to your stated desire to take immediate and direct control of the inheritance: the law dictates that women may not manage their own financial affairs. Therefore, M. Georges Villiers-Segonzac continues to hold complete authority over the entire fortune despite the fact that the assets have always belonged directly to you and never to your husband. As long as M. Villiers-Segonzac is active, your husband's will dictates that he, and not yourself, stands as the one who controls the fortune."
"Please accept my most sincere regrets and esteem,

"- Maxime Siquotie"

Arno whistled to himself. Some sort of document proving that she was to get the inheritance, but denied due to being female? That would anger someone.

The next document was in an open safe, and was similarly enlightening.

"My mother, through her business, amassed a considerable personal fortune before her death, which she left entirely to me, her eldest daughter. To honor her, I declare a legacy to be passed to the eldest surviving female of my line born of the name Monvoisin.

"My wealth is held in trust, with the income benefitting my heir directly. As one heir dies, it passes to her eldest daughter or, if none, her eldest sister or, if none, her eldest female relation.

In addition, the heir must take ownership of my mother's commonplace book and her collection of glass rings and necklaces, the judicious use of which is essential to the success of the enterprise. Indeed what these items represent is more powerful than any wealth.

"I declare these to be my wishes upon my death.

"- Marguerite Monvoisin.

"Belle-Ile-en-Mer, 1692

And over a hundred years old. That should have overridden the will if it weren't for gender. That was ancient precedent.

Something that had been niggling at the back of Arno's mind snagged his attention when he saw the name. Marguerite Monvoisin. Of course! The name was Monvoisin was familiar because it was one of the names from the Affair of Poisons against Louis IV two hundred years ago. Thirty-six people were executed, rumors of black masses and other Satanic rituals. Amélie Monvoisin was very likely descended in some way. He looked to the letter again.

Heirs are always the eldest daughter or sister.

Arno finally went to the last thing his eagle had pointed out. An ancient book, left open to a page with an extremely detailed recipe for poison that would be odorless, colorless, and virtually undetectable and work within minutes. Several different notes were written along the side, adding to the recipe, all in different hands and various ages from old to more recent modifications.

Right.

It didn't take a genius to figure this out. Arno took the items and returned to the dining room, where Giraud was questioning Villiers about a snuffbox of a similar Japanese design. Across the room Monvoisin was standing with the cook, hiding her gleeful smile demurely behind a hand.

Arno stepped up and nudged Giraud. Giraud nodded and stepped back with Arno. Clearly Giraud wanted to swap evidence, but Arno wouldn't let his eyes leave Monvoisin for a second. Instead he stepped up to her.

"Citoyenne Monvoisin," Arno said politely. "You wanted to inherit your famous ancestors fortune
and gain independence. Your legacy of poison since the Affair of Poisons a hundred years ago has
been passed from mother to daughter ever since, and the only way for you to inherit was for your
sister to be out of the way. As it stands, I have questions about Citoyenne Duclos's husband's death,
but I can see why he made sure there was a will that conflicted with a Monvoisin inheritance. But
tonight, you saw your chance. Citoyenne Duclos was more vile than usual and you saw the chance
to cast suspicion on Citoyen Villiers by making sure he gave her a poisoned drink, leaving you in
charge of the inheritance, particularly after her threats about the Committee of Public Safety. The
documentation of your ancestors mentions jewelry such as the ring found by Citoyenne Duclos's
body. Such as would be favored by a Monvoisin."

By now Monvoisin was glaring. "Damn you," she hissed. "Interfering where you're not wanted!
Valérie didn't deserve that money! I did much more for the honor of the family! She was nothing
but a vile, hectoring drunk! If I were you, I'd be careful what I drank!"

It didn't matter. Giraud and Arno grabbed her and she screamed and struggled, but against two
larger men, she didn't have a chance. Together, they started to drag her out of the room and behind
him, Arno could hear Pierre turn to Lucille an proclaim, "We can finally be wed!"

Arno wished them luck.

It was far too much work and effort to drag Monvoisin back to the station and then log all the
evidence that Arno brought along. And Arno didn't... feel good about it. He'd caught a murderer,
made the streets safer, removed a poisoner and the recipe for so dangerous a drink. But the woman
murdered, Duclos, was a hateful old crow who wanted things only her way and complete control
over her finances and son's life. Yet Arno understood that a woman was subject to the whims of her
husband or son. He'd been with the Brotherhood enough to understand that. If Cosette had been
denied her inheritance just because she was a woman, or just because of her skin color, Arno would
be disgusted and help her in any way he could. The same for Charlotte or Yvette or even Célestine.

But what got him the most was the description of just how vile and volatile Duclos was. Every
dinner involved her insulting and degrading people so why did they keep going to such dinners? If
someone was so vitriolic, why even see them? Pierre and Villiers were on good terms. Why not
just arrange for Pierre to leave to a different home? Why did he stay with his mother?

It left Arno very pensive, but he couldn't say why.

"Excusez-moi."

Arno and Giraud paused as they walked down another boulevard. "Oui, Citoyen?"

"I need to report a counter-revolutionary."

Arno clenched his jaw and Giraud bit back a sigh. "Oui, Citoyen?"

"The cooper, Juneau. He wants to go back to the constitutional monarchy. That makes him a
Royalist."

"When did he say that?" Arno asked quietly.

"Just this morning?"

"Where those really his words?" Giraud asked, looking hard at the man.

"Close enough."
“Precise wording?” Arno pressed.

“He said we haven’t given any government a chance before we change it again. He doesn’t understand the point of the Revolution. We finally have a voice. If we’re not happy we can change things.”

“But did he say, specifically, that he wanted a king again.”

“Well, no, but—”

“Did he specifically speak of wanting to go back to the régime ancien?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Did he—”

“Look, he’s a Royalist! Always has been! Just arrest him!”

"Pardonnez-moi."

"Oui, Citoyenne?"

“Um, my husband... He didn't mean it... but he said something yesterday... It was against the Revolution. S’il vous plaît, I don't think he meant it! But I know I have to report it. Please, it was just frustration!”

"Messieurs?"

"Oui, Citoyen?"

“Hurteau, the apprentice? I saw him giving money to a Girondist. That makes him a counter-revolutionary.”

“You know that that’s his dying aunt, don’t you, Citoyen? He’s trying to help her survive.”

“Still makes him a Royalist.”

"Oui, Citoyen?"

“I think I saw a Royalist. A counter-revolutionary. I’m not sure though.”

"Oui, Citoyen?"

“I need to report a counter-revolutionary.”

Arno was with Giraud in a tiny café that served passable food. “I just don’t understand,” he said softly. “So many people come to us, claiming that there are counter-revolutionaries. But I’m not sure there are as many as the numbers we’re seeing.”

“I don’t doubt you, Victor,” Giraud said, leaning back. “Most seem to be people just wanting a competitor or enemy gone. Some are just people frustrated and don’t know what they’re saying. But we have to take them in regardless. The Revolutionary Tribunal will see if they’re guilty or not.”
Arno bit back his doubts about that.

"Now we have this new calendar. I have no idea what day it's even supposed to be."

Giraud barked out a laugh. "It will take some getting used to. Come on. We're about done eating. It's time to get back to work."

Once they were back out on the streets, Arno was back to using his eagle from time to time, trying to see if there was anything he needed to worry about. Most of the time, his eyes were drawn to urchins, and Arno staring at them made them stop whatever mischief they were about to do, sometimes he caught a thief in the middle of lifting something, or saw a crowd of bullies surrounding someone. That part of the job, when he was doing something that he could see the results of, that felt good and made Arno think that being part of the gens d'armes was a good choice. Far better than the Law of Suspects that had him and Giraud arresting people that, from what Arno could observe, had done nothing wrong.

"Did you hear Lyon was taken back by the Convention?"

"Yes," Arno nodded, eyes roving the streets as much as Giraud's. "I imagine the Convention isn't happy with Lyon's little rebellion any more than Vendée."

"Can't see that going well for Lyon." Giraud nudged Arno and he turned his head, eagle awake, and indeed saw small fireworks around three teenagers, tall and gangly, but surrounding a young girl with a basket laden with groceries. He nodded and the two of them headed over to break up something before it even started. No sooner had the three boys been dispersed and the girl on her way than Arno heard a gasp and then a cry.

"You're back!"

Hands grabbed his arm gently and a bright smile stepped in front of him.

"You're back!" Cosette beamed at him. "Oh, thank the heavens, you're back! We were all so worried about you!"

Giraud was glancing between them and Cosette's giddy joy. "Victor? You know this slave?"

Both Cosette and Arno, as one, turned to Giraud and said, in unison, "There is no more slavery in France."

Then they glanced at each other and Arno couldn't quite help but laugh, even as his stomach tightened.

"Sorry, Giraud. Allow me to introduce Cosette, a friend of mine from a previous job."

"Enchantée."

"Enchanté." Cosette turned to Arno and her face could damn near light up the city of Paris. "We were worried, when you left. Marcel has been stewing at his shop and only ever grunts. Fabre has been silent. Citoyenne Gouze and Citoyen Grizier have kept your rooms the same. They've been saying you'll be back, and now you are! You should have told me!"

And this is exactly what Arno didn't want to deal with. "I'm back in Paris, Cosette. I'm not going back to Madame Sophie. She made it quite clear I'm not welcome."

Cosette's smile cracked. "We know," she said softly. Then she sighed. "We know. But you're back!"
That's what matters. Oh, look at me, prattling on when you're clearly on duty. Tell me, Victor, where is your precinct? I'll stop by later and we can catch up properly. We'll commiserate over the sorry state of the world, complain about how Madame Sophie is, lament everything that has happened, and then get back to chatting and having fun."

And Arno knew that Cosette wasn't going to take "no" for an answer. Diable.

Once Cosette had hefted her basket and lifted the hem of her petticoats to head off, Arno also knew that Giraud was going to have a lot of questions.

He sighed.

"Do you want to explain that?" Giraud offered lightly as they went back to patrolling the streets.

"Not particularly," Arno grunted. "When I came to Paris, I was... lost. My first employer, the one who took me in after my father died, he was dead, the property was ransacked after the Estates-General, and I was little more than a beggar when I finally got here."

Giraud's brows entered into his hairline. "Really? You? You talk like a noble. No one would hire you?"

Arno gave a baleful look and continued his modified history. "Would you hire a noble after everything that happened? Does anyone here want to hire a noble now that we've gotten rid of the various estates?"

Giraud actually looked sheepish. "Okay, you have a point."

"Madame Sophie found me and made me a part of her staff." Arno could see Giraud's questioning look for who this Sophie was but Arno would not reveal that. "We were a good team. We all worked well together. In a way," Arno worked not to wince as he realized this, "in a way we were a brotherhood. A family."

"Given how that sl-ah, that young lady was smiling at seeing you, I can see how that might be true." Giraud gave a slanted look. "That young lady wasn't an old lover, by chance?"

Arno looked to Giraud. "Why would you say... oh. No, she wasn't. I've always been in love with my wife. My heart has never looked at anyone else."

Giraud nodded.

"Anyway, Madame Sophie wasn't the easiest person to work under. Very demanding." Arno let out a long sigh. "I made too many mistakes. I was let go. I... did not handle it well."

"That's why you never drink wine?"

"Yes."

Giraud hummed.

Arno made a point to ask Giraud how his family was doing, all the little children and the sickly mother, making sure conversation stayed away from himself.

But, sure enough, and the end of the day, when Arno was leaving the precinct, his eagle easily found Cosette up on the roofs, waiting patiently. Arno looked around carefully, knowing his uniform stood out and wasn't meant for blending in. But if he wanted to talk more freely...
Fine.

In an alley, his eagle told him it was safe and he swiftly climbed up to meet Cosette. She wasn't in petticoats anymore, dressed more properly as an Assassin. She still beamed at him.

Arno sat beside her, looking out over Paris, watching as the sun finished disappearing over the horizon as the days kept getting shorter and shorter. Cosette was content to sit beside him.

Finally he let out a long sigh. Arno had promised that he would apologize. He had apologized to everyone back in Versailles, and to Élise. The Assassins deserved apologies as well. Bon sang, how was he going to manage that to the Council? Meet them at their individual workplaces?

Later. Best thought about later.

"I am sorry, Cosette."

Cosette blinked, looking to him.

"I... wasn't a good Assassin. I know going around the Council was wrong." He chuckled bitterly. "I see that quite clearly now. I didn't think things through. I just don't think—"

"Arno," Cosette said softly, "that's not you talking."

Arno stuttered his apology to a halt. "Pardon?"

Cosette shook her head. "Arno, that's Bellec talking. Bellec always said you never thought. That's a lie. Arno, you're always thinking. Whenever you go quiet, you're thinking. I seriously doubt you just stare off into space like a dullard who doesn't have a brain in his head. You're always thinking. Don't parrot back Bellec's nonsense."

"But... Bellec was right. I don't think. I just go off on a whim, went around the Council, didn't think anything through. I've never had to think at the level that Assassins do and—"

Cosette grabbed Arno and pulled him into a tight hug. "Don't do that to yourself," she said firmly and softly. "Don't put yourself down like that. That's Bellec talking. That's someone else talking. I don't care what Bellec thought of you. I don't care what that de la Serre woman thinks of you, or Monsieur de la Serre or anyone else. I know that you think deeply about things, that you're a wonderful man, one I am proud to call my Brother."

Emotion welled up in Arno and for the life of him, he couldn't say why. "I'm not part the Assassins anymore."

"I don't care. You will always be an Assassin. You will always be my brother."

Tears welling in his eyes, Arno hugged her back.

The following week, Cosette showed up again after Arno's shift had ended, this time in petticoats, and together, they walked the streets. Cosette was animatedly catching up Arno on all his friends and how they were doing.

In many ways, it was like he'd never left. It felt so good to laugh. Smile. He hadn't realized how little he'd been smiling lately. It was like the world was brighter with Cosette in it.

"You're still with that de la Serre woman?" Cosette asked quietly when Arno paused before going down the street that headed home.
Arno nodded.

Cosette nodded as well. "You're still one of us, Arno. I've watched you all week. Everything you do, you're an Assassin. Don't let her take that away from you."

Arno gave a sad smile. "I was never an Assassin, Cosette. You, Marcel, Charlotte, the others, you all accepted me. But the Council never did. Granted, I earned that for going around them, but... I don't think I was ever an Assassin."

"Maybe you didn't feel that way. But you are."

Arno shook his head smiling. "We're going to argue that someday."

And Cosette beamed. "Yes. We will. After the Queen's death, we've been busy. I'll try and drop by once a week to catch up."

Deep down, Arno admitted he was looking forward to it. He was still smiling when he opened the door to his home and Élise was there, frowning.

"You're late," she said flatly.

Arno shrugged. "I was talking with a colleague."

Élise's frown deepened. "Did you learn anything about Germain?"

Arno's smile finally faded. "No."

"Then you should have come straight home. We need to discuss who his remaining lieutenants might be."

Arno just nodded and pulled off his jacket. Time to get back to work.

It was three days later that Cosette showed up, and she was once more in her Assassin robes and rather than meeting him, she gestured him down an alley.

"What's wrong?" was the first question he asked.

"I need your help."

Arno actually stopped, making Cosette pause and turn around. "Cosette, I'm Attainted. I can't help. I'm not an Assassin. I never was."

Cosette looked at him carefully, then gestured upward. Arno nodded and together they climbed to the roofs.

"I'm sorry, Arno," Cosette said softly. "I'm just so glad that you're back. When I was scouting for an assignment and I realized I would need help, I knew you'd be closer. I didn't think; I just came straight to you."

And damn if that didn't warm Arno a little. "You'd have to make your report and mention that I aided you. That wouldn't do you any good."

"It should," Cosette replied. "I understand you did things the rest of us didn't know. That hurts, that you didn't feel that you could come to me, but it involves that de la Serre woman. I understand that. Sort of. Basically. But you've done everything the Council asked, you know the
Creed—"

"I do not—"

"—and you were learning more by the day. I don't see why you were Attainted."

Arno let out a lengthy sigh. "Cosette, I don't know the Creed. I can spout that 'rien est vrai, et tout est permis' till I have no tongue left, but I can't explain it. I don't understand it. If I don't understand it, if I can't explain it, I don't know it."

Cosette looked to him. "Arno, why does the sun rise and fall? Why is the day only twenty four hours?"

"I don't know," he replied.

"But it is something you see and experience every day. You can't explain why, but you know."

Arno shook his head. "That's not the same, Cosette. That's not a fair comparison."

"It is to me," she said softly. "You are such an Assassin, yet you don't see it and I can't figure out why."

Her quiet belief in him... Arno looked up to the darkening sky, not wanting to give away anything. "Tell me about your assignment," he said to change topics, before he realized that he probably shouldn't be asking what the Assassins were doing.

Cosette stretched her legs out in front of her. "You know how over twenty Girondists were arrested?"

"June, right?" He and Élise had just returned to the city and all the news was how the Commandant-General of the National Guard, François Hanriot, and surrounded the Convention while it was in session with canon and sans-culottes soldiers at the behest of Pache and the Paris Commune to arrest Girondists. Apparently, while Arno had been drinking himself to oblivion, the Girondists were in hot debate with Jacobins like Marat and Robespierre, politely sniping insults at each other. All the unrest had led to Pache – a former Girondist - calling on Hanriot to arrest the Girondists and Hanriot had resigned shortly thereafter, saying order had been restored. He had then been elected to Commander of the Armies of Paris. Occasionally Lapprent had to deal with him and was always in an even fouler mood than before.

"Another insurrection," Cosette said dryly. "May thirtieth. Our third, I believe, if you keep track of them."

Right, Arno was still getting sober, then.

"Hanriot was able to get the Convention, but after that he was supposed to grab many prominent Girondists who weren't an actual part of any government. Some of the more vocal speakers." Cosette sighed. "We were able to warn them and get them all to various safe-houses spread through the city. We've arranged for transport for them tonight. There's a boat on the Seine that we need to get them to, but the sewers we were planning to use have been blocked off. With Hanriot in charge of the Armies of Paris, he made sure to leave officers behind to look for the Girondists who got away. I just thought..."

Arno smiled softly. "An extra pair of hands?"

She smiled sheepishly.
"Fine," he growled with mock petulance, "at least show me a map."

Cosette beamed at him.

The Girondists, the moderates, and their families had gathered in the sewers already. Tissot, Cosette, and Marcel were to guide them out, but they'd come across a blockage. There was an old wrought gate, iron, and rusted so badly that lockpicks couldn't open it, but still strong enough to not be broken. And because the lock was on the other side there was no way they could fit something through in order to try and break the lock that way.

"I thought you had scouted this."

"We came from the other end. Once we saw most of it was clear, we just assumed the back end was. No one is ever in the sewers but us and the deranged."

"I can help you unblock a tunnel."

And Cosette was beaming at him again.

They dropped back down to the streets and then headed to the Seine and down to the banks to get into the sewers unseen. Cosette held a candle and guided them through the path that was planned and Arno could see why she had initially thought it was fine. They walked for almost three miles under Paris without any problems before they came across a gate barring their path.

"Lockpicks?" Arno held out a hand.

Cosette smiled and pulled them out of her pouch.

It took under a minute to pick the lock and Arno was pleasantly surprised that he still had the skill after being a drunk for so long.

"We'll keep this one to ourselves, right?" Cosette said quietly, and Arno was certain she was blushing in embarrassment that there was another door she had missed by assumptions.

"Bien sûr."

"You?" came a cry from further down the tunnel and Arno looked down to see Tissot and Marcel in front of easily fifty people, the Girondists who were escaping.

"Is that a gen d'arme?" someone whispered.

Tissot had a hand on his sword, but he didn't move to draw it, and Marcel was clearly turning purple in rage.

"Just a moment," he said quietly, not looking at either Assassin and just kneeling before the lock, holding Cosette's candle carefully to it so he could see the damage and what was still salvageable. Then he shook his head. "You were right, too much damage." He handed the candle back to Cosette.

He looked passed Tissot and Marcel to the families. Diable, so many children. "I need to break the lock," he said calmly. "I need to use my sword as a crowbar. Don't be alarmed."

Then, slowly, no sudden movements, he unbuckled his sword and sheath.

Someone whimpered.
He held back a sigh.

Once he put the tip of his sword through the hasp, he pushed it down as far as he could and then pulled, sharp jerks, trying to break the hasp. Pausing, he checked his work. Bits of rust were breaking off, but the hasp and body of the lock were thicker and not as damaged as the more delicate springs of the interior of the lock. This was going to take some effort.

He turned to Cosette and he didn't even have to ask. She nodded and helped him pull and yank. On the other side, Tissot had let go of his sword and grabbed Arno's improvised crowbar from the other side and was helping to provide force from both ends to break the lock.

It took almost ten minutes. A blacksmith's hammer and chisel would have been more useful, but once the lock was broken away from the hasp, the door was easily opened. Arno rebuckled his sword. He turned to Cosette.

"I was never here," he said firmly.

But she was still beaming.

"Of course not, Citoyen. No one here saw anything, and you saw nothing."

Arno smiled gratefully and nodded. He then went through the Girondists and back the way they came. Cosette, Marcel, and Tissot could help the Girondists escape. Arno found a ladder and climbed up to street level. Then he carefully made his way back to the Seine in order to make sure no patrols were around.

He watched from a rooftop, as the Girondists were piled on to a set of flatboats, and each Assassin took the rudder to start guiding them downriver.

That... had felt good.

Like when he caught cutpurses. Or when he stopped bullies.

Arno smiled to himself and returned to street level. He smelled disgusting and he would be glad to take a long, hot bath.

The next day, the Girondists who had been arrested by Hanriot were guillotined.

23 Brumaire, Y2 (November 13, 1793)

Thus began the executions of the Girondists.

Arno watched in frustration. When he considered where he was in the political spectrum, he considered himself closer to a Jacobin. They pushed further for more rights than the more moderate Girondists. But to see what the Jacobins had become while he was drunk in Versailles... Were they always like this?

Madame Roland put it best before she was guillotined. "Liberty, what crimes are committed in your name!"

On the twentieth of Brumaire, (November tenth), the dechristianization hit a peak with the Fête de la Raison, the Festival of Reason by the Hérebertists. Notre Dame was torn apart, the holy alter dismantled and replaced with an alter to reason. Women dressed as goddesses of reason pranced around instead of statuary which the dechristianizers abhorred, and from what Arno heard, it was a
very lurid, depraved affair. Robespierre, who had been slowly gaining power, firmly denounced
the Hérbertists and the Cult of Reason, and it was probably the only reason the Convention didn't
adopt the Cult of Reason as a state religion.

Arno let out a heavy sigh when another citizen came up to mention a possible counter-
revolutionary.

Giraud also sighed, but put on his professional face. "Come on, Victor. We need to talk to him."

It was, once again, a depressing turn of events. Their jail was filled far beyond capacity, as was
every other prison, and every new prison that was made was filled swiftly. What the citizens didn't
understand was that the usual frustrations of everyday life couldn't be counter-revolutionary, at
least to Arno's mind. It was like they were policing thought instead of the street.

"Cheer up, Victor," Giraud said once they were back on the streets. "We've never gotten this
amount of information before. Just yesterday I heard they arrested some sort of spy who was
keeping a book on secret societies here in Paris."

Everything in Arno stiffened against his will. "Oh?"

Giraud nodded. "They say his notebook had a heading about some Daddy of Understanding or
some other such nonsense. He had an odd name..." Giraud frowned, clearly picking his memory.
"Didier Paton."

"Really?" Arno said with feigned interest. "And where was such a lunatic arrested?"

"Oh, he's in the Grand Châtlet."

"Ouch. That's punishment enough. How do you find out such juicy gossip?"

Giraud gave a blithe smile. "I have my sources," he replied dryly. Then he chuckled. "The old
captain I worked under is a notorious gossip. I still drop by once in a while, even though I'm glad
not to be working there anymore."

"A good connection to keep," Arno observed as they turned down another street.

Giraud offered a good-natured shrug.

After his shift, he said his good-byes to Giraud and pretended to head off the way he usually did.
After about two streets he changed direction to head to the Right Bank. He'd have to be fast, trials
didn't take long and the guillotine was swift after that. He needed to get to the Grand Châtlet and
fast.

Originally a wooden tower built in 870, a very early Louis, Louis IV built a stronger stone
structure, making it a small castle, a châtlet in 1130. After Phillipe Augustus built ramparts around
the city, the châtlet became home of the prévôt de Paris, making it part court, part jail, and all
about justice. Rebuilt by Charles V and over the centuries needing the court to be moved from time
to time for repairs, the châtlet was then rebuilt again in 1684 by another Louis, the XIV, and this
time with a street going right through the middle. The western part of the Grand Châtlet held the
courts and precinct. The eastern part held the prison.

Arno almost felt like pinching his nose. The stench of nearby slaughterhouses and the sewers that
were emptying into the Seine made for a foul smell that Arno never wanted to be around in the
height of summer. November, er, Brumaire, was bad enough.
"Bon soir," he greeted once he was in the magistrates offices. "I understand you arrested a Didier Paton? He fits the description of someone we've been looking for."

The lieutenant grunted. "Yeah. He's here. Want to look through his possessions? Or do you need to see him?"

"Possessions. If it's not a bother."

"Not at all." The lieutenant brought Arno downstairs and shifted through a bookcase before pulling out a small box. "Here. He didn't have much on him at the time."

Arno shrugged. "Either it's the man I'm looking for or it isn't."

"Ain't that the truth."

Arno opened the box and first went through papers, appearing to be checking minute details, and then pulling out a small booklet. The pages had been left blank for taking notes and it was clear that Paton took a great deal. Most of it was ridiculous. Names of citizens and what they said that made for counter-revolutionaries. Arno read through it again. Actually, some of these people might actually be counter-revolutionaries. As in pro-royalists and not different ideas of a revolution.

Hmn. A damn good little spy then.

But there was an entry about some sort of secret meeting and a clear quote about the "Father of Understanding".

Right. Paton needed to be rescued.

Arno set the book back down and shrugged. "Doesn't look like who I was looking for."

"You sure? Do you need to see him?"

"I never actually saw the person I'm looking for. But this is enough for me to know it's not him."

The lieutenant just nodded and closed the small box, putting it back in the bookshelves. Arno let himself out of the châtellet and quickly took to the roofs.

An hour later, or rather the old hours, not these new hours that were so damn long, everything was dark and the streets were quiet. The lieutenant had left for the night and the Châtlet was locked down.

Good.

Since helping Cosette, Arno had taken to keeping lockpicks on his person again, and he very easily slipped back into the Châtellet and back down to the cellar where evidence was held. He grabbed the book and pulled out a sheet of paper and quickly wrote down every single name of the Templar and what was said. Once it was dry, he stuffed it into the book and put both into his waistcoat. He needed two copies. The paper, that was an easy copy, he could take that to Élise. They would have another lead to follow. But the book and Paton... They had to go to the Assassins. If Paton was such a good little spy, then he was someone that the Assassins would need. Arno didn't care how Germain was taken down. If it was Élise and himself, all the better, particularly for Élise to land the final blow. But if it was the Assassins, Germain would still be gone. And Élise might not care about routing out other Templar followers of Germain. She only had eyes for the silversmith's blood. But the Assassins would care.
It was a risk.

A very definitive risk.

Arno would be putting Élise and the Assassins on the same people.

But Germain had to die. Whatever it took.

Now the hard part: Getting Paton free.

The benefit of the western part of the Châtlet was that because it was all offices it was easy to slip from one room to another. He needed to get to the prison in the eastern side of the building, where there would be guards. Arno considered his options carefully.

Having spent time as a gen d'arme, he knew he could simply ask to see Paton and then they could sneak away, but he'd be seen and he didn't want this little excursion to be remembered. He'd have an additional escort and Arno didn't want to have to kill a fellow gen d'arme if he could help it. Sneaking really would be best, but he wasn't dressed for that. He was still in uniform. And even if he turned it inside out, his pants would stick out in the shadows.

Hmmm.

Finally, Arno nodded to himself. It wasn't a great plan, but it was workable. He picked the lock to get into the prison itself, then locked it behind himself. Now to just play the part of a guard and not let anyone see his face.

He let his eagle guide him, pulsing it outward and following the pops of fireworks and the sparkles of color. Whenever he encountered a guard he just went up to a cell to observe the prisoners inside till the guard passed. Arno's uniform wasn't exactly the same, but the dim candles of the night let him pass from one hall to the next.

Ah, there you are. One man, stripped to a shirt and culottes and stockings was surrounded by fireworks and Arno studied him. Seven other cellmates. He couldn't get all of them to escape. He wasn't here for a prison break. So he offered a bored tone. "Didier Paton? You're needed for more questioning."

The man sighed and stood. Arno had already picked the lock, though none saw that because most were almost asleep.

"Bon chance," someone muttered.

Arno locked the cell behind Paton and grabbed his arm like he was supposed to.

"Come along."

Paton let out a tired and resigned sigh. Good, stay resigned, don't hint a thing when we start going the wrong direction...

Arno focused on his eagle, ignoring the growing headache and let the echoes of fireworks take him to a set of stairs.

"This isn't—"

"Shhh," Arno hissed. "I need to concentrate."

They went down and down stairs, and Arno had to push Paton back into the shadows and stood in
front of him, looking like he was holding some sort of post when a pair of guards, yawning, walked by.

"Come on."

Paton seemed to have realized that escape was happening and he kept his mouth shut. Arno kept his eagle active, until they were down into some sort of lower store room, where grain was kept. It was dryer here than up in the smelly jails. Arno took a deep breath and leaned against the wall, rubbing his head.


Pain was spidering forward along Arno's head. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to focus again on his eagle. One pop of fireworks, one little spark of color and then Arno bit down a groan.

"Under this barrel. Come on."

They heaved an old barrel aside and Arno pushed old straw and dust away, then pulled up a hatch. The smell that floated up was disgusting, but it meant they'd be free.

Paton didn't even say anything. He headed down with Arno. Arno rubbed at his eyes and he was willing to lay money down that they were bloodshot again. He didn't like relying on his eagle so much. And since his... illness, he hadn't used his eagle anywhere near as often as an Assassin. It was almost midnight when they exited the sewers to the banks of the Seine.

"We need to get to Île de la Cité," Arno said softly, pulsing his eagle out again to make sure the streets above were safe. "I know a place where you'll be safe."

Paton starred. "You've even arranged for my safe passage? Who the hell are you?"

"I'm not arranging passage," Arno replied, glancing back and motioning for them to head up to the streets. "I'm getting you somewhere safe. They'll handle the next part, after discussing it with you."

Paton stuttered. "I even get a choice? Who the hell do you work for? Not Robespierre, he's so paranoid he thinks his shadow is out to get him."

Arno gestured again and they crossed the bridge. In the quick dash he pulled out the notebook and put the single sheet back into his waistcoat. He handed the book back to Paton. "Those people that follow a Father of Understanding. I'm against them. Where I'm taking you, is against them. You're right, they don't have France's interests at heart. Only their own."

Oh, the streets on the island were too damn familiar. He didn't need his eagle here. He knew all the dark corners and back alleys. He stalked them without needing even a candle.

Once they were across from the Café, Arno waited with Paton.

"They're not open yet. We'll wait an hour or so," he whispered.

"Who the hell opens this early?"

Arno bit back a smile. "Anyone who needs to cook for a living. And they won't be open, but the people you need will be there."

The rest from not using his eagle so constantly had helped his headache. And with the faintest of lights on the horizon, Arno looked with his eagle and saw Charlotte and Augustin walking to the
Café, arm in arm, to start their day.

Arno stood and turned to Paton.

"Go across and ask to speak with Madame Gouze or Monsieur Grizier. Tell them you need the Sanctuary."

Paton looked incredulous. "That's not a church. And what the hell good would claiming sanctuary do, no one listens to the church anymore."

Arno shook his head. "You're not claiming sanctuary. Say that you need the Sanctuary." He gave a dry chuckle. "The sewers here will be better maintained."

"You're mad."

And Arno smiled. "But correct."

Paton barked out a laugh. "You got me out of there. I'll take your word."

Arno watched. He watched Paton enter. He could almost hear the moment that Augustin and Charlotte met him, and he turned away. It was probably the hardest thing he'd had to do in a long, long time. He could already smell the food, see his old room, hear all the staff. He wanted nothing more than to take Paton in himself. He wanted to be there.

But he couldn't. He was with Élise. He was still searching for Germain. He wasn't an Assassin. Cosette's words echoed in his head as he crossed to the Left Bank, words of how they had kept his room for him, how they expected him to return.

He had wanted to cross that bridge.

Instead, he was crossing another.

24 Brumaire, Y2 (November 14, 1793)

Élise pursed her lips as she looked through her notes, recrossing her legs. It seemed like every other day some new "event" was occurring to change the course of the Revolution: Marat's murder on July 13, Robespierre being elected to the Committee of Public Safety on the 27th and simultaneously instigating the death penalty for hoarders – and then voted the President of the Convention just a month later – and not three days after that the recapture of Marseille, a week after that the Convention was surrounded by soldiers demanding the arrest of counterrevolutionaries, and the next day, September 5, the Terror was formally instituted. The Convention made the Law of Suspects for Arno to arrest anyone who was labeled as a counter-revolutionary, women were mandated to wear tricolor cockades (she grimaced as she looked at hers), Marie Antoinette's trial and execution, the new damned calendar and time measurements, capturing Lyon and then destroying the city for being so rebellious – at least that made sense. Make an example and others would fall in line – executing the Girondists, the Temple of Reason, and now there was an order for the arrest of Danton's allies by Robespierre and the closing of all churches and places of worship in Paris.

The Revolution, in short, was a mess. Cities and hamlets outside of Paris bucked the idea of the government being centralized in a place too prone to violence, the country folk did not understand why destroying the Church was considered helpful, nor did they respect the new laws of equality the Convention was trying to establish. Élise of course expected as much, people were sheep, and anything that changed what they perceived to be normal was an evil being thrown upon them. That
was why monarachies existed in the first place, to tell the people what to do so they did not have to think or handle the great responsibilities they were woefully inept at handling. Élise knew the Revolution would not last, that whatever form of government came about some kind of monarchy would come back – king, emperor, president, the title was irrelevant – someone had to take the reins of the country, and Élise knew damn well that whoever bubbled up to power would be in the pocket of Germain.

On paper, if only in the chambers of her own mind, Élise could marvel at the cleverness of Germain's plan. No one had expected Revolution, but the opportunity it presented had been seized upon with a deliberateness, a swiftness, that Élise was breathless to realize as she looked back on it. She wondered if Germain had somehow orchestrated the very Revolution itself, to create the situation where an Estates General needed to be held in the first place. She had heard from her father that then thousand livres had disappeared from the royal treasury – was that Germain? With Versailles in ruins and the people of the palais scattered to the wind she would likely never know.

By Germain's logic, according to Arno, whoever held the gold held the power, and removing the gold from the government made the powerful much harder to see. Without titles like Second and Third Estates and bourgeois being so ubiquitous and without a definitive label or marker to identify, Germain was now essentially invisible, exactly as he wanted.

It made her hate him all the more.

What she didn't understand was: what was his plan now? It would take time for a new government to suss itself out – the people now had a taste of power and were exerting it like infants, crying out every time their needs weren't met, throwing tantrums to get their way, as if change on such a massive scale could be achieved overnight. The Templars had well documented how long things like this could take – the Americans were only now finally settling into their form of government, and their revolution ended a decade ago. She remembered they had two – was it three? – congresses before finally getting their act together – and that was without an entire continent of other countries chomping at the bit to take a piece out of them. Élise estimated this Revolution would last at least a decade – that meant things wouldn't end until the turn of the century – or whatever that damned new calendar called it. What would Germain do in the interim? Wait it out? That hardly seemed likely. Now that he had the money he would start manipulating everything, but she didn't know what or why or how, and her leads continued to be fruitless.

The cabinet noir, she had known about already, but Arno reminding her of its power had sent her to the nearest post office and begin making friends. As a woman she had no hope of getting a job there, but she had found two or three prime candidates for manipulation: an affair here, a manipulation there, and she would have someone on the inside to read the mail of select names.

But first she needed the names, and that had been the most frustrating of all. She had no starting point.

But Arno had proved useful a second time, as he arrived shortly before dawn and gave her a list of names before collapsing to bed from whatever work he'd done. Élise glanced through them, looking for larger names she could use, people she could get close to, a society she could wander into without Germain knowi—

D'Églantine? Where did she know that name?

She looked back at her notes, flipping through what few account ledgers she had procured to look for possible choices of Templar activities.
There! Phillipe François Nazaire Fabre d'Églantine. Last month when the French East India Company had been liquidated and dissolved. Summer had brought a litany of anti-capitalists laws, and d'Églantine had capitalized on it by blackmailing the directors into turning over half a million livres. How quaint that he thought he could get away with it. Élise grinned as she stood, grabbing a hat and heading out to the streets, looking for all the world like a normal woman and not the Grandmaitre of the greatest Order to ever exist. She would need a man for this, someone from Weatherall's old list of contacts, someone who hadn't yet been inducted...

Chabot. François Chabot, he would be a good choice. He was one of the few state-instituted members of the clergy before the Revolution decided to ban religion altogether, and now he was a Montagnard, a Cordeliers, and also a name on the East India Company. Wouldn't he be interested in knowing what happened? Yes, he most likely would, and that would give Élise several options to pursue: d'Églantine as he was marched to the guillotine, Chabot as a debt she could collect, and an in to Hôtel de Ville, where (for now) all the power was as they tried to clean up the mess they made. If she could get close to someone like Danton or Robespierre...

She found Chabot as the sun began to rise, moving up to him with a manufactured tear in her eye.

"Citoyen! Citoyen!" she called out, darting up to him. "Oh, Citoyen Chabot! I hoped to find you, I knew only you could fix this travesty!"

Chabot looked at her, frowning, recognizing the face and trying to place it. Élise played him like a fiddle, talking about her father's interest in the East India Company, the money he'd lost and her dowry now defunct, all because of d'Églantine and his blackmail – it was fraud, fraud! "Surely there is a way to stop this," Élise said, reaching out to touch his arm. "Surely there is a way to stop me from falling into the gutter! I've done nothing wrong but be my father's daughter, now I have nothing! What if I fall to the Cour des Miracles? What if I must sell myself to put food on the table? I'm not married yet, how will I survive?"

Chabot drank it up hungrily, taking her hand and pulling her along to a house before telling her to wait. He entered, shouting "Conspiracy! Counter-revolution! Robespierre you have to hear this!"

Élise stiffened to hear the name, knew she wasn't ready to be that high up on the food chain, and quickly disappeared from the home. One Templar discredited, now to use that leverage to get herself deeper in.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, were'd all these side-quests come from?

Like we've said in notes waaaaay back in the beginning of the fic, the major story beats all stand up nice and straight, it's just the execution that needs the rewriting. The result is that we can now start slipping into the mess of multiplayer and side quests that all happened in the very narrow set of months when Robespierre is at the height of his power. And we get to talk about gendarmes Arno. Ever since we saw the murder mysteries we knew THIS was his secondary job after he was expelled from the order. It's also a great place to witness the Revolution: it's very boots on the ground and seeing what all these laws that Robespierre and the others are enacting and seeing how it affects the people personally. We couldn't find that kind of research that wasn't in French, but our basic understanding is that the citizens were doing their best to comply
with the Law of Suspect, and the gendarmes and justice system was trying to ejudicate appropriately. But with SO MANY "Suspect" for the very reasons Arno defined, it got to be too much for the prison system. Hold that thought.

We also got in a reference to the Cabinet Noir, the place in the post office people's mail could be read if they were Suspects, you know, just 'cause, and Élise has a lead to chase now to keep her out of her depression a little longer.

We don't really have time to do every murder mystery, but the Hot Chocolate Murder was perfect: It was self-contained to one area, references old history for funnies, and more importantly has a thematic tie-in. Mme Duclos was someone who was verbally abusive, much like people in Arno's life. And the victims of her abuse - only after her death - think it's now safe to get married. Arno, a few steps removed, wonders why they didn't run away or something else, he now understands - if not for himself - that one doesn't need to stay around abusive people and that they should get out. It will stick with him, the same way Corday will. He's collecting good ideas and influences.

Giraud is one such example. He's not some intense relationship like Arno's used to: he's nice, friendly, and professional. He accepts Arno exactly as he is and doesn't judge him. That is huge for Arno's sense of self. So is Cosette. Cosette is still kind of intense relationship because of the Brotherhood business, but she, like Giraud, accepts Arno as he is. And most importantly, she teaches him about positive self-talk. Arno has internalized a lot of Bellec's abuse - he even calls himself merdeux in his own mind if he's stressed enough, and Cosette has pointed out that it's not healthy for him. She believes in Arno, even when Arno doesn't, and she's okay with giving him the space he needs to come to that realization on his own. She should get a Best Friend Award.

And then we get to the multiplayer mission(s), now completely recontextualized since Arno isn't an Assassin right now. Him helping out is an interference - he did piss off a lot of people when he was thrown out, and they all have different reactions. But now notice that Arno is starting to have positive feelings. He feels good when he does something that is "right," something that can demonstrably be seen as good. He feels bad when he focuses on the past and his mistakes and his shortcomings. There's a lesson in there somewhere.

And Arno... you should have crossed that bridge!

Author's Note II: We have a tvtropes page! wow!

Next chapter: Reparations.
Reparations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

5 Frimaire, Y2 (November 25, 1793)

"I still don't understand," Arno said. "Why was there an arrest ordered for Danton's supporters? Isn't he one of the heads of the Convention?"

Giraud shook his head as they turned a corner and continued on their patrol. "You're doing it again," he said. "You want all these details as if that will explain anything. With all the civil war, the other countries helping the insurrections, the counter-revolution, the fact that we're at war with four different countries at once, the Convention needs to take violent steps to keep it all in control. You have to go extreme in these days because everything is extreme – extreme hysterics, extreme paranoia, extreme corruption, extreme everything. That's the whole point of the Law of Suspects that you don't go along with, and now that all the Girondists are executed Danton thinks that was the magical line we crossed to mean we don't need all this terror anymore. You watch: without any more conservatives, someone will end up as the new conservative. I don't know if it will be Danton, or Desmoulins, or Robespierre himself, but someone will end up in that role and this will all start again. That's why it's best not to get too deep in the weeds; you're problem, Victor, is that you think too much."

Arno pursed his lips. "I was always told I never thought at all."

"Pissant, whoever that was," Giraud said. "Don't believe a word of it, you're too smart for that."

Smart? Arno was... smart? He had never thought of himself as that, surrounded by Bellec and Beaumont and Olivier and so many others, who reminded him of all his failures and wrong doings. If he was so smart... then why were his father and M. de la Serre and Mirabeau dead? But Giraud wasn't the only one who made comments like that – Cosette had already lectured him on how much of a thinker he was, and several people at the station asked after his opinion as if it were the smartest thing in the room, and Arno didn't understand why. Was he really so intelligent? He shook his head.

"There you go," Giraud said, "thinking again. Look, over there. See the whore?"

Arno looked, and he had seen this girl before, had chased her off more than once. Pursing his lips, he moved towards her, detaching from his partner.

She gave a wane smile. "Off duty, monsieur?" she asked, trying to make her voice sound deep, sultry.

"You ask that every time," Arno said. "You know the answer is no. You need to move your business somewhere else."

The girl pouted, swinging side to side, rolling a shoulder. "You could take my business somewhere else," she said. "I feel like you'd be gentle."

Arno breathed in through his nose. "Leave, mademoiselle."

She smiled, happy to get such a formal title, and turned and left, hips swinging as she did.
Shaking his head, Arno went back to Giraud and the two started walking again, making it perhaps four steps before someone came to report another counter-revolutionary. By the time their shift was over Arno was rubbing his eyes and massaging his feet. Walking for hours on end in ill-fitting shoes was not his idea of a good time, but he and Élise didn't yet have enough money to spend on something like new shoes. Giraud left one way, Arno another, and he picked up a paper to glance through the headlines. He had far less time to read it back to back, but he didn't want to fall completely out of the loop as he had during his, er, "illness." Lapparent did a good job of apprising them of the new laws but that didn't always—

He stared at the paper: the Convention had voted to remove Mirabeau's remains? From the Panthéon? Marat was somehow more deserving...?

Mirabeau...

Arno was moving east before he even really thought about it, crossing into Sorbonne and passing the Cordeliers club, turning right on Rue St. Jacques and following it southwest for maybe ten minutes before turning left down a much smaller street – he didn't know the name – and exiting out to the massive structure of the Panthéon.

On the highest hill on the left bank, the site was home to many monuments over the years: Roman forum, the burial site of St. Geneviève who fought the Huns in 451, a church in 508 constructed by king Clovis, an abbey in the Middle Ages, etc. In 1744 Louis XV promised to rebuild the dilapidated abbey to something more appropriate for the patron saint of Paris if he recovered from illness. The design was settled on eleven years later, and construction was finished after the architects' death. A Greek cross rather than Latin, it had four naves, Corinthian columns, and a monumental dome rising from its center. Construction had only been completed three years ago, and the Revolution acquired it to lay their famous to rest.

Mirabeau had been the first.

And now, a scant two years later, he was leaving.

Arno entered the grand building, pulling off his bicorn had, and stepping into the massive structure. The ceiling was immaculate: the four naves each having their own spherical dome, and the fifth rising up into darkness of the evening light. Everything was blue and white, French colors, and the mosaic on the floor was equally as symmetrical, equally as ornate and beautiful. A thrill pulsed through Arno's heart to see the site, to realize the elegance and richness of the building, how appropriate it was to put people of esteem here. He moved deeper into the temple, looking for some kind of access to... where would the crypts even be?

Below, of course, and Arno moved to the northwest side of the Panthéon, fingers tracing along the walls as he found the stairs and started moving down. The crypt was in pitch darkness, Arno was forced to use his eagle, moving through the black corridors and looking for the sarcophagus'. When he found Mirabeau's remains, and he extinguished the sensory fireworks and let the darkness engulf him. Arno knelt down, bowing his head in respect for the only man in all the brotherhood who sought to help him.

"Mirabeau," he said in the dark, and all of his words immediately fell to ash in his mouth. Even saying the name brought forth a well of emotion that flooded his senses: his eyes watered and his nose flooded and his face flushed with the emotion that suddenly exploded from his heart. He sniffled, head tipping down as a fist came up to knuckle his eyes.

"Mirabeau..." he tried to say again, but the emotion swept over him, all the heartache bubbling up and spilling over. He couldn't remember his last words to the Mentor, wasn't sure when their last
true conversation was, and so much had happened since then, so many mistakes, so many decisions that would have been so disappointing to Mirabeau. He'd let the Mentor down, had failed to learn the Creed, had failed to get Germain in honor of M. de la Serre. He'd been attainted, been cast out, and had been lost in a bottle for months, months, failing even further. Diable, was there any other way to fail?

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, his words wet and half choked, more a sob than a mumble. His hands covered his entire face, trying and failing to contain his emotion. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry... Je suis vraiment désolé..."

The pitch darkness suspended all sense of time in the catacomb, Arno was lost to his emotions, feeling inadequate and inept. He spent an eternity thinking about all the work Mirabeau had put into him – pulling him for special talks, giving him space to heal after the challenges, taking interest in his development – and he couldn't even learn the Creed. He rocked back and forth, "sorry" the only word able to fall out of his mouth. Just when he thought he'd run out of tears, just when he thought he could master himself, the emotion would come up again.

Why was he so weak?

Why did his emotions always get the better of him, why did he have to cry every single time?

Eventually, after an eternity of eternities, Arno ran out of tears. His face and hands were soaked, his nose was completely blocked, and he was just so tired. He wondered if he could just sleep there, near Mirabeau, like when the Mentor found out about the challenges and swept him up to his home. He straightened, feeling creaks along his back and dimly noticing that both of his legs had fallen asleep. Arno braced a hand on Mirabeau's monument, waiting for feeling to return. To more than just his legs.

"I'm sorry," he said again, voice hoarse and soft. "All I seem to do is disappoint you. I've no idea what you saw in me, why you thought I needed so much attention. I let you down... I let everyone down..."

He sniffed again, wet and noisy. He rubbed his nose with the cuff of his sleeve.

"I wanted you to know... They kicked me out. Maître Trenet and the others. I went behind their backs, and they say I broke the Creed. I... I don't blame them. I was never much of an Assassin, so I suppose it's no great loss."

"Ch. That's rot if ever I heard it."

Arno startled, failed at getting to his feet because of his numb legs. Light... when was there light? He could see a candle at the far end of the hall, and attached to the candle was a hand, and attached to the hand was...

"Fabre?"

The Roi des Thunes moved forward on silent feet, putting his candle down on the floor by Arno and joining him. Arno's eyes traced inevitably to the amputation, watched as a palm rubbed the end of the stump.

"Wasn't expecting to see you here, Arno," Fabre said.

Arno blinked, uncertain what to say.

Fabre smiled, that easy-going, slightly knowing smile that he always had. He shook his head, said,
"You going to say something?"

"... Uhm..." Arno struggled to reconcile the intrusion. "Why are you here?"

"Because," Fabre said. "When they put him here we gave him honors. Now that they're moving him we have to hide those honors away. Trenet and Quemar are trying to see if they can't nick the body, have him put in one of our tombs."

A natural silence fell between them, feeling slowly bleeding back into Arno's legs.

"Well, come on," Fabre said, standing up. "So long as you're here you can help."

Arno struggled to his feet, and gave both of his arms to help Fabre's one to open the stone coffin. The weight was unimaginable, he wondered why Fabre – one handed – had been assigned this. There was a long series of grunts and strained muscles, but the lid finally slid open, and Fabre brought up his candle.

"Sorry, Mentor," the thief said. "Don't mean to disturb you, but you know how it is."

Arno looked into the sarcophagus, saw a red sash of fabric covering Mirabeau from head to toe, his body wrapped in simple linen. Fabre nicked the red sash, reached into a corner to pull out two leather-bound books before nodding to Arno to close it.

"You know," Fabre said, shifting his weight to one leg. "I hope you don't actually think that you weren't much of an Assassin."

"... What?"

"... What?"

Fabre blinked, staring at Arno for several beats, before he cursed. "Arno, I swear, the more I get to know you the more I wish I could resurrect that connard Bellec and kill him all over again. Nom de dieu, okay, let's get something very, very clear. You," he pointed to Arno's chest forcefully, "are just fine as an Assassin."

"No I wasn't," Arno countered, "I didn't think, I didn't know the Creed, I didn't—"

"Arno," Fabre said over his objections. "Listen to me. You are fine as an Assassin. You have the skills, the speed, the talent, the heart. You're a little rough around the edges, but before you use that as an excuse all of us are a little rough around the edges. Bellec was dumb enough to believe you didn't think, but it wasn't that so much as you didn't ask questions. Nothing ever got explained to you because you didn't ask for an explanation. Of course we all look like a cult to you, you never asked to have the rules explained."

"But Fabre—"

"And before you try to shrug that off, Arno, because I know you're going to try to: no that was not your fault. I told the maîtres this after Louis' execution: it wasn't that you weren't inquisitive, it's that you were never encouraged to ask questions. Between your steward... Olivier, that was his name wasn't it?... between him and that putain de merde Bellec you've had your heart twisted and broken six ways from whatever day they call Sunday now. It takes time to straighten your mind out from something like that and instead of giving you that time they threw you out. Merde," Fabre cursed again. "If I talk about this too much I'll start shouting and we can't have that right now."

He used his stump to tuck the two books into a satchel Arno hadn't noticed and bent down to get his candle.
He turned to the tomb. "Mirabeau..." the thief said softly. He put the candle on the tomb to place his hand on the engraved name, a soft gesture of respect. "... we're doing the best we can."

Fabre turned and left, leaving the candle and its light with Arno.

9 Nivôse, Y2 (December 29, 1793)

The Patriot of the Cabinet Noir: M. Antoine Gerard. Moreover, a deputy of the assembly.

Élise had taken the better part of four months trying to wile her way into the Black Office, working from one possible candidate to the next, but she was now certain that this man: Alexandre Gerard, was one of the noir agents; code named the Patriot. After that it was a matter of getting to know his wife, Madeleine Gerard. Élise met her at a café while "waiting for her errant husband," and the two talked politics, both of them pointing out their cockades, discussing Mme Roland of the Girondins, Olympe de Gouges, Théroigne de Méricourt, Pauline Léon, Claire Lacombe, and the closing of all women's political clubs. Manon Gerard believed in her rights as a citizen, but knew the men needed to pass a law allowing them to be active citizens again, instead of passive. Élise artfully mirrored her views beat for beat, agreeing at every step, and finally, finally, she was invited to a party with the husband.

It was to be a small affair, just them, Arno and Élise, and another couple, at the other couple's home the Vendôme district. Élise made the obligatory concern about the other couple, didn't you say they were conservative, will it be safe?

"Oh, it will be fine," Madeleine said. "He's not a Girondin, if that's what's worrying you. He did vote for clemency for Louis, and that's a black mark on his record, but he's more than happy to talk about fixed grain prices, and he supported Danton and Robespierre in instigating the Terror."

"Then we should be fine," Élise said with a dramatic sigh. "I shall inform my husband."

Of course, first she had to convince him.

"Élise," Arno said, "I can't just take a day off to walk all the way to Vendôme. I don't have any good clothes for such a dinner – you know that – and I'm supposed to be keeping my ears open for leads on Germain."

"Don't worry," Élise said. "This will work itself out. We can get you fitted for a good surcoat and waistcoat."

"And culottes and hose," Arno added. "I only have my uniform culottes and those dirty rags you found me in."

"Fine," Élise said. "We'll get you all nice and dolled up, you'll be the catch of the dinner, if that's what you want. The gens d'armes won't miss you that much."

"Élise," Arno said, "It's a lot harder to leave the police than it was in my old cover. There I could always head out and look for supplies or hunt down sales or shake out new employees. I don't have that freedom here."

"Arno," she said. "Stop being so difficult. This is the perfect chance to engender me to the Cabinet Noir, and I don't want to lose it. They can read anyone's mail, and I want them to read the mail of that list you gave me for clues to Germain's whereabouts."

"I'm not trying to be difficult," he said, "I'm trying to point out—"
Élise was fed up. "This is why you always got us caught, you know," she said, crossing her arms. "You were too worried about all the ways something could go wrong and never once thought about how something could go right. I want this Arno. Are you trying to stop me from getting what I want?"

"No, of course not, I would never—"

"Then there's no need for further discussion. You will go with me to that dinner, you will keep your head down and your nose clean, and you will help me get in the good graces of Alexandre Gerard."

She brooked no other argument, and as stated she didn't have time for Arno to be difficult. As fond as she was of him, over the years the small things that had only occasionally annoyed her had slowly blossomed into larger problems: Arno had grown from adorably dim to frustratingly missing the point – she thought Assassins praised intelligence in their members, but his years under their care had somehow made him even more obtuse. He constantly worried about unimportant things: how certain actions affected so-and-so or such-and-such, or why one particular decision was unethical. Unethical! This coming from a man trained to stab people in the back! Arno got so lost in the details that he lost the big picture, and Élise knew as a GrandeMaitre that the big picture was all that mattered. She didn't have time for Arno to have yet another breakdown over something or other, or to go out and have fun drinking with friends when Germain was still out there, plotting. He'd become so emotional, so weak, and she needed him strong for her to achieve her goals.

Especially since the East India Company had turned into a dead end. Fabre d'Églantine may or may not have been one of the perpetrators, but it was becoming increasingly obvious that Chabot was in just as deep, if not deeper, and that meant she needed a better way into the Hôtel de Ville: perhaps through Danton or the author of that filthy Père Duscheene paper that had been elected – what was his name? Hébert – or maybe the enragé, Roux, Saint-Just, Robespierre, someone. She would take any opportunity she could find, and the rest would work itself out.

The night of the dinner, Arno did not come home early, but at his usual time. Of all the—!

"I know," he said quickly, "I know. I'm sorry, I tried, but there was another food riot in Sorbonne and they needed all the help they could get. I'll be fast, I promise!"

Élise had purchased dark, charcoal culottes, with thin, grey, pinstripes and white hose. His waistcoat was also charcoal, and to top it off she had found a rich-looking green velvet surcoat. The cut was not perfect, not for a rush purchase like this, but it hid how dirty his shirt was and after dunking his head in water and shaving he had cleaned up very well – he always did. Élise was in a matching green velvet gown, only two petticoats, and her stomacher was grey with black pinstripes. They almost matched, and Élise hoped it gave the right impression. She piled her hair up and hid it under a small hat and two long argus feathers and a fasan vénéré feather that trailed out behind her. She caught herself in the mirror, looked at herself from different angles, and nodded. The perfect image of trying to look bourgeois and only just making it.

The walk took half an hour – or whatever the equivalent was with the new decimal time system, the sun had already set with the short days and Élise worried about what sort of impression being late would entail.

"If this gets ruined..." she muttered darkly.

"I'll just explain that I was helping put down a riot," Arno said. "They'll understand a member of the police doing his job."

Élise gave him a withering look.
"You did tell them I was a gens d'arme, right?" Arno asked.

"And risk Gerard being gun-shy? Of course not," Élise said, irritated. Always irritated. It was the only emotion the malaise let her feel. "You are Arno de la Serre, my husband and nothing more. If they ask after your profession, tell them you're a secretary at the Louvres, that new museum they opened a few months back. You were late because you were cataloguing nameplates or something equally innocuous."

"Élise, I'm not going to lie."

"Do not make me look bad, Arno. I mean it."

"I wouldn't! But I'm not going—"

"Quiet, we're here." Élise put on a polite smile, apologizing for the lateness of their arrival, and steadfastly pushed down her thrill of frustration and irritation that Arno was being so foolish. The servants escorted them first to a broad man who searched their persons – the indignation! – and then up to the dining hall where Élise made another round of apologies.

"My fault, mes amis," Arno said politely, shaking hands during introductions. "My partner and I were called to Sorbonne to put down a food riot. I'm a member of the police in Faubourg St. Germain."

Ce putain d'idiot. He would pay for that.

"Oh," their hosts said, "You're a gens d'arme?"

"Very recently," Arno said, shaking more hands.

"How wonderful," the wife, Mme Hennebert said, "We would love to ask your perspective on a few things."

"I'll do what I can, of course."

Introductions were made, M. and Mme Hennebert, M. and Mme Gerard, and M. Gedet, another deputy of the assembly. Excellent. The house was small but very rich, gold-leaf paneling and ornately framed paintings littered the walls, the furniture was curvacious and intricately carved. They sat around the fire for almost an hour talking.

"The political climate is on the brink of hysteria," Hennebert was saying, "War is our overwhelming top priority: England, Spain, Austria, Portugal, they're all helping the civil unrest and uprisings. We've gotten Lyon and Toulon back, and we've just reclaimed Vendée. We have to focus on keeping our own house, as it were, but here in Paris nobody sees all the dangers at our borders. They're starving, everybody is accusing everybody of hoarding grain, they want a hundred changes but we can't focus on that and fight off all those countries."

"That's why we need the Terror," Gerard said, nodding as he fiddled with his wife's necklace. Madeleine had explained that it had broken shortly before Élise and Arno's arrival, and her beloved was determined to fix it at the table as they waited to be served. "Austria was little more than a hard day's ride from our borders, we don't have time for people to contradict the Commune as we fight the war."

"That's all well and good," Hennebert said, "but now that the conservative Girondists are gone we can start focusing on that very war we're fighting. Tell me, Citoyen de la Serre, what's your opinion of the Law of Suspects?"
Élise bit her lip, having heard this all before and now being forced to listen to it again.

"I understand the broad concept, *citoyen,*" Arno said, reaching over to touch Élise's hand like a husband would. She did not offer it, silently bidding him to make this speech as succinctly as possible. "I understand the need to put ourselves in line so we can make a good effort in the front – I heard an artilleryman, Bonaparte, was responsible for recapturing Toulon. On paper, the law makes sense, but in practice, on the street, as it were, it is much more difficult. I cannot tell you the number of people who report counter-revolutionary behavior on mere suspicion rather than fact, or because the accused is a business rival, or simply just because. The definition of counter-revolutionary behavior is not well defined for the practice."

"But that's what the Tribunal is for," Gerard started to say.

"Now, now," Madeleine said to her husband. "We're not at Hôtel de Ville, we can save the rhetoric. Tell me, *Citoyenne* Hennebert, how many children do you have?"

"None as of yet," the hostess said. "I've lost two last year, and we've decided to wait for now, given the times as they are. We're very afraid."

"Afraid?" Madeleine asked. "Does this have to do with us being searched when we arrived? Whatever are you afraid of?"

"Nothing grandiose," Hennebert said, "Just... as you said, *Citoyen* de la Serre, suspicion is a heavy burden to carry around one's neck. My family and I have had difficulties for the last year because everyone thinks me some sort of conservative. When Louis' trial came up what I voted for was the death penalty followed immediately by a pardon. But that doesn't count it seems. Metal, these days, is measured by how far you push, and not just if you're pushing at all."

"Tell them about the threats, *mon amour,*" Mme Hennebert said.

Arno perked. "Threats?"

"... Well, *oui,*" Hennebert said. "We've had several death threats mailed to us, and last week we woke up to find one of our window panes downstairs had been shot."

Madeleine gasped, Élise quickly following suit. "Are you serious?"

"It was terrifying!" Mme Hennebert said, taking a shuddering breath. "I don't know how much more I can take. We've even hired a bodyguard, he's downstairs right now tasting the food."

"Oh," Élise said, "I'd wondered why it was taking so long for the food to arrive."

"Please forgive the tardiness," Hennebert said, nodding his head.

"That's why we're dining," M. Gedet said from his spot by the fireplace. "There's no word for this other than murderous. I thought having two leaders like this: dining together and seeing that we're all human and want what's best for France, clearing the air and drinking a toast to letting bygones be bygones."

"An excellent idea!" Gerard said, fiddling with the necklace. "We've all been talking so long we forgot to eat and toast. Here, Madeleine," he added, crossing the space, and returning the necklace. "I can't seem to fix it. We'll have to have a jeweler look at it."

Madeleine nodded, and everyone stood and moved to the dinner table. Almost as soon as they were seated platters of food came out. Élise saw Arno's mouth water, knew he was thinking something
about the poor, but he held his tongue and Élise started up a conversation with Mme Hennebert in preparation for a pleasant dinner.

"Apologies for the lateness," the serving woman said, "André has disappeared."

"Never mind that," Gerard said, lifting his glass. "A toast."

"Yes, a toast!"

"To the Revolution!"

"To the Revolution!"

"May liberty spread to all of Europe, may our own citoyens realize the great work we do, and may all threats die on their lips."

"Here, here!" Hennebert said. They all drank their wine – Arno much more than a sip – and then all hell broke loose. Hennebert coughed into his cup, ugly choking noises bubbling up his chest as he collapsed, his drink rolling away. Blood dribbled out of his mouth.

"Michel! Michel!"

But M. Hennebert was dead.

Arno rolled Hennebert over, pulling at the man's cravat and checking his airways, but he knew it was too late. His wife was screaming and the pair Élise was so interested in were backing away from the table, the husband, Gerard, knocking over a chair to do so. Eventually Arno straightened and shook his head, Mme Hennebert fainting at the news. The men hurried to get her to a different room and Arno stood and moved to Élise. "Keep them here," he said, "In one place."

"Of course," Élise said, "It will keep them safe."

Arno pursed his lips and didn't correct here. One of them could very well be the killer, but for now the first priority was to get someone on duty. He exited the dining room, seeing one of the maids at the top of the stairs.

"Citoyenne," he said quickly.

"What's happened?" she asked. "We heard screaming."

"I know," he said quickly. "There's been murder." Her eyes doubled in size, a hand going to her mouth. Arno pushed forward, giving her directions. "Run to the nearest station, find a gendarme, tell them what's happened."

"Oui, Monsieur!" she said, voice unnecessarily loud as she nearly ran down the stairs.

Arno went back into the dining room, closing the eyes of the corpse and crossing his arms. "Repose en paix," he said softly, bowing his head and giving a moment of silence. Then he stood and walked over to the wineglass, picking it up and studying it. A powdery residue was on the glass, no odor as far as Arno could tell, whatever the poison was was powerful enough to cause internal bleeding almost immediately, given the blood on Hennebert's mouth. Arno cursed and wished he'd paid more attention to what poisons worked best in powder form when he was training. Recognizing a plant wasn't the same thing.

Pursing his lips he went down to the kitchens. Time to see where the wine came from.
Word had spread through the staff like wildfire, everyone desperate for direction; Arno was flooded with questions by no less than six people, demanding to know the details, what they were supposed to do, how to proceed.

"I've already sent for the police," Arno said, hands up, "and I'm one as well. I need you all to stay here, and I would like to question you one by one, if that's all right."

The first and most important was the bodyguard, a tall, broad man by the name of Armand.

"Here," the man said, guiding Arno to one of the windows and pointing. One of the window panes had spidery cracks all along it, a distinct hole of a bullet obvious now that Arno was looking at it. "That's why I was hired. It's my job to protect Monsieur Hennebert. I search everyone who enters, as you know, for weapons or vials of poison." Arman made a face and turned away. "But I failed."

"Then help me find the killer," Arno said. "What was the path of the wine?"

Armand took a deep breath, thinking. "I tasted the wine just before it was served by André. Like an idiot, I didn't taste it directly from his glass. A guest could have slipped the poison into his empty glass long before the wine was poured."

Arno nodded. "And what of this garçon, André?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him since he brought the wine up."

The chef didn't know anything about the wine, and neither did the laundress or the gardener. One of the maids, however, was much more observant. "André brought up the wine. Armand tasted it and André poured everyone a glass. I am worried about André, though; he's completely disappeared."

Missing servant? Arno looked out to the rest of the staff. "Does anyone know where André has gone?"

Several looked to each other but the cook stepped forward. "His mother's ill, deathly so. Messenger came saying she'd taken a turn for the worse. He's been expecting it for days."

Arno nodded, not wanting to push more. He exited the kitchen, moved to the front door and saw two blue uniforms stepping in, the maid from before with them.

"Citoyens," Arno said, stepping up. "Victor Dorian, gen d'arme of Faubourg Saint-Germain. My wife and I were invited to dinner here."

"Citoyen," one of the two said. "Paul Charpentier. This is Dominique Boucher."

"Messieurs," Arno said, shaking their hands. "My wife is holding everyone in a room upstairs, the wife of the victim has fainted." He gestured up the stairs, the police moving up and Arno following. "There's a powder on the glass, and the Henneberts have a bodyguard that acts as taste tester," he added, going through the list of things he had done and bringing them up to speed. The two inspected the dining room, confirming Arno's findings and then breaking apart to interview the guests and the staff. Arno spoke first, talking about arriving, being searched by the bodyguard, the conversation in the dining room of politics and death threats, Gerard fixing a broken necklace, Mme Hennebert's obvious fear, etc. Once he was done, Arno dismissed himself to the main hall, asking a maid where Hennebert's office was.

The office was a floor above them, and Arno went upstairs to inspect it. The desk was overrun with letters and books – some titles very familiar to Arno from his time underground, and others he'd
never heard of. He dithered for a moment, wanting to let Charpentier and Boucher do their jobs... but Élise had a stake in this, and that meant he had to do his very best.

Mentally apologizing to his colleagues, he closed his eyes and thought of fireworks. Two pieces of paper caught his eyes and he pulled them from the piles.

Citoyen Hennebert, the incident of the bullet through the window is the final straw. I'm sure you, as the target, are more cognizant than I that we cannot allow your life to be put in constant danger. The precautions you have taken do not appear to be adequate. As a result, the other leaders and I believe that we must bridge the chasm with the Montagnards. I advise you to invite Citoyen Gerard and his wife to our weekly dinner. I will attend as well. It's a purely social gathering to help clear the air, no discussion of politics will be allowed. Citoyen Gedet.

Arno pursed his lips. Most of the conversation had been nothing but politics.

He moved the letter aside. The second was a letter from Adrien Duport from Switzerland. Duport... Duport... Arno knew that name from Café Théâtre, from when he read the papers to the crowds... yes, he was a lawyer, supposed to defend Louis after his flight to Varennes. He opposed the King's accusal, and had fled around this time last year – apparently to Switzerland. Arno frowned at the letter – it was folded up, in the envelope, and though the seal was broken, that was a bridge too far for Arno. He wasn't an Assassin... he couldn't just collect all the paperwork for light perusal. Gedet's note had been open for any to see but this... But Élise... but the law... but his place...

He paced the office, trying to figure out what to do. After sobriety had been dragged out of him in Versailles, he had promised himself to be a better person: to apologize to the people he'd wronged and strive to learn from his (long, long, long) list of mistakes in his life. As Giraud had often said, he wasn't on duty now, there were two perfectly capable contemporaries conducting the investigation, he shouldn't run roughshod over their job like he had with—

With the Assassins.

Arno sighed. He needed a drink.

No, focus.

Arno turned on his boot to report the letter to the police when inspiration struck. His head whipped back to the letter – from a moderate, from Switzerland – Hennebert had given no indication of moderatism, had said he'd voted for execution. But how did everyone think he was a conservative to begin with? Unless...

Cabinet Noir. The office inside the post office that read the mail of suspicious persons. Oh, Élise... she wasn't going to like this.

"Citoyen Dorian?" Arno looked up, seeing Charpentier.

"Sorry," he said quickly, "Needed a minute to myself."

"Good eyes on the poison," the gen d'arme said. "Boucher is tracking down that server, André to confirm his mère is ill."

Arno nodded. "I had a question," he said carefully. "Can mail be opened when a man is dead?"

Charpentier straightened. "I don't see why not. Why?"

Arno looked meaningfully at the table, and Charpentier immediately saw the letter from the
moderate Duport. He snatched it up and read it, brows creased. "Says the dead man, Hennebert, should be careful of the Black Office," he said after several minutes. "Says that was probably how he was chased out of Paris."

Arno sighed. "I was afraid of that. Tell me, did you find the missing bead from Madame Gerbet's necklace."

"No, why?"

Arno rubbed his forehead to forestall a headache. "I was afraid of that, too." He sighed, desperate for some burgundy. "I know who the killer is," he said simply.

In ten minutes Arno and Charpentier were downstairs asking to speak to Gerard and his wife. Élise joined them, and Arno dreaded her reaction. "Tell me something," Arno said to the husband. "When did your wife's necklace break?"

"Shortly before you arrived," Gerard said. "I was trying to fix it."

"At the dinner table."

"Yes, that's right."

"How did the necklace break?"

Gerard looked to his wife. Arno asked for help from his eagle, needing to know the truth of the answer.

"I'm not entirely sure," she said, hand going up to her empty neck. "It was a new piece, the beads were Prince Rupert drops, made out of glass, but I guess one of them was weak. It broke off the necklace and when it fell to the floor it split apart."

"I thought I could fix it," Gerard said. "I couldn't. Why?"

"Where's the broken bead?" Charpentier asked them.

Élise's eyes turned ice cold. She'd figured it out. She immediately glared at Arno, silently demanding him to do something, but Arno had sworn to himself he would do the right thing in the face of how many times he'd done the wrong thing, and he would do the right thing now.

"It's ground to dust," Arno supplied to the couple's silence. "Because the poison that killed Citoyen Hennebert was contained in it."

There, the wife stiffened, and her face paled. That was all Charpentier needed.

"Both of you are coming with me," the officer said.

"You can't be serious!" Gerard said, indignant. "I'm a member of the Assembly!"

"All the more reason," Arno said. "The whole point of the Revolution is to prove that no one is above the law, and that includes people in government. If Louis isn't above the law, then neither are you."

"This is outrageous! Feuillants, both of you! I should be getting a medal, not put to trial!"

"That's nice," Charpentier said, voice so flatly professional he could have doubled for Giraud. "Let's go. You, too, citoyenne."
They didn't get home until well after midnight. Élise didn't speak for the entire walk back, Arno could see the veritable black cloud looming over her. They had been living together for six months, Arno had seen this several times. Élise called it the *malaise*, when her entire mood shifted to the dark. After so many near-death experiences, after the loss of her père, her heart had been beaten down as much as Arno's. But whereas Arno had a loose goal that kept him (mostly) sober and was trying to improve himself, Élise had not yet come out of her *malaise*.

By her own words, it was a struggle to feel anything, there was a deep numbness inside of her, and the only emotion that could bubble up to the surface was the only emotion that kept her alive: anger.

In Versailles, when she had confessed that Arno made her feel, he had come to understand just how important he was to her and her own health. Most of the time she was cold, guarded, and when she wasn't she was irritated, frustrated – and that was when Arno had to be very careful, because irritation would and did quickly give way to anger, and anger had to go somewhere, and it usually went to him. Now... Now he had arrested a lead to finding Germain, effectively undercutting her plans at revenge, and Arno knew that tonight was going to be bad.

Arno understood he was responsible for fixing Élise – he had caused her pain to begin with with his carelessness, and he was going out of his way to not be careless again. Instead of undoing a mistake that could never be undone, he was trying to better himself to never make that mistake again.

But Élise didn't always see it that way.

"What was that?" she demanded as soon as they were home.

"They deliberately murdered someone, Élise," he said, knowing he had to defend himself and still confused as to why he had to.

"The Gerards were my way into the *Cabinet Noir*, I would have had all the access to anti-revolutionaries and a chance to find Germain."

Arno tried reason. "Germain said the culmination of his work was the execution of the king. That rather implies that he is pro-revolution."

"It doesn't matter!" Élise said. "I could have read the mail of anyone I wanted, and then any time he sent word out for his arms to do something we would have had an address. Now I'm back to square one!"

"No, we're not," Arno said, trying to be reassuring. "We still have that list I got—"

"Half the names you had are émigrés that are out of the country and therefore disconnected to Germain's operation, or they're already cut by the guillotine, or they're impossible to find! Do you have any idea what it feels like to work so hard to achieve something, only to have it snatched out from your fingers?"

"Yes," Arno said, "I know—"

"No you don't," Élise corrected, "Because you never worked for anything in your entire life. You spent every day following me. I had to make all the decisions, and I still have to make all the decisions because you do not think."

The blow carved into Arno, echoing out over his psyche, *think merdeux*, and his heart clenched and
his stomach sank. But for the first time, a different sentence entered his mind, whenever you're quiet, you're thinking. Cosette.

"Élise, I knew how important this was to you," he said, standing up for himself. "You don't want to ally yourself with someone who judges you on how far your political beliefs push, you don't want to ally with a killer!"

"And just what are you, then?" Élise demanded.

Arno froze, the second blow shocking his entire system.

"Don't try to turn this around to you having some kind of moral high ground, Arno!" she continued. "You're an Assassin, you're entire raison d'être is to kill people who disagree with your contradictory and meaningless Creed, so you have no right to judge who I align with. I've told you this before, I will do whatever it takes to make sure Germain is brought down for what he's done to me and my father. Taking him down is the only thing that matters, and even after all this time you still don't see it!"

"Élise," Arno said, uncertain what was coming out of him mouth but needing to say something to make it stop. "If Germain is the only thing that matters, then what about us? I love you Élise, I want to see you happy more than I want to see Germain dead."

"If you want to see me happy, then that means you want Germain dead, because that's the only thing that will make me happy!"

"... don't I make you happy?" he asked.

"Not when you do something stupid like this!" Élise hissed. "Not when you deliberately undermine my work! You might say that you love me, but your actions prove otherwise!"

Arno staggered back as if struck. "Élise..."

"Get out Arno," she said, glaring and cold and so different than when they were children. "Right now I can't even stand to look at you."

She threw him out.

And without somewhere to go, he looked for a tavern that was still open.

"Victor... Victor... wake up..."

Arno struggled to understand the words, world blurry and ill defined.

"Come one, Victor, you're worrying your friend."

"Victor, please..."

Arno rolled over, and doing so brought sickness that he had not felt in months and he immediately moved over to the side of the bed and there was a bucket and everything poured out of him even his self-loathing and ooooooh, he was drunk again... Bong sang. Merde. He moaned, collapsing back onto the bed when everything shy of his shoes had been purged from him, and he looked up to an unfamiliar ceiling.

"There now..." said a male voice. "Worst is over... Just need to let him sleep it off... Thanks for bringing him over..."
"Je vous remercie... I didn't know where else to bring him..."

Arno passed out.

He woke to bright sunlight shoving needles into his eyes and tiny hands poking at his shoulder. Knowing he would regret it, he cracked open an eye and saw a tiny little girl staring at him. She gasped to see him and ran away. Arno turned his head to the dark side of the bed and wished the world would go away.

Damn fool. God damned fool. He'd gotten drunk again. Could he be any more pathetic?

"Victor."

He opened an eye again, seeing Giraud—Giraud? What was he doing here...? ... Where even was he?

"You're blinking," his partner said, "that means you're breathing. You awake?"

"... No," he replied, petulant. Diable he even sounded pathetic.

"Well, too bad," Giraud said. "Shift starts in an hour, we need you dressed and ready, hangover or not. Come on."

Moaning, Arno struggled into a sitting position, vision swimming briefly before he started meticulously rubbing his forehead. Giraud tugged him to his feet and stuffed him into Giraud's spare uniform. Downstairs was a full table, Arno looking out over Giraud's family as he made introductions and deducing he was in his partner's home.

"These are the kids: Jean: ten, François: nine, Louis-Antoine: six, and the princess over there is Anne: four. My beloved wife, Antoinette,"

"Enchanté."

"And my mère."

"Good morning," Arno said, feeling incredibly awkward that so any people had seen him at his worst. "I'm... I'm very sorry for inconveniencing you."

"Oh, it's happened to the best of us," the wife, Antoinette, said. "These days you can't blame a body for falling into a bottle once or twice – god knows it's cheaper than bread these days."

In the span of twenty minutes they were walking to the station, and Arno wasn't quite sure how any of this had happened, and it was very hard to think through the teeth grinding headache. He moaned as the sun rose, trying to cover his eyes. "I'm so pathetic..."

"No," Giraud said, "You're just hung over. You told me once, if you ever asked to go drinking to tie you down and empty every bottle in the city. Got to fight your demons any way you can, and sometimes that's just forgetting them for a few hours." He paused, giving his next sentence careful thought. "Fight with the wife?"

Arno almost didn't answer, didn't want to explain the murder, finding the culprit and how that had hurt Élise. He needed all the time he could spare to figure out how to explain it, and in the end all he could say was, "... yes."

Giraud nodded and that was the end of it.
It wasn't until near the end of shift, Arno's hangover mostly subsided, that Giraud turned again and said, "You might want to thank that friend of yours."

"Friend?"

"The dark girl?"

Cosette. How had she even found him? Arno simply nodded, still a little fuzzy, as they filled out their reports to give to Lapparent and left for their homes. Giraud grabbed Arno's shoulder before turning down his street. "Look, Victor," he said. "You ever need a place to sleep, look me up. Far cry better than trying to sleep in a tavern."

Warmth flooded Arno first, warmth over the kind gesture, then guilt that he was pathetic enough to warrant the pity, then frustration that he had taken so many steps backwards, then anger that things had gotten so bad in the first place. The only safe reply he could give was a deliberate nod, and as soon as Giraud was out of site Cosette appeared in his stead.

"Good evening," she said quietly.

"Good evening," Arno replied. "How did you even know that I needed to be found?"

Cosette smiled, soft and understanding. "We need a higher view for that, don't we?" she said coyly.

That was all the prompting they needed before they were up on the roofs, sitting by a chimney to keep warm, a light snow starting to fall.

"I was tailing a messenger," she said softly. "We're doing the same thing you are: looking for Germain, and we thought the messenger might be fruitful. I saw you stumbling out of a tavern from the roofs. I followed my tail – it was a dead end – and came back to find you. You didn't say much, but then you usually don't."

... "And how sad is it that I'm drunk often enough that you know that about me?" Arno asked, still feeling low. He wanted to drink right now, to push away the hurt and self-loathing, but he knew that would only perpetuate the cycle, and he needed to be sober when he talked to Élise again.

A thin arm wrapped around his shoulders, Cosette leaning her head on his shoulder. "I wish you could see what I see," she said. "You think so little of yourself but you do so much. I wouldn't be who I am today without you, and you've no idea of that, do you?"

Arno blinked, confused. "What?"

He heard a smile in her reply: "I knew it." She lifted her head to look at him more fully. "Do you remember when I was just promoted?"

"No..."

"I was researching the Cult of Baphomet, you helped me with some of the translations from our old records and came with me for the assassination even though assassinations were banned from you."

Arno nodded, remembering her work, sneaking underground as she posed as a prospective convert.

"That was my first assassination," Cosette said, a snowflake landing on the tip of her nose. "And you took me to your cover, gave me a bath, let me have my thoughts. That man was so indifferent, and that was the world I lived in before coming to the Brotherhood. Nobody cared about my family..."
or what was happening in Saint Dominique, or even about me and the struggles I went through. My own brother cared so little that he left as soon as he possibly could. Maître Beylier, he was wonderful, but he looks like me, he knew that indifference and I felt it was because of him knowing it that he handled me as he did. You, though," she said, squeezing his shoulder. "You did all of those things without a second thought. You were not indifferent, you were sensitive just for the sake of it."

Cosette rested her head on his shoulder again. "You made me confident in the world we live in."

Arno felt his eyes water, quickly covered them to prevent leakage. "I hardly did all that much..." he said.

"But you did enough. And that's all that counts. You always do enough. You did things like that for Marcel, and Fabre, and Jérôme and Camille – you saved her life, and if you dare think otherwise I will throw you off this roof – and now you are trying to help Élise, and she doesn't see it."

"How did you—"

"I asked you why you were being thrown out of a tavern. You told me."

Arno turned bright red as the snow continued to fall. There was a warmth in him, the same as he'd felt from Giraud, the same as Fabre, when he expressed such rage at what Bellec supposedly did to him. He tried to think of the word, tried to name the feeling.

Affirmation. He felt affirmation. People were expressing compassion to Arno, and somewhere deep inside him he craved it desperately. He didn't know how he felt about that.

... but he wondered why Élise didn't make him feel like this.

They talked quietly about other things in the snow, huddled by the warmth of a chimney: there was an investigation into Jacques Roux going on led by Marcel. Roux, Cosette explained, had been a point of interest for the Assassins for a long time, he advocated the economic equality and went as far as the abolition of private property, making everything free to use because it all belonged to the state, and dissolving all classes, including the bourgeoisie. "We've quietly helped him out without his knowing," she said, "but it's starting to look like he's deliberately inciting some of the food riots. The Commune threw him in jail in Vendémiaire, but that's because of all the unrest he causing and the upset of power. If he really was starting food riots, then he sacrificed innocent people for his political agenda."

"Meaning he'll have to die," Arno said.

Cosette nodded. "Marcel is uncomfortable. He's the very people Roux speaks for, and he doesn't want Roux to have done it."

"I understand."

There was also Danton and Desmoulins starting a paper talking about ending the Terror and fixing grain prices so people could afford bread and start making peace talks with all the countries France was at war with.

"We're going to try and support them, but Robespierre has a lot of power in the Commune, and the Law of Suspects makes it very difficult."

"I know," Arno said, "You should see what Giraud and I go through day to day."
But, eventually, they had to go back to their different lives.

They stood and made their way down to street level, two inches of snow already on the ground they had talked for so long. Arno lingered. He didn't want to go back to Élise, and that thought was very damning, but in the end, he had a responsibility to help her, and so he had to go back. He arrived, darkness and snow making him invisible, and as he slipped in he saw no signs of his lover until he went upstairs to their bedchamber. Élise was there, having never gotten out of bed, simply staring off into nothing. The malaise.

Arno sighed, undressing and joining her in bed.

He held her all night.

When she came out of the malaise, she acted as if nothing had ever happened.

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22 Pluviôse, Y2 (February 10, 1794)

"But Danton is advocating policies we're all interested in," Arno was saying to Giraud. "Fixed grain prices, peace talks with foreign countries – we've reclaimed Toulon and Vendée and Lyon, we have our house back in order, and it's time to focus on the fact that so many of us are starving."

"Be that as it may," Giraud replied, "The only reason we have that hint of stability right now is because the Terror is keeping all the dissidents quiet."

"Giraud, how many people need to die by guillotine for it to be enough?"

"That's not our place to say, Victor. We just have to arrest the suspects and let the law figure itself out. And at this point I'd be very careful what you say, Victor. You're a great partner but if some random citoyen hears what you have to say you'll be put to guillotine, too."

Arno suppressed a growl, frustrated. That was exactly his point!

The two moved through the streets, the air still cold, chasing off beggars and vagabonds and women of the night. Arno tried to focus on the positive, word had come up that Bonaparte had been made a brigadier general at the shocking age of twenty-four for his work in Toulon, Élise was out of her latest fight with the malaise (and talking to him again), and Cosette made a point of seeing him once a week when she could – the absolute highlight of his life. Giraud spotted a child selling herself and the pair moved to shake her off, she ran almost as soon as they started toward her.

"Excusez-moi, citoyens," said a new voice.

Both men winced. Another accusation of counterrevolutionary behavior?

They turned and saw a thin man, stubble along his face and wide, green eyes. Arno frowned, thinking him familiar.

"What can we do for you, Citoyen?" Giraud asked.

The man hesitated, pursing his lips, before saying, "My name is Gabriel. I was hoping to see you, Citoyen Dorian."

Arno frowned, why did he look so fami—he stiffened. "Oh," he said, forgoing the rest of his reaction. "You."
"Victor?"

"May I present Gabriel Jules Duchemin," Arno said. "He was a new member of the political club before I was ill."

"Oh," Giraud said, "Need time to catch up then?"

"Yes," Gabriel said.

"No," Arno countered, voice flat. "The less I see of that political club the better."

"But—"

"No," Arno insisted, giving Gabriel a hard look. He turned and marched down the street, Giraud following him. Why did he keep running into Assassins when the Council had made it so clear that he had broken their trust? Cosette was one thing, she was his best friend, but Marcel and Tissot, then Fabre, now this green pup—wasn't he still dead? No, Arno wasn't an Assassin, he'd never considered himself one and they had certainly not trusted him.

... But they were right not to trust him, he couldn't forget that. As soon as he had made contact with Élise he had ignored everything they wanted and focused on his selfish goal of undoing a mistake that was impossible to undo. Now he had to turn himself into something else, something better than what he was, and he couldn't do that if the Assassins kept wandering into his life to judge him.

Giraud sensed his mood and gave him space as they walked through St. Germain. He asked if Arno wanted to talk about it later, but he didn't answer. But, as expected, once his shift was over, the new blood sought him out.

"Arno," he said quietly.

"That's not my name," he corrected, "And aren't you supposed to still be dead?"

"I was reborn a month ago," Gabriel replied, a little indignant. "I need your help."

"Does the Council know you're here?"

"Well... no..."

"Then ask them," Arno said. "I'm attainted, I'm no longer an Assassin. Diable, I was never an Assassin to begin with. I can't help you."

"You're the only one who can," Gabriel hissed, surprising Arno. The former gravedigger took an audible breath through his nose. "Look," he said. "One of my teachers, Marcel Pontmercy, he's gone missing. It's been a month. I haven't seen him since Nivôse, when he was assigned to kill Jacques Roux, and nobody's doing anything and there's so few of us after the Law of Suspects started. Almost twenty of us have been arrested for suspicion of counterrevolutionary thoughts and we're all spread so thin, everyone with a cover is doing double duty with assassinations and heists. I'm going from one assignment to the next. Marcel said that was natural until they found a good cover for me, but then the papers said Roux tried to stab himself when he found out his hearing was before the Revolutionary Tribunal, except I know that was probably Marcel's work, and that meant that he was hurt, too, and I can't do nothing."

Arno closed his eyes and, like Gabriel, took a long breath through his nose. "Just because they're not telling you something doesn't mean they aren't doing something," he said. "I learned that the hard way."

Arno asked himself what kind of person he wanted to be, and he growled low in his throat when he realized the answer. Shaking his head and putting his hands on his hips he bowed to the inevitable. "Alright," he said, resigned. "Let's go."

"Go? Go where?"

"Hôpital de la Salpêtière," Arno said.

La Salpêtière was originally a gunpowder – hence the name saltpeter, but in 1656 the King converted it to a hospice for poor women in Paris: prisons for the prostitutes, a holding place for the hysterical or dimwitted or insane, and pleasant home to thousands of rats and bureaucracy according to legend. Enlarged in 1684, now it was a hospital of 10,000 beds and 300 cells for prisoners, and where Jacques Roux was being held after his purported suicide attempt and most likely place where Marcel was being held. It was clear on the other side of Paris and probably an hour walk. He was going to miss supper over this...

He bought some dubious stew for himself and Gabriel and they ate it as fast as possible. Arno used up the last of his purse to pay and they started the overly long walk, trying to shrink into his coat in the cold.

"How much do you know?" Arno asked.

"Very little," Gabriel said. "Only that he was assigned Roux as a target. The papers say he tried to stab himself multiple times, that means there was a fight, and Marcel lost."

"That would follow," Arno said, rubbing his forehead. Marcel had never been a good climber, and Arno couldn't remember ever seeing him fight but if physicality was a problem then it made sense that if things went bad he would struggle. If he was still alive he would be at l'hôpital, most likely in one of the prison cells if he was caught, or in a ward if he was injured. He frowned. Ten thousand beds was a lot to search. He turned the problem over in his mind as he and Gabriel walked. "When we get there," he said, "This is what will happen. I'm still in uniform, so I'll bring you in, saying you're from the countryside looking for your cousin. How well can you describe Marcel?"

"Three inches shorter than me, auburn hair, brown eyes."

"Mention the two moles on his neck and the calluses on his hands," Arno added, pointing to his own neck for emphasis. "Say you got word that he took ill, but you don't know where. Then collapse yourself, say you haven't eaten in four days or something. Smear your face with dirt so they don't realize you're not all that gaunt. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course," Gabriel said, quick to pick up. He moved away from Arno, disappearing to a back alley, most likely to make his appearance match his cover. He came back without his surcoat and waistcoat, shivering in the cold, hair loose and with several runs of his hands through it. "It's another half hour to la Salpêtière," he said, "I'll have a lot of symptoms by then."

Arno nodded. "Good. If you can get enough people to carry you away, I can look through their records and find out if Marcel is there. If he isn't, I can at least find Roux and ask him some questions. 'Wake up' an hour later or so and slip out. Wait for me at Pont de la Tournelle."

Gabriel nodded, the pair walking in silence for several minutes, before he added. "You still act like an Assassin."
"No, I—"

"But you do," Gabriel said, "You have that savoir-faire, you always know what to do even when everything is falling apart."

Arno openly snorted. "That's a lie if ever I heard one," he said.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean this plan is half-baked and has a dozen different ways it could go wrong. I mean savoir-faire is the furthest descriptor that can be used to describe me."

"... then you must hide it very well, Arno," Gabriel said. "When we first met you knew exactly what you were doing, and even with a 'half-baked' plan there's more thought to it than anything I've come up with in the last month."

Eventually they arrived at l'hôpital, and Gabriel followed the plan beautifully, Gabriel was shivering and barely able to form words through his chattering teeth, and Arno helped him describe his sick cousin. The person at the receiving station looked through records and Gabriel collapsed perfectly, slumping first to the table and then to the ground. Arno, as a member of the police, was quick to shout orders for help and watched as Gabriel was hauled away, leaving the table empty of anyone. He got to work, looking for the name Pontmercy, then his most common aliases: Gillenormand, Thénardiers, Prouvaire, before finding the name L'Aigle. The eagle. Of course. Prison cells. Also of course.

The secretary returned and Arno asked how the vagabond was.

"Cold and hungry," was the reply. "He'll be fine."

Arno nodded. "So long as I'm here I did have a second question, if it's not inconvenient."

"Of course."

"The captain of my ward heard that one of our agitators might be being held here. He wanted me to confirm it for our records. He has a lot of aliases, but what criminal doesn't?" He offered a charming smile.

"Name?"

"L'Aigle. I was told to confirm with my own eyes, but if he's here I don't know where the prisons are."

"Below ground, lower floors, near the center of the building. And... yes, we have him. Recovering from three stab wounds. Nearly bled out."

Arno held in a wince. "Could I see him now?"

"Not at this hour. Come by in the morning, we'll walk you down."

"Merci," Arno said cheerily, turning and leaving.

Outside he shed his bicorn hat and turned his winter coat inside out, where the lining was much darker. He reached a hand into his pocket, wrapping a fist around the watch, closed his eyes, and took a breath.

He reentered l'hôpital via a different door, making a subtle show of shivering and stamping his
feet. Arno asked for a small pulse from his eagle, seeing a smatter of fireworks to his left. He followed the trail, ending up at a wide staircase that led down. He pulled out a piece of paper, scrawling on it in the dim light, and as he cleared the stairs he found a guard. "I was called to see a patient," he said, looking down his nose. No uniform, probably a member of the staff.

"We never sent word up," the guard said, frowning.

Damn. Not knowing how to make the excuse work, Arno was forced to do violence, spinning the guard around with a start and pulling him into a choke hold. The man struggled, yes, but Arno was stronger and better trained, and in two minutes his target was passed out on the floor. "I'm sorry," he whispered, before closing his eyes and thinking of eagles again.

The fireworks were brighter now, at the end of the hall. He followed, feet silent but also fast, knowing he was on borrowed time. Security was comparably light compared to a prison, but then the prisoners here were mostly diseased women of the night or the insane. Arno followed his eagle to the right cell door, lockpicks already out. There were only one or two lamps about the place, light was very poor that that made Arno's dark inside-out coat invisible to most eyes. He held a breath as the tumblers gave way, praying nobody heard the noise as he pulled open the lock. The hatch seemed to be well oiled, however, there was barely a sound.

He stepped into the cell, eyes adjusting to the even dimmer light. Marcel was indeed there, stretched out on a bed – not a cot but an actual bed – under a blanket.

Arno touched his friend's shoulder.

Marcel turned, eyes fluttering open. "... Arno?" he asked, voice barely a whisper. Arno nodded.

Marcel's face contorted into something hard to make out in the long shadows; he surged up but then fell back, hand going to his side, grunting. "Of course it would be you," he moaned.

"How bad are you hurt?" Arno asked.

He shook his head. "I'm well enough to move. Where's Roux?"

"Here, three floors up."

"... Then let's go."

"Marcel—"

"Don't call me that," Marc—Pontmercy said, sitting up more gingerly. "You lost that right when you betrayed us."

... He deserved that. More than Cosette's glee at seeing him again (no matter how good it made him feel) and more than Fabre's acceptance of him, he deserved ire, indignation, anger. He deserved it for what he did to Élise and the Assassins both – trying to be both things and ending up being neither. He helped Pontmercy to his feet. "Do we leave?" he asked softly, deferentially.

"No," Pontmercy said. He held his side, obviously the most serious of his injuries, and tested walking. He could do it with a limp, and Arno silently followed him as he moved through the prison cells and upstairs to l'hôpital proper. The third floor was very nearly empty – outside the prison there were no guards to speak of. Arno quietly offered the room number and Pontmercy limped through the halls, occasionally grunting.

There was, however, a guard at Roux's door. Pontmercy cursed under his breath, trying to figure
out what to do, but Arno was pulling off his winter coat and giving it to his friend—his former
test. He wished he had his bicorn hat, but he walked up and put a puzzled look on his face before
"seeing" the guard.

"Ah!" he said brightly, "I got lost coming up here. I was supposed to relieve someone, but I've
never been assigned here before."

The guard rolled his eyes. "Listen, new blood, you'll have to do better than that for Lapperent."

"I know, I know, sorry I took so long. When will my relief come?"

"Dawn, I'd wager, though given how long it took for you to get here, who knows."

Arno took position as the guard left, and no sooner was the coast clear that Pontmercy limped up
and opened the door. Arno let the man do his job, heard the solemn, "Repose en paix," before
hearing the distinct sound of metal sliding into meat. Pontmercy left, all but throwing the coat back
to Arno, and he helped the bookseller out of the hospital and to Gabriel's meeting place at Pont de
la Tournelle.

"What are you even doing here?" Pontmercy asked as he limped along.

"One of your students, Gabriel, begged that I help him. I told him to go to the Council, but he was
convinced that nobody was doing anything to rescue you."

"Merde, that novice," Pontmercy cursed. A small pause fell between them. "Still doesn't explain
why you're here."

Arno looked away. "You were in trouble," he said. "I couldn't ignore that."

Pontmercy muttered something under his breath, something that sounded suspiciously like,
"... now he follows the Creed..."

Whatever injuries he had, Pontmercy clearly wasn't ready for the walk back to the Sanctuary. Arno
was very nearly carrying him to Pont de la Tournelle when all was said and done, the bookseller's
leg having given out of him. Gabriel wasn't there yet, and Arno frowned. Had he really done all of
that in less than an hour? He helped sit Pontmercy on the safety rail of the bridge. He could just see
Saint-Chapelle over the roofs of the buildings.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes. He'd promised himself he would apologize to those he
wronged. He'd done it for Cosette, Fabre, Mirabeau... He turned to Pontmercy.

"... I'm sorry," he said, voice inexplicably soft. "About what I did."

Pontmercy smiled, dark and ironic. "Of course you are," he said, unrelenting.

Arno shook his head. "I don't expect forgiveness," he continued. "I knew full well I was going
gainst the Council when Élise came back, and—"

"Don't," Pontmercy said. "Don't say that woman's name."

Arno closed his mouth, hurt.

"Merde," Pontmercy said. "Do you have any idea how I felt; when I found out the Lobit-Lévesque
mission wasn't sanctioned? You took me after my shop had been ruined and reminded me why we
do what we do. I felt so good, when you told me to release the prisoners at Luxembourg and
even better when I learned Lobit was a prisoner by his own wife and freed him. You told me it was okay not to sleep at night. I called you frère that night!” Pontmercy stopped, hearing the volume of his own voice as the anger oozed out of him. Arno said nothing, taking the dressing down as he knew he should.

Pontmercy coughed, shifting his weight to better favor his leg and his side. "Family is the most important thing," he said. "Family is everything, and you betrayed it. Just like my sœur. And I wanted to blame you! I hated you when the Council was figuring out what happened at Place de la Révolution, but every time I started to hate you, I remembered what that woman did to you after you betrayed us for her." He took in a shaky breath, in the dark Arno thought he heard tears. "And every time I tried to hate you," he continued, voice wet, "I remembered that you had already been punished."

The natural pause fell upon them again, Arno giving Pontmercy space to have his emotions and trying to figure out his own.

"Marcel! Marcel, you're alive!"

"Novice!"

Gabriel ground to a halt.

"Did it ever occur to you that the Council was giving me time to heal before breaking me out?" Pontmercy demanded. "And why in God's name did you bring in someone not a part of the Brotherhood?"

"But..."

"No buts! I'll make sure you're grounded a month for this! And Dorian!" he added, spinning around to glare at Arno.

"Yes?"

"... Je te remerci," he said, offering a hand.

Arno took it, and was met with a sucker punch to the gut. He coughed all air out of his lungs, falling to his knees and leaning back for air, only for a right cross to slam into his jaw, making him spin into the dirty snow.

"The first was for working with that woman," Pontmercy said, "The second for punching me in Versailles." He turned. "Come on, Gabriel, let's go home."

Arno struggled in the snow, trying to breathe, watching as Gabriel half carried Pontmercy over the bridge.

"Hey, Dorian!"

He looked up.

"When you finally tire of that woman hurting you..."

But the wind carried the words away.

Arno finally got to his feet and prepared himself for the hour walk back to Élise.

... She didn't hurt him...
Well... not much, anyway...

Chapter End Notes

Early chapter is Early. We're gonna be super busy this weekend, so we thought we'd put this up ahead of time. Now, to the chapter!

We spend a lot of time circling around Danton, political name and partner with Robespierre because of events coming up. Arno isn't in a position for first hand stuff, but boots on the ground rumors and conversations are cool, and evocative of the fact that EVERYONE was talking politics at the time. More on Danton later, though, first is the alternate take of the Moving Mirabeau multiplayer mission.

Without the Brotherhood to keep him on a leash, per se, we can see how good Arno actually kinda is. This is the second (and later in the chapter third) time he sneaks into a secure building without anyone the wiser. As Napoléon observed earlier, Arno's a bit of a chameleon with all his costume changes. Almost like those customizations in the game hinted at something :)

We also get more looks into Arno's psyche, and once again a lot of "us" starts to shine through. It wasn't until we were well into our adulthood that we were told we were smart. Like, we were used to having questions right in school but it never occurred to us that we were actually "smart," like making connections and analyzing problems smart, until we were told by other adults in the same job as us. Arno has been told repeatedly he doesn't think, and can't really believe that Cosette, Giraud, and now Fabre all say that he can and does it well. Fabre also gives Arno some more positive self-talk, and most importantly he gives Arno validation: YES, Fabre says, it WAS fcked up what Bellec did to you. That kind of validation is critical for abuse victims. If one comes to you and outs what they went through, quiet listening is quietly accepting that the abuse they suffered is normal - it is important to have as visceral a reaction as possible, even to say, "I have no idea what to say that is so fcked up," it reminds the victim that what they went through wasn't right and they are RIGHT to feel that it wasn't right. Er, if that makes sense.

Next is the murder mystery. Élise had a lead to chase and, per her luck, it blew up in her face. Reviewers have pointed out that she is beyond all redemption, and for Arno that is true, but it must be pointed out that she is still mentally ill. Depression and NPD are a hard combo for her - the depression extinguishes all her feelings and the NPD prevents her from finding new ways TO feel. She can't be outright written off because she's abusive - Arno certainly isn't the one to help her and needs to get away from her ASAP, but the more the fic progresses the smaller and smaller her world is getting - much like our abuser's - and Élise was never given the right coping mechanisms to handle stress, and the NPD makes her handling stress even harder.

The fight with Arno had dialogue pulled right from our own abuser. And Élise "going away," retreating into her own mind, is another thing our abuser would do when things got to be too much. You feel bad for her, to a point, even though she's terrible.

And we have more positivity from Best Friend Cosette - who points out to Arno that he does, in fact, do good things. And as much as Arno doesn't believe it he, like us,
crave being told he's doing well. It makes him feel good which for someone with as little self esteem as him goes a long, long way to building himself up. Gabriel in turn shows up again as a pro-Arno and points out how good Arno is as being an Assassin. And we finally get to talk about la Selpetiére. Arno doesn't know it, but there are two famous doctors in residence there who, instead of keeping the insane patients in chains, give them beds and talk to them - sometimes multiple times a day, in one of the early precursors to therapy. That doesn't play into our mental health themes at all, nope...

And then we have the AA scene with Marcel. Arno's been doing this for a while, but one of the Twelve Steps is to apologize to people you've wronged and accept their response - whether it's forgiveness or not. And Marcel - like life - is complicated, hurt, betrayed, but also sees all the struggles Arno has with his life and isn't without compassion. Sucker punch or not the door is still open.

But enough dawdling around.

Next chapter: the Fall of Robespierre. Oh, the things that happen...

Happy Thanksgiving!
7 Germinal, Y2 (March 27, 1794)

The middle of Ventôse proved to be a very busy month for the Committee of Public Safety. The Cordeliers Club started calling for insurrection, and neither the Committee for Public Safety, nor General Security cared for that. It was soundly denounced and as a result, as Ventôse started to close, Robespierre called for all factions to perish by the same blow. Thus started the arrest of the Hébertists. Two days later their trials began before the Revolutionary Tribunal. It was reported that the Hébertists were constantly linked to aristocrats, foreign bankers, and counter-revolutionaries. Arno wondered how much of that was true. After having spent almost a year (he thought it was a year, this new calendar kept throwing him off...) walking the streets with Giraud and just who was usually brought forward as a counter-revolutionary Arno wasn't sure that the reports were really true. The Hébertists supported popular policies like fixed grain prices and the like, but the Cordeliers club that the Hébertists came from cared about only one thing. Dechristianization. There wasn't anything counter-revolutionary about that. Part of the bedrock of the Revolution was the hatred of how the Church treated the Third Estate and how they charged for everything and so much ceremony was always required for things.

Arno could hardly say he was surprised when, at the start of Germinal, all the Hébertists were guillotined. Three days later, a mathematician was arrested.

"Condorcet?" Arno asked after reading a paper over his usual quick lunch with Giraud. "What was he arrested for?"

Giraud sniffed. "He's a mathematician. Isn't that enough? No good comes from the study of math other than to make people lose more."

Arno shook his head. "Descartes used the logical proofs of math to prove that there is a benevolent god and we wouldn't have the scientific discoveries in the last century without him."

Giraud scoffed. "Descartes was a philosopher, not a mathematician, Victor."

Arno offered a flat look. "Tell that to the Cartesian geometry I had to study. Twice, I was forced to read through some of his books. It's all logic, which is ultimately what the study of math is, the study of logic." Or so Mirabeau had once said. "Besides, Condorcet was one of the people who gave us this metric system of math. It makes doing math far easier. It's all a matter of the decimal place-"

Giraud shook his head. "That's why I say the study of math is pointless. Math is impossible for anyone who isn't a genius."

"It is not. I was made to keep accounts from time to time, growing up. I've kept ledgers. It's not impossible."

"That's because you're too smart for your own good."

"Don't worry, I never understood Condorcet's thoughts on calculus."
They laughed.

"But Condorcet has been for everything the revolution has wanted," Arno said as they went back to walking the streets. "He was against the monarchy, against the Church, he wants women included in the rights of a citizen, he's against slavery, everything I've read about him has him as a staunch ally of the Revolution. I feel like I was ill and when I came back everything's incomprehensible."

"Victor, Victor," Giraud shook his head. "Condorcet was against killing the king. He may not be a part of any club, but he is close to the Girondists. That makes him counter-revolutionary."

"Just association?" Arno offered dryly.

Giraud shrugged. "It's not up to the likes of us to decide politics. We just deal with the laws."

But the arrest of Condorcet bothered Arno. It wasn't until the next day that Arno understood why. Condorcet, in essence, believed not only in what the Revolution did, but also what Assassins did. While Théroigne de Mericourt had made a strong push with others for equality for women, it seemed that the push had died away. No one was interested in it any more. Instead, there always seemed to be more important things to do. Yet, when Arno had been an Assassin, he'd worked with men and women both, all equally capable, and he believed that women were equal to men in any way. The same for anyone who wasn't European. Skin color had nothing to do with one's abilities. The same for religion. One need look no further than the Council to see that. The Council had consisted of one white man (repose en paix, Mirabeau), one woman, one black man, and one Jew. The Assassins wouldn't be successful without a strong Council, and while Arno understood his mistakes, and there were things he wished the Council had told him, the Council did their best to keep the Assassins safe and France safe.

Idly, Arno wondered if Condorcet was an Assassin or an ally of them.

Then, the next day, the papers were shouting how Condorcet had been found dead in his cell.

Almost automatically, Arno read through everything he could find, wondering if it was Templar influence or if Condorcet had simply chosen how to die, or something he hadn't thought of.

But he wasn't an Assassin. He couldn't investigate. It hadn't even happened in Paris.

It set him on edge, but there wasn't anything he could do. Not as he was.

It was frustrating.

And then, the next day, Georges Danton was arrested.

Georges Danton was just as much of a firebreather for the Revolution as Marat, pushing and pushing for things to improve and calling out when things didn't or were against what he believed. Originally part of the Cordeliers Club, Danton was one of the first to speak against the King after that flight to Varennes. He had been an instigator of the crowds at the Champs de Mars massacre and had fled to England briefly in fear of counter-revolutionaries. He eventually returned and made it all the way to Minister of Justice after the raid on Tuileries that had devastated the ranks of the Assassins so badly. One of the Montagnards with Marat (whom Danton apparently hated), Robespierre, Desmoulins, and other leaders of the Convention. A key creator of the Revolutionary Tribunal that took the weapons of the masses away after the September Massacres, Danton was also one of the first members of the Committee for Public Safety and often dispatched to the armies to raise moral. Danton was a mountain of a man with a hideous face and a colossal voice that could shake walls and it was no wonder that he was a gifted orator who could inspire any he
spoke with.

One of the instrumental people who orchestrated the fall of the Girondists. Once there was no more opposition in the Convention, Danton had taken to the work that needed to be done with gusto and intense focus. The only way he saw to get things under control in France was extreme measures. He once again had become a pivotal man as he helped to grant dictatorial powers to the Committee for Public Safety, where he was no longer a member and resolved to never be a part of, thus leaving the Convention to be a supporter outside of it.

But something had changed.

Danton, lately, had been saying that the Terror had succeeded, and now that France was back to being united, it was time to focus on the wars with all their enemies, fix starvation and grain prices, work on improving life. Of course, as always, there were rumors abound about Danton and financial indiscretions, using the Revolution to profit, and most hauntingly, being involved in the French East India Company, though Arno had yet to see any actual proof of that.

And Danton was a man that Élise very much wanted to speak to.

"We don't have any time," she said one night. "You need to get me in there."

"I beg your pardon?" Arno looked up from the book he was reading, trying to unwind after a long day on his feet.

"Danton. He's too high up to not know something. But we both know that the Committee for Public Safety is going to execute him."

Arno set aside his book. "Élise, not everyone who goes before the Tribunal is executed. Danton has done a great deal for France. He'll defend himself well. We can't presume—"

"Arno, I need you to get me to him."

Arno sat back, eyes hooded. "How do you propose that?" he asked dryly. "One of the people that the Committee is most interested in will be under more than lock and key. More like water and rock. I can't just walk right in—"

"Are you an Assassin or not?" Élise hissed back, eyes narrowed.

Arno sucked in a breath. She was asking for the impossible, but she was so desperate to find Germain, she didn't seem to understand that he wasn't some sort of god that could do anything she asked. He slowly let out his breath. "Élise, I'm not able to get into everywhere and anywhere just because I have a uniform. It takes a great deal of planning and preparing to properly—"

"You didn't need a plan for that crow-bitch Lévesque," she countered.

Arno took another slow, deep breath. "And escaping via balloon was so subtle, never letting Germain know that someone was taking out his associates. To say nothing of the hours and hours of time we had to interrogate her."

She scowled at him. "I will handle interrogating Danton. That way we have a hope of finding out anything. Your job is to get us in there."

"Élise, you don't understand—" Arno just let out a sigh. There was no point in fighting. "Give me two days."
"We don't have two days, they'll start his trial immediately—"

"It's either two days, Élise, or it isn't happening."

"How dare you—"

Arno walked out. He walked out to the cool spring night and just walked down the street and away to breath. He and Élise had been arguing more and more. It's not that he didn't understand. All she wanted was Germain dead, it was her raison d'être. While Arno was pounding the streets, keeping his ears open for anything of use, Élise was trying to get ins through the social circles of important people. People that she wouldn't have to impress if she'd still had her power as a Templar. She wasn't prepared for the grunt work of investigating; she was prepared to be the one at the top. And the longer she went with no progress, the more frustrated she was.

It was clear that Élise was grasping at straws, taking any gossamer thread and following it because she had nothing else.

So Arno more than understood where she was coming from.

Arno just wished she understood where he was coming from. Just once.

He kept on walking until he was all the way to the Seine. He looked out over the black waters to the flickers of candle-light across the river and just let out a long, gusty sigh.

"You look like you need a drink."

Arno stiffened and turned to see Fabre, sitting against the stone rail, staring up to the night sky. Two brutes who were undoubtedly his lieutenants were further down. "You're doing well," Arno commented, deliberately not looking at the missing arm.

"I manage." Fabre shifted, turning more to Arno. "I wasn't expecting to see you storming down the streets. Do you need me to fetch something to drink?"

Arno let out a bitter laugh. "I'd take it and that would be the problem."

A flicker of a smile flashed across Fabre's face. "Well then, what caused the need for a drink?"

Arno sat down next to Fabre, tired. "You know who I'm with."

"I know who you're sleeping with," Fabre countered. "I know you are a gens d'armes, and that you make it very hard for me to get any eyes here in the faubourg. It's amazing how many of my subjects came to me saying that you always seem to see them."

Arno grunted a laugh. "Shall I not notice them for a few weeks?"

Fabre's grin was unrepentant. "No. Let them learn how to be sneaky. At least one of them has potential to join our little club, but I need her to understand the world a little more. But that was a nice attempt to distract."

Arno rubbed his forehead. "I can't say anything. You're an Assassin. You'll report to the Council. She's a Templar. That won't end well."

Fabre nodded and they sat together for a while.

"I notice you don't include yourself as a Templar."
"I never was."

"True. That was never in doubt. But you're not a Templar now, even though you're helping her?"

Arno looked up to the sky, squinting to see the stars through passing clouds. He let out another long breath. "Élise has been with me since my father died. I love her. I've loved her for as long as I understood what loving a woman meant. I broke her. It was my thoughtlessness that lead to the death of her father and it has broken her. I can't undo the mistake. But I can fix the damage. She has suffered so much. I can do this for her. I can fix her. Help her get closure and peace. I want to make her happy."

Fabre nodded sadly. "You don't see it, but you are one lovestruck Assassin, Arno."

Arno let out a bitter snort. Arno. He had only heard his name from Élise. Everyone he currently knew called him Victor, and while that was still him, Arno couldn't help but feel more... himself when Cosette or Fabre said his name. He shouldn't. He was dead. He could be anything. A change of name shouldn't mean anything.

Fabre stood, dusting his dirty clothes off with his single hand. "Arno, you can't fix people. People just are what they are. The only person you can ever change is yourself."

Arno nodded. "I just want her to understand my perspective."

"That's not too much to ask," Fabre said gently. "All any of us want from friends and family, is a little understanding." Turning, Fabre headed down to where his two lieutenants were. "You're a good policeman, Victor. Keep doing what you're doing on the streets. The rest? Do what you do best: Think about it."

Arno sighed.

16 Germinal, Y2 (April 5, 1794)

Arno had taken his two days to study the prison that Danton was being held in. He was fairly certain he could get in easily, from any number of points, especially along the roof line, but Élise was the hard part. She couldn't climb like he could. He had been able to sneak in one night and explore to get a rough idea of what was where, but once the trial started in front of the Revolutionary Tribunal, there was little doubt that Danton was going to be traveling back and forth from the Convention. The easiest way to get to Danton would be to replace the guards on whatever carriage Danton and Desmoulins and whoever else was on trial would be taking. But there was no guarantee of isolation, and it would be far too short a time if Danton wasn't willing to talk. The best place to have time would be after the trial started, when Danton was at his most tired, and most likely to slip up.

Which still lead to the issue of how to get Élise into the prison.

In the end, Arno used his spare uniform on her. She had frowned heavily at the idea, but when Arno asked if she had a better idea and she grit her teeth. The only part that worked was that his spare uniform had been from when he first started, when he was still far too thin and sickly. He had since filled back out and was almost as strong as he was before he was Attainted. But the smaller uniform, while still big on Élise, wasn't so noticeably off. The pants were easy to let the excess tuck into her boots and the longer sleeves took some extra pinning to not be so noticeable. Extra fabric as padding and she didn't look quite so ill-fit. It was enough for someone to need a second look to recognize the disguise, but that still took getting in.
So, that night as tired guards waited for their shift to end, Arno, from up on a roof line, threw down a cherry bomb. It was enough to wake up the guards and several came running. By then Arno had dropped down to where Élise was hiding and they were able to slip in.

For two nights, Arno brought Élise to Danton's cell and Élise grilled him for anything about Germain, getting more and more frustrated as it became more and more clear that Danton didn't know anything. Then Arno would go home, listening to her quietly rant at everything, then collapse into bed for maybe two hours sleep before getting up for work.

During the day, Danton's trial was irregular, to say the least. Only seven of the required twelve jurors were present, as it was felt that only those seven could come to the correct verdict. Danton used every bit of his verbosity and rhetoric to tear into the Committee for Public Safety, demand that the accused be able to bring forth witnesses of character, and so much pontificating that the Convention itself stepped in and approved of Saint-Just's proposal that if a prisoner couldn't show proper respect for justice that the proceedings and reading of the sentence wouldn't require the accused to be there.

It was the final nail in Danton's coffin. He was no longer even able to speak for himself.

On the sixteenth of Germinal, Arno didn't even bother getting any sleep. He just took Élise home and went straight to the precinct.

L'apparent called in Arno and several others once the day was ready to start.

"You'll all be assigned to the Tribunal for today."

Arno blinked, his tired brain unable to process that.

"What?" someone else asked, also surprised.

L'apparent grimaced. "Today is to be the last day of the trial. We know what that means. We're expecting trouble, so we need to keep things calm."

So Arno and Giraud, and many colleagues, marched to court.

When the time came to take the convicted to the guillotine, Arno found himself walking beside Danton.

Oh, the irony.

There were shouts and jeers, of course. There usually was. The public did enjoy a tidy little execution. But many seemed utterly surprised that Danton was being executed. Danton stood in the wagon with some dignity, while others cried or were distraught. Arno walked by the side, keeping the crowd away as gently as he could. He didn't have to do much. Most knew what to expect. After all, executions were commonplace now. Arno thought that Danton might be staring at him, but he was too tired to know for sure. He just kept doing his job.

He was so damn tired.

At the square, Arno stayed by the wagon and kept watch. He was inside the perimeter, but he glanced about with his eagle to make sure all was good. Nothing drew his eye. Not even an Assassin.

Then again, by Arno's count, after Tuileries and what the Law of Suspects had done from what Cosette had said, the Assassins were just above half-strength. He doubted there were enough to try
and manage such crowds and he doubted that the Council could spare anyone to man such crowds that happened so regularly.

He scanned the crowds again. Two people were already guillotined and Desmoulins was being lead up.

"You look tired."

Given that he'd probably had eight hours of sleep in the past four days, that was an understatement. Arno blinked and turned to look up at Danton, who was studying him intently.

Arno gave a wry grin and rolled his eyes. "Is that any surprise?" he asked lightly. "I haven't had much sleep for the past few days."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't."

Arno still watched and observed. Quietly, he said, "I don't understand this."

"No one does, anymore," Danton replied, a smiling grimace across his scarred face. "I can't advise France anymore. I can't advise my friends or family. I think I might be able to advise you."

Arno turned, eyebrows disappearing into his hairline.

The fourth person was taken to the guillotine.

"You love that woman, don't you?" It wasn't a question.

Arno did raise a brow, but nodded.

Danton let out a long sigh. "You're young. You need to find couples that love each other and study them."

"Pardonez-moi?"

"I have had two wives and two of my children have survived so far," Danton said as the fifth person was taken away. "My first wife... I still miss her. I married her at about your age. She was the light of my life, my joy, my friend, my inspiration. She died just over a year ago."

"My deepest apologies, Monsieur."

With a third of the convicted now guillotined, the sixth person was taken.

"I was lucky," Danton continued. "I found the girl who is my current wife, but... Louise, charming and kind as she is... She is not Antoinette. I trust her to raise my boys as her own. I have to now."

The crowd cheered and the seventh was taken away.

"That woman of yours, she's going to die very young."

Arno turned, not sure he'd heard that correctly. "Quoi?"

"All that passion and determination. She's only looking at one goal and can't be bothered to look at anything else."

The eighth.
"She will not die. I love her. I will protect her. I would die for her," Arno said firmly. "I will fix my mistakes, and I will help her be happy."

"Oh, you'll try," Danton nodded sadly. "But I've been in love. Deeply and passionately. You love her, I can see that every time you look at her. But she doesn't love you. Not like that. You can't be her everything the way she is everything to you. Your love isn't balanced. It isn't matched. You won't find happiness like that."

The ninth.

"But you don't believe me," Danton said softly. "That's fine. But you need to find couples that truly love each other. Not arranged marriages, or attempting to work up the social ladder, but true love matches. Watch and observe how they interact with each other. See how they support and care for one another. Then compare it to yourself and that young woman."

The tenth convict stepped up to the guillotine and the crowd cheered.

Arno didn't say anything. Charlotte and Augustin immediately came to mind. How they looked to each other. How they were close when no one else was around. How Augustin did anything he could to help Charlotte and vise-versa. How M. de la Serre and his wife would look to each other. How one smile would speak to the other. How Jérôme and Camille didn't even need to speak to work together. How they wrangled their children with such love.

How those couples interacted were vastly different. Charlotte and Augustin had a warmth about them, acceptance and welcoming to any of the staff and well wishes to the patrons of the Café. The de la Serre's were colder, keeping a quiet distance between themselves and the staff, but it didn't take much to see the warmth whenever they looked to each other. The Tissots were louder with all the children, but there was still so much care between them, and even a glance would make the other smile.

And he and Élise didn't have that. They fought. A lot. Arno couldn't remember the last time he had been able to make Élise smile with just a look, or vise-versa. It was all about Germain, plotting, and all the arguments. They didn't fight like this before the Éstates-Général. They had lost their connection.

"I see you already understand."

"We love each other, Monsieur. It isn't like how it started. But we love each other. We'll find a way."

The fourteenth person was taken up to the guillotine. That left only Danton.

"To be so young again," Danton smiled. "I've said my piece. You'll see."

Arno forced himself to roll his eyes and be nonchalant. "Any last bits of advice?"

Danton smiled winningly. "I think I do. But it's not for you. It's for France. Be well. Don't mourn her for too long."

Danton was brought up to the guillotine and he stood before the crowds tall and looking just as strong as if he were standing at a pulpit.

"I leave it all in a frightful welter," he said to the crowds, "not a man of them has any idea of government. Robespierre will follow me; he is dragged down by me. Ah, better the poor fisherman than meddle with the government of men!"
Then he was slid into the guillotine and his head was chopped off.

When Arno got home, he was exhausted. Élise had stayed home and slept most of the day after two nights of an interrogation that brought up nothing. She was up when Arno hobbled into their place, sitting at the table with scraps of paper scattered about and newssheets, ink staining her fingers as she jotted down something or other. Arno stood in the door, just looking at her. She had focus in her eyes, and dimly, he remembered a softer version of that look when they were children. When she planned on sneaking away, or some little prank.

She was beautiful.

Arno walked up to her, then just leaned forward to hug her.

"Not now, Arno. I'm concentrating."

"*Je t'aime*, Élise. I love you more than life itself."

She reached up and patted his face. "That's sweet, but now's not the time."

"Élise... I..."

She turned to him. "Get some sleep, Arno. You need it." She gave a small smile. "Sleep well."

Danton was wrong, Arno decided as he collapsed into bed, not even bothering to change. Élise did love him the same way he loved her. She looked out for him just now, after all.

Five days later, a new "conspiracy" was uncovered, the Conspiracy of Luxembourg. Arno read the newssheets and saw that it conveniently rounded up followers of Danton and Hérbert, including the wife of Desmoulins and the wife of Hérbert. As the trial commenced, nineteen were convicted and guillotined. This is what gave Arno an inkling of... something.

Since they still had so many newssheets laying around, Arno pulled them all together and started reading through them again. Specifically, he went through reading about any trials before the Tribunal.

Then he read through with a keener eye for what he was looking for.

Hmmmm...

The following day, Arno didn't talk much with Giraud, thoughts swirling in his head.

"Victor, are you better?" Giraud finally asked.

"Hm?" Arno turned, eyes still roving the streets. "Sorry, Giraud," he apologized. "I'm better than I was last week, yes." Mostly because he'd finally gotten enough sleep, though if he caught his reflection, he still had some dark circles under his eyes.

"I can see that, but you're still not acting well."

"Just have a lot on my mind."

Giraud nodded as they turned down another street. "You haven't been discussing the papers lately."

Arno offered a wan smile. "I'm taking your advice and keeping my politics to myself."
Giraud smiled. "Now, I believe I see a beggar down the street."

"I saw him as well," Arno replied lightly. And his eagle had drawn his eyes to another man. Just as Arno turned to observe him again, "Thief!"

After collecting the newsheets and taking his notes, Arno deliberately pulled Élise out to dinner.

"We don't have time for this," she muttered quietly as they sat down. "We still have nothing—"

"I brought you here to unwind and relax," he said. "You've been buried in trying to get close to the —" he dropped his voice "-Cabinet Noir—" and went back to normal, "and it hasn't been working. We need a fresh perspective and what better place than by going out to eat and listening to various patrons."

Élise offered a flat look. "I fail to see how listening to an uninformed public will help us get closer to him."

Arno leaned back. "We will not be discussing any of that during dinner. If you are to relax, you need to not be worrying about him."

Their drinks were served and Arno leaned forward. "Now, what is your happiest memory?"

Élise looked at him balefully. "Really? What sort of question is that?"

"One to change the topic," Arno replied lightly. "My happiest memory was our first time together. That thunderstorm and all the sparks. I was utterly in love with you already and then you let me touch you. Let me taste you. I was just a house boy. I never thought I'd be gifted such a privilege."

For a moment, she blushed. Then she let out a long sigh. "Fine," she muttered. "We'll do this your way. My happiest memory was with my mother. She took me out to the country house and that's where I met Weatherall. She informed me that I would be learning how to fence and I was so excited. It was the first truly formal step in my education and proof that I wasn't like the other girls. That I was special. Better than them."

Arno nodded. "Outside of your parents, who was the most influential person in your life?"

Élise sat back to think, and Arno smiled. Finally, she was thinking of something other than Germain. "Probably Weatherall. His fencing and also his lessons on Templars."

He kept asking questions. Partially it was to get to know her better. He hadn't realized how much of her life was hidden when he was growing up with her. Partially it was to keep her distracted. But mostly... Arno mostly just wanted to spend time with her. Since they had come to Paris they hadn't had a simple night out like this.

When dinner finally came, they were deep in conversation, not about Germain, but smaller, little things. Fashion trends versus practicality, how the strange phenomena of electricity seemed to be the new toy of scientists, all sorts of different topics. For a brief moment of time, Élise smiled. She laughed. Her eyes danced.

And Arno was happy. They were having some tasty beignets filled with blackberries and Élise was the most relaxed he'd ever seen her. She leaned back and smiled at him in a way he hadn't seen in years. So he smiled back.

"Merci, Arno," she said softly. "I needed that. I didn't realize how much."
Arno smiled back. "Shall we go home?"

"Yes."

Once they were back, Arno brought Élise to his collection of papers. "I think we've been looking at this wrong," he explained. "We've been looking for the money and the power, but I think we need someone else who has been doing this sort of work for us."

From there, he explained what he'd been researching in his off time. The Revolution was rife with conspiracies, rumors, planted rumors from paper's like Marat's, it was incredibly hard to determine what was true. The people they needed to focus on were on the Committee for Public Safety.

"Robespierre? The Incorruptible?"

Arno looked Élise straight in the eye. "The Incorruptible just sent his close friend and ally Danton to the guillotine. And Desmoulins, Hébert, Condorcet, d'Églatine, and many, many, others. He sees conspiracies everywhere."

"Because he has all the information to see the connections."

"He's made a new police force under his direct administration with the Committee for Public Safety. Ignoring how that makes my job harder..."

"It shows he's getting paranoid." Élise sat down looking through the papers again with a fresh eye.

"And in the more recent papers..."

"He's starting to fence with other members of the Committee." Élise turned to him with a cruel, vicious smile. "We can work with this," she declared.

Through the rest of Floréal and into Prairial, Élise spent her days at the Convention, observing Robespierre's movements while Arno continued to pound the streets. Robespierre was starting to push the Cult of the Supreme Being, praising the tenants of virtue and good citizenry, the immortality of the soul, and it was clear that he wanted it to be the state religion.

"You know," Arno said to Giraud, "there have been more French philosophers besides Rousseau. I think the Incorruptible could stand to study more than one for a more diverse understanding of virtue and its components."

Giraud only chuckled. "Sometimes, Victor, I wonder why you're one of us with all that education that was pounded into your head."

Arno only offered a dry shrug.

Unfortunately, since Robespierre saw corruption and conspiracy everywhere, it was clear that he wouldn't be easy to get to.

"Can't you just sneak in and bring him here?"

"Élise, are you asking me to commit suicide?"

"But he's at the Convention, the Jacobin club, his home, there are many places where he can disappear from."

"You haven't been paying attention to his guards. I don't want to kill anyone if I don't have to. I
think there's been enough death, don't you?"

Unsurprisingly, Pache, the mayor of Paris who had been so at odds with the Convention was arrested. Also unsurprisingly, he was replaced by Jean-Baptiste Fleuriot-Lescot, a close friend of Robespierre.

"That's why I can't just whisk him away, Élise. He only keeps those he knows around him. He'll sound an alarm the instant he sees anyone he doesn't know."

"Thinking like an Assassin isn't exactly getting us anywhere."

Then Robespierre became the president of the Convention.

"And he's running the Committee of Public Safety? He might as well be a dictator."

"I don't care, Arno, how do we get to him?"

Then it was proclaimed that there would be a Festival of the Supreme Being.

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20 Prairial, Y2 (June 8, 1794)

Arno was awake before Élise and he pulled out his hidden blade. He stared at it for a long time.

One thing that had been made abundantly clear was that no one was to be armed for this Festival. Arno would not have his sword with him, or a gun, or knives. The best way to stay armed would be the hidden blade.

Which was why Arno was staring at it.

No matter what, it was the weapon of an Assassin. And Arno wasn't an Assassin. This blade had been a gift from Charlotte and Augustin, and their warmth and caring filled him. He stared at the blade, pulled it apart to clean it, soaking pieces in oil and then reassembling it. But when he went to strap on the blade, he hesitated.

No.

He couldn't wear a hidden blade.

So with great care, he packed it up again and hid it away.

He went to the kitchen and pulled out some knives, thinking hard. He could aim muskets and pistols and phantom blades. He had no practice with throwing knives of all things. Best not to risk it. Arno sighed. Men were to have an oak branch for this festival. He'd have to use that. Into his pockets he was able to hide small bombs, hopefully unnecessary if things went according to plan.

Then he set about adorning their windows with a garland of flowers he'd bought the previous day and hung out the colors of liberty.

Time for breakfast.

The recall sounded and Élise came sleepily into the kitchen to have something to eat before she also got ready for the festival. Most of the next hour was preparing. Élise was dressed in the colors of liberty, like she was supposed to, and hid a dirk under all her petticoats, as well as the drugs she would need for her part of the day.

Élise scoffed as she switched stomachers. "Really, 'Festival of the Supreme Being'. A paean to the
virtue of nation and the citizen's duty towards it."

"That rather sounds familiar," Arno offered wryly.

Élise gave him a look. "As Templar doctrine, it's a very loose interpretation. Every person has their role in society and they need to preform it to their fullest. Leaders must lead, bakers must bake. It's the nature of society and community."

"And the poorest and forgotten simply wait for scraps," Arno countered, memories of Versailles flitting across his mind.

"Don't be stupid. A good leader makes sure that doesn't happen."

Together they went to the designated meeting area of their section. Arno was given an oak branch from their section leader and he hefted it, testing the weight. It was shorter than he'd like, but it would make for a good club if needed. Already, teenage boys were being gathered to be given swords, the only weapon adornment to be allowed for the Festival, and bouquets of roses were being given to mothers and little girls bore baskets of flowers. Ten men, ten mothers, ten older teenage girls, ten teenage boys, and ten little boys were selected from their section to be graced with standing at the constructed mountain on the Champs de la Reunion, formerly the Champs de Mars. The mothers were told to go home and dress in white and were then given tricolor sashes to wear, as were the teenage girls, though they needed flowers braided into their hair. The teenage boys were given swords.

Once they were set, they were guided away to go stand at the constructed mountain. Meanwhile, many teenage boys left behind were encouraged to bear swords, pikes, or guns, and they formed a square battalion, twelve wide, with the middle carrying banners and flags of the armed forces. Soon, they'd start being organized into columns of men and women to march to the National Garden.

This was the perfect time.

"We know the plan," Arno said, double checking everything he had stuffed into his pockets.

"Yes. Think like a Templar. Discredit him."

Élise, once at the Champs de la Reunion, would drug Robespierre. Arno, meanwhile, would search Robespierre's home, with the esteemed leader of the Convention presiding over the frolicking Festival of finery.

"I'll meet you later."

"Stay out of trouble."

"Don't get caught."

Arno pretended he had forgotten something at their home and disappeared into the crowds. With all the citizens of a neighborhood meeting with their section, it made it easy for Arno to find a secluded alley and to climb up to the roofs. He wasn't sure where other crowds would be and would be far faster to travel above the streets than on them.

Sure enough, the cannon firing over Pont Neuf could be heard throughout the city, which signaled it was time for everyone to proceed in their orderly columns to the National Gardens. It would take time to organize all the citizens of Paris there and then proceed to the Convention and then to the Champs de la Reunion.
That left the streets very empty.

Arno took a risk and headed back down to the streets, pretending once more that he had forgotten something and was in a rush to take care of it in order to get back to the Festival. He was able to rush by, the occasional stragglers also rushing to get to the Festival.

Good, just another face in the crowd.

He arrived at Robespierre's home, and concentrated for a moment on his eagle. Second floor. He could see the fireworks inside a window.

Quick glance around, streets empty, Arno knelt down and picked the lock. He eased his way silently upstairs, then picked another lock to get into the apartment proper. He stepped lightly, not wanting to disturb anything, and found the office.

Robespierre's desk was a mess, papers scattered about, bits of notes, old newspapers, a letter begging for leniency for someone arrested via the Law of Suspects, another letter begging for leniency, various lists, scraps of speeches...

Not quite what I'm looking for. I need something a bit stronger...

Ah, finally. A list of some fifty members of the Convention, several of whom had been less than pleased with Robespierre after the execution of Danton.

Parfait. A list of deputies of the Convention in Robespierre's own hand. This should do nicely. Arno slid the list into his waistcoat. Time to get back to the festivities.

It took the better part of an hour to get to the Champs de la Reunion, and he had to admit, he was getting hungry. He hadn't eaten since very, very early that morning, and all the running around he was doing wasn't overly helping.

To say that the Champs de la Reunion was packed would be something of an understatement. But the orderliness of it was similarly astonishing. He took a deep breath and reached to that back corner of his mind for the eagle. Immediately his head started pounding. At least three other Assassins were nearby, watching specific people in the crowds, but he couldn't look to that at the moment. He took a deep breath, immediately trying to rub his temples in a vain attempt to push away the headache even though it had taken hold.

He could use some milk right about now.

But he did see a firework shoot up around where Élise was, so Arno started to slowly make his way through the crowds. Around him, the crowds seemed basically happy with the Festival.

"No more political fighting, at least for today. This is a relief."

"Amazing! That mountain, it's man-made! It's like the Montagnes!"

"Thought we started this revolution to denounce religion. Now we have a state religion?"

"Vive Robespierre!"

"Oh, this is lovely. All the colors of France everywhere!"

"Vive la liberté!"

"What's Robespierre thinking? Did you see how he marched ahead of the Convention, then
mounting himself at the top of that fake mountain?"

"It's not enough for him to be in charge, he has to be God."

"If Danton were alive, he'd choke on all this."

"Vive la Révolution!"

Arno kept threading through the crowds as cheers went up. He squinted, looking up to the tree atop the mountain where Robespierre stood and was making some sort of speech that Arno couldn't hear at this distance. It was clear that he looked quite intoxicated. From what he heard through the crowds, it was also clear that while many were still enamored with the Incorruptible, quite a few didn't hold so fast to such faith. Between the purges and this religion when France was fed up with religion... Discrediting him wouldn't take long. Then Robespierre would be isolated and he and Élise could swoop in.

He finally made it to Élise and leaned over to whisper in her ear. "How is the Festival treating you?"

"All pomp and circumstance and no substance," she replied dourly. "Of course, the powdered ergot seems to have made things a bit more interesting. He looks drunk. Now we need to make him look dangerous."

"I have something for that. I'd recommend waiting a few days. Let his drunkenness settle in." Arno offered a smile, even as his head throbbed. "Quite a few people can put two and two together with Robespierre looking so very godlike in all this ceremonial chicanery."

Two days later, the Law of 22 Pairial passed, to ease the overcrowding of prisons. Witnesses were no longer required to testify. The guillotines, already so frequent in use, seemed to run around the clock now. Élise was watching the Convention, trying to determine who would be the best person to anonymously deliver Arno's pilfered list to, when two days after that Robespierre announced to the Convention that he would demand the heads of intriguers who plotted against the Convention.

Wasn't this the man against the death penalty?

Arno shook his head, hiding up on the roofs. Élise had several possible people for that list to be delivered to, and Arno was taking a few hours each night to observe each dwelling and see what would be easiest compared to who would be the most influential.

Of course, since this was Paris, who was influential seemed to be changing day by day.

On the thirteenth of Messidor, Robespierre announced at the Jacobin Club that there was a conspiracy against him from the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Safety. Just under a week later, on the twenty-first, as Robespierre announced to the Jacobins that he had a list of the conspirators, that he refused to name. Arno was able to deliver said list, anonymously, to a large group of delegates who had been dining together after a long day of debates.

Sentiment against Robespierre was turning quickly, and a week later Robespierre sought out the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Safety to try and work out differences.

But the damage had already been done.

8 Thermidor, Y2 (July 26, 1794)
Maximilien Robespierre.

Born in '58 to a family of lawyers and the eldest of four. The mother died in '64 when Robespierre was six, complications of a stillborn days earlier, and the father was so devastated as to travel Europe until his death in '77. Smart in school, he was given a scholarship to Collège Louis-le-Grand, where he met his future political partner Desmoulins. Robespierre idolized Jean-Jacques Rousseau and purportedly kept one of his books in his coat at all times, even claimed to have seen the man shortly before his death in '88. He moved to the University of Paris for four years, and graduated in '81 with a prize of six hundredlivres. Three months later he passed the bar.

He couldn't handle being a judge because of his disapproval of the death penalty (oh, the irony). He instead became an advocate for social justice: women in education, inequality under the law, legitimate vs illegitimate children, lettres de cachet, etc. Élise nodded, that made sense if he idolized Rousseau. He wrote essays on collective punishment – punishing families of criminals – and other think pieces establishing himself as an intellectual. He gained a seat on the Estates General by writing a notice where he outright attacked local authorities in order to curry favor, an early sign of his self-importance, perhaps.

Élise turned over her next page of notes.

From there he joined the National Assembly, and carried over to the National Constituent Assembly. He stood out as pushing for the suffrage and rights of Protestants, Jews, blacks, servants and even actors. He was the one who coined the term, "Liberté, égalité, fraternité." He was a frequent speaker at the Assembly but was still new to governing, by accounts. She found a quote from Mirabeau of all people, printed in a news sheet: "This is a dangerous man, he believes everything he says."

How appropriate for an Assassin to fear someone who had principles. She sneered and scratched the quote out as useless.

He joined the Jacobins the same year, since political clubs were popping up like weeds, and was a secretary for several months. There was where he found his audience: educated artisans and shopkeepers, people who could read and think and were not enveloped in privilege, desperate for an equality where they had power, and eventually he became president of the club.

Robespierre continued to be a leftist: wanting the national army open to everyone instead of just active citizens, prevented the Constituent Assembly from serving the new Legislative Assembly when the constitution was ratified, proposed all Frenchmen should have the right to vote, and when the Legislative Assembly finally became the new government he secured a position as public prosecutor. When Louis tried to flee, Robespierre convinced the Jacobins to not support abdication. That's when the moderate Jacobins broke off to be Feuillants. That left Robespierre and Danton and others the dominating force in the club.

He moved to Rue Saint-Honoré, near Tuileries (oh, the irony), and soon the rest of the family joined him.

He opposed the war with Austria for fear of dictatorship stemming from war (oh, the irony). War was supposed to be about freeing subjects from unjust tyranny, not defending dynasties or expanding borders, he said. Instead, he wanted to arm citizens and the National Guard – because giving peons weapons always worked out so well. The Girondists, in power, outmaneuvered him by smear campaign, claiming he was posturing to be an idol of the people, and he left public office on the pretense of doing more as an active citizen. His first act?

Start a paper and using its first sheet to attack the Girondins who had smeared him.
Robespierre was one of the organizers of the insurrection in August, '92, along with Hanriot, Hébert, and others. The next day, before the blood had even dried, he was elected to the Paris Commune. Not a week later he demanded for a Revolutionary Tribunal of the Legislative Assembly to handle the "enemies of the people." Some people tried to oppose it, a mathematician named Condorcet tried to say that enemies of the people were still Frenchmen and deserved to be judged constitutionally. Robespierre denounced that, saying like he always did that people who held themselves above others were bad and not to be considered part of the goodly masses (oh, the irony).

Then, the September Massacres, agitated by his friend Danton and the "Friend of the People" Marat, in cold, calculated blood.

Élise, still in Austria at the time, appreciated the display of power on a technical level. It was the perfect way to slaughter enemies. Robespierre, Danton, and Marat were elected, putting Robespierre back in public office. The Legislative Assembly transformed to the National Convention, and the Commune still met. When called out for being a triumvirate dictatorship, Robespierre had skillfully, downright artfully, turned the argument around, saying that he represented the will of the people, and if he was accused of such, then surely everyone should be tried. It was the Girondists, then, who were desperate to keep their power.

Everything snowballed from there: After Louis' execution and Élise's failed attempt to kill Germain, Robespierre got his Revolutionary Tribunal and Élise learned he was uncomfortable with it, fearing it would be used as a political tool (oh, the irony). Robespierre accused conspiracy of certain Girondins, said the entire war effort was a game played to overthrow the Republic – all while pushing for a volunteer army that could not be supplied with nonexistent funds, said the Jacobins were to stand in insurrection against corrupt deputies – which they actually did in another insurrection, decried the bourgeois as an internal danger, pushed the Girondists out of power, and finally joined the Committee of Public Safety (oh, the irony). Shortly after that the Committee was recognized – by law, no less – to be the supreme revolutionary government, and Robespierre at its head.

He slaughtered his Girondist enemies, routed out the Templars Élise had sicced him on, and slowly became drunk on the power he possessed. L'Incorruptible was now corrupt. Élise leaned back in her chair, having read every scrap of information she had procured, every speech he had given, and every idea the man had ever had.

Her ultimate conclusion was that he had a total lack of self-awareness: a man against the death penalty now in charge of guillotines that were falling daily; afraid of dictatorship had become a dictator himself, thought people were good and magistrates bad while continually in a position of ultimate power; worried the Tribunal was a political tool but beheading every Girondist he could get his hands on; on a committee for "public safety" that evoked the Terror; a devout proponent of Rousseau's virtue and unable to see that he no longer had any. She could use that.

Now that he had slaughtered his closest allies in Danton and Desmoulins, after poisoning him at that gaudy festival with a slow acting poison, his numerous enemies felt confident in ousting him. Élise sat in the Convention, dressed as a man and red curls hidden under a powdered wig. Robespierre, who had been ill for six weeks, physically and mentally exhausted from all the demands on him, had returned. Today would be the day, Élise knew the man well now: he would announce another conspiracy, and she would engage him in conversation after he left, and would get the information she needed on Germain.

"Citoyens!" he said, "Others draw flattering pictures to you; I come to tell you helpful truths. I do
not come to carry out the ridiculous terrors spread by perfidy; but I want to smother, if it is possible, the flames of dissension by the only force of truth. (I will reveal the abuses who tend towards the ruin of the patrie and which only your integrity can repress.) I will defend before you your outraged authority, and violated freedom. If I also tell you something of persecutions of which I am the object, you will not do me injustice; you have nothing in common with the tyrants whom you fight. The cries of the outraged innocence do not importune your ear, and you are aware that this cause is not foreign to you."

"Well, that didn't take long," Élise muttered. In one swift paragraph he outlined that only he spoke the truth, only he could defend the people's authority and freedom, and that he and therefore the people were fundamentally different from the tyrants trying to smother them. What followed was a long, rambling speech; Élise could see Robespierre's color was still pale, he was not yet back to full health.

Then came the rambling talk of conspiracy:

"The Republic, imperceptibly caused by necessity and by the fight of the friends of freedom against always recurring conspiracies...

"All the conspirators have even adopted, with more alacrity than any other, all the expressions, all the words of rallying patriotism...

"They didn't fight our principles, the corrupted them; they didn't blaspheme against the revolution, they attempted to dishonor it under the pretext of serving it; they declaimed against tyrants, and conspired for tyranny; they praised the Republic, and slandered the republicans...

"We, dreadful towards the National Convention! And what are we without it? And who has defended the National Convention at the risk of their life? Who is dedicated to its preservation, when execrable factions conspire its ruin on the soil of France? Who is dedicated to its glory, when the evil henchmen of tyranny preach atheism and immorality in its name; when so many others maintain a criminal silence on the felonies of their accomplices, and seem to wait for the signal of carnage to bathe in the blood of representatives of the people; when virtue itself was silent, frightened by the horrible ascendancy which audacious crime has taken? And against whom were the first strikes of conspirators destined?"

"Come on, come on," Élise muttered, impatient. If he was going to point to Germain, it was going to be today. Twisting himself to be the victim of conspirators was a matter of course in this day and age, he didn't need to glorify himself so outrageously.

"What do they want, the originators of these machinations? Is it the safety of the patrie, the dignity and unity of the National Convention? Who are they? What facts justify the horrible idea which one wanted to give to us? Which men have been accused by the Committees, if not the Chaumettes, the Héberts, the Dantons, the Chabots, the Delacroixes? Is it the memory of conspirators which one wants to defend? Is it the death of conspirators which one wants to avenge? ...

Twisting again, using the fact that the dead were conspirators and if one were defending their names they must be conspirators themselves.

"I believe in the fatal circumstances in the Revolution, which have nothing in common with the criminal plans; I believe in the detestable influence of conspiracy, and above all in the sinister power of calumny..."

"The conspirators wouldn't be conspirators if they wouldn't have the artifice to hide cleverly
enough in order to usurp for some time the confidence of good men; but there are certain signs at which one can detect the dupes of accomplices, and the error of crime..."

Élise shifted her weight, tired of hearing the word conspiracy and not having something, a name, a method, a place to start. If she had to approach him it would be very difficult, he had at least half a dozen bodyguards, and even on uncertain political footing as he was now he was well protected. Moreover, he would be more paranoid, Élise needed an in to get to him, to learn what conspiracies he had uncovered and which of them had the air of the Templar.

"To the rest, if it consists of privileged conspirators, if it consists of the inviolable enemies of the Republic, I agree to impose on myself on their account an eternal silence...

"You serve them, you who corrupt the public morals and protect all the crimes; the guarantee of conspirators lies in forgetting the principles and in corruption; the one of defenders of liberty lies in the public conscience. You serve them, you who, always within or beyond truth, preach by turns the perfidious moderation of the aristocracy, and sometimes the fury of false democrats. You serve them, stubborn preachers of atheism and of vice. You want to destroy the representation, you who degrade it by your conduct or who trouble it by your intrigues. Which is the guiltiest, the one who attacks security by violence, or the one who attacks its justice by seduction and by perfidy? ..."

"But who were they, these calumniators? What I can respond at first, is that, in a royalist manifesto found among the papers of a known conspirator who has already undergone the penalty due to his felonies, and which seemed to be the text of all the calumnies revived in this moment, one reads in clear words this conclusion, addressed to all kinds of public enemies: If this astute demagogue existed no more, if he had paid with his head for his ambitious maneuvers, the nation would be free; everyone could publish his thoughts; Paris would have never seen within it this multitude of murders vulgarly known under the false name of judgements of the Revolutionary Tribunal. I can add that this passage is the analysis of proclamations made by the princes forming a coalition and the foreign newspapers in the pay of kings, who like this seemed to give every day the watchword to all the conspirators of the interior. I only cite this passage of one of the most accredited of these writers.

"Thus, I can respond that the originators of this plan of calumnies are firstly the duke of York, Monsieur Pitt, and all the tyrants that are armed against us."

Élise leaned forward, focus suddenly intense. The duke of York had been a Templar position for generations and good friends with the Carrols and the Cormacs. The Templars were always allied with princes in other countries; this was it. This was what she had come here fore, this was what she needed.

"Who is next?" Robespierre asked rhetorically, and everyone waited on baited breath. Élise could see how pale he had become in his diatribe, saw a trickle of sweat in the summer heat of the convention hall. He paused, perhaps even froze. Then,

"Ah! I do not dare to name them in this moment and in this place!"

*God damn it!*

"I cannot resolve to entirely tear apart the veil that covers this profound mystery of iniquities; but I can affirm this positively, that, among the originators of this weaving, are the agents of this system of corruption and of extravagance, the most powerful of all means invented by foreign countries in order to ruin the Republic, are the impure apostles of atheism and of the immorality whose basis it is."
Élise stopped listening, her frustration bordering on rage was so great, the feeling so raw and overpowering she nearly stood and shouted at the damn idiot for talking of conspiracy without actually outlining it! He might have well waved a piece of paper for show for all his talk. This was base fear-mongering, and Robespierre himself either too ill or too cowardly to make good on it. She ground her teeth and nearly snapped her pen in half she was shaking so badly.

Then someone stood, shouting, "Give us a name!"

"Yes, names!"

"Who are the conspirators?"

"Names! Give us names! Les noms!"

Robespierre did not, he concluded his speech and left, ushered out by his bodyguards and his entourage of Hanriot, Saint-Juste, and his brother Augustin.

Élise was ready to spit fire as she powered her way down to engage him, but he was in a carriage just as she was leaving the building, his distinct colored glasses visible as he was driven away. Bon sang! Merde!

And Arno wouldn't take position as driver to kidnap the connard to make this easier. No, heaven forbid. He was only helpful when it was convenient for him, he never stuck his neck out for her these days. Cursing, she stomped her feet and paced about before going back into the Convention to try and salvage something of the day.

Inside everyone was in an uproar, Robespierre's fear-mongering had put everyone on edge, they were afraid they would be the next to be purged from their ranks, another culling for the guillotine. There were motions to hold the speech for studying, to prevent it from being printed for public consumption.

Robespierre's fear mongering had worked, and Élise knew she wouldn't get anything useful for the rest of the day. Cursing up a storm, she left, going back to her apartments. The sun was low in the sky, the air still humid, promising a storm, and she slammed the door as she entered, cursing and pacing about her room. She could have seen him today! If only Arno did his damn job! She pulled out a book, tried to read, knew it wouldn't work, and instead went back outside to work off the anger her malaise always exacerbated. She couldn't afford to be angry, she had to be numb, when she was numb she could think clearly, rationally, but all she wanted to do was strangle everybody in sight – kill Robespierre for not giving out names, eviscerate Arno for not kidnapping him, she just needed to stab something and then she would feel better.

It was dusk when she finally returned, not at all calm but in better control, and she just saw Arno entering, bicorn hat in hand. Nom de dieu, that was all she needed.

"Élise!" he said brightly, always so dim. "How did your day go?"

"Terribly," she said, voice flat. "I don't want to talk about it."

He frowned, like he always did, as he unbuttoned his uniform and shrugged off his jacket. "How can I help?" he asked.

Élise nearly drew a gun on him. Instead she turned around. "You could bring Robespierre here," she said, just a hint of her overwhelming fury bleeding through.

"Élise," he said after a sigh, and she knew exactly what he was going to say. "I'm not a miracle..."
"That is an excuse," she countered. "You just don't want to fetch him. I saw him ride off in a carriage today, and you could have easily taken the position of the driver and taken him to me. Instead you walk about the streets, chasing sluts and beggars, doing absolutely nothing of value! You don't want to help me!" she accused. "That's the only possible explanation!"

"Élise!" Arno said, "I do want to help you!"

Oh, god, he was going to try and defend himself.

"Everything I've ever done has been to help you, and I will always put your needs first, you have to know that, but one man can't kidnap someone that well-guarded without a team. You say he left in a carriage? How many others were with him? How many guns? How many swords? Was there a secondary carriage? I can't fight that many on my own and—"

"Don't," Élise said, "Don't try to twist this around and make me some kind of irrational shrew!"

"That's not what—"

"You've always been like this, even when we were children. You ask a hundred questions just to hold me back. You never wanted to have fun, you would always think of a hundred ways something could go wrong. They never went wrong when we were children, there's no reason for it to go wrong now."

"Élise, please. We aren't children anymore; our very lives are at stake—"

"And that shouldn't matter," Élise hissed fed up. "I don't know how many times I have to tell you, but I will sacrifice everything to put Germain down, and even after everything you've done to make things worse you still don't understand that! You keep refusing my requests unless it's convenient for you, you no longer risk anything, leaving me to do all the work!"

"And finding that list of Templar names?" Arno interjected. "That wasn't a risk? Or sneaking into Robespierre's apartments? Or pointing you to the Cabinet Noir? Or getting you to Danton?"

"Yes, and the Black Office was so helpful," Élise growled, stepping forward aggressively. "Lists, locations, one tiny little break in. You're an Assassin! Your kind can sneak into the most fortified locations in the world and kill a man without anyone even knowing you were there – but where is that skill when I need you? Really need you? Nowhere! You refuse to use your skills over and over, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that you didn't love Père as much as me!"

Arno straightened, his face flattening out. "That's a low blow," he said quietly.

"Then it must be true," Élise countered.

Arno turned and left.

"That's right, run away, Arno!" Élise called after him. "Find a tavern like you always do! That really wins the argument, doesn't it?"

She heard the door to the outside slam, and she slammed the door to her apartment, shaking with rage.

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9 Thermidor, Y2 (July 27, 1794)
Élise had gone through an entire bottle of wine before her rage bled away and the numbness returned. The numbness was still with her when she awoke the next morning, but no headache. Good. She turned over in bed and saw that Arno was not there. If he didn't come home drunk that meant he was with his patrol partner. Probably for the best, the last thing she needed was to see him sulking, and right now she had work to do.

She dressed again and went first to Hôtel de Ville to see if the Commune was doing anything, and then to the Convention hall to see what had been decided about Robespierre. It was another long day of speeches and deliberations, the hot air frustrating Élise all over again. She saw when Robespierre entered the hall, still so pale. He took his seat on the far left, and even with him there nothing happened. It wasn't until after lunch that Robespierre's public face, Saint-Just, came up to make a speech. Less than ten seconds after opening his mouth everyone was shouting.

"You've broken with both Committees! You only speak for yourselves!"

"Robespierre accused people in the Convention of conspiracy! We demand to know the names!"

"Both Committees have been incriminated, the Convention as well!"

"Name those which he accuses, Saint-Juste!"

"Name, names!"

"Give us names! Les noms!"

Men were standing, moving, the government had finally hit a boiling point. Would Robespierre be arrested? That might work, Élise could sneak into his cell like she had with Danton. But the committee members were irate, all shouting, even cursing.

"Every man here would rather die than live under a tyrant!" someone shouted.

"Oui, tyrant!"

"Tyrant! Tyrant!"

Nobody was looking at Saint-Juste, they were all shouting at Robespierre, calling him tyrant and dictator. The ironies had finally run out, he had lost all goodwill of the Committee of Public Safety. His pallor went from pale to white and then to red. He was furious. "I demand to speak!" he shouted, standing and moving to the podium. "I demand to speak!"

"You do not have the floor, Robespierre!"

"I demand to speak!"

"Tyrant!"

"It is those with virtue in their hears that I would appeal!" Robespierre shouted. "Not the corrupt! Not the ambitious! Not the outlaws of society!"

"Then just who are those you would appeal?" someone demanded. "You've accused all here of conspiracy, so there is no one to appeal to!"

Robespierre went from red to purple, his mouth open to shout something when a coughing fit bubbled up; he reached for a handkerchief to cover his mouth, and for breathless seconds he could not reply.
That was all they needed.

"The blood of Danton chokes him!" someone shouted.

Robespierre looked up, finally out of his coughing fit. "Is it Danton you regret?" he shouted. "Cowards! Why didn't you defend him?"

"As if you gave us any option!"

"And suffer your guillotine as well?"

"We no longer fear you, tyrant!"

"This is for the good men you murdered!"

"I propose a decree of accusation against Robespierre!"

"And Couthon!"

"And Saint-Juste!"

"And the brother!"

"And Le Bas!"

"Yes, all of them! A decree of accusation against all of them!"

"Let us put it to a vote!"

Elise was standing, as was everyone else, watching as it all played out. Men were grabbing at Robespierre, pulling at his coat; same for his brother and the rest of his entourage. Robespierre was still demanding to address the Committee, but his cries fell on deaf ears. Hands were shooting up in the air, Robespierre was shouting, a man was being carried out on the back of a gen d'arme, everything was swelling and moving, the very air was charged with electricity, but Robespierre could no longer twist the blame to everyone around him. Accusation meant execution, and Elise didn't have a lot of time. She had to get a message to Arno.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaa, so much exposition this chapter. It's almost painful...

First, if anyone noticed, we dropped a hint to a later mission for Arno in this chapter. We also had the Danton execution multiplayer mission to completely retool. Why is it nearly all the multiplayer missions happen when Arno is expelled from the Brotherhood? He's part of the Jacobin Raid - THE NIGHT OF ROBESPIERRE'S FALL - and he still has time to then go off to the Temple...? Wut...? Anyway, instead we use it to yet again give Arno a lesson: compare his relationship with Elise with healthy relationships. She doesn't respect Arno, nor does she try to understand him.

Arno sees this but also remembers the good times. He tries to recapture that magic, and it works for a little while, but not enough to justify the continued relationship, because Elise has an objective: get to Robespierre and let the Incorruptible do all the
work for her.

We once again played to history as close as we could for the Festival of the Supreme Being, with game flourishes at appropriate places, and the fall of Robespierre starts.

For aficionados, after some digging we finally found eight pages worth of a Robespierre speech that had been translated to English. Search for the word "conspiracy" and you have most of what he says while Élise is observing him. We again played to history as much as we could - including the famous "the blood of Danton chokes him!" Robespierre in the game was really twisted to be OOC - he was called the Incorruptible because he found conspiracies everywhere and guillotined conspirators so the government could be kept virtuous (oh irony, as Élise would say), so the idea of him being second in command of the greatest conspiracy ever... just... Well. Wait until next chapter.

Speaking of: Death of a Sage. Hm, wonder if anything important happens...
"Do you see that?" Arno asked.

"All that commotion?" Giraud asked. "Across the river?"

"Yes. You don't suppose it's another riot, do you?"

"That's all we need. Been four riots in the last two days, and six up by those Cours des Miracles people."

"... I wonder if the Roi des Thunes has anything to do with it."

"Bah. There is no king of rats over there. It's just a legend to make people afraid to go there."

Giraud spat. "As if anyone would want to go there except for the whores. Even they are probably as diseased – actually, they're probably more diseased than the rats, filthy whores."

"It's almost like they've been so pushed into a corner as to be unable to find any other means of survival and are forced to take the most diseased clients because they simply can't afford to say no."

"Non, non, we are not having this debate again, Victor. You're reading too many philosophes. Whatever got you turned onto that anyway? None of those writings are practical."

Arno smirked. "After my illness," he said, "I made a promise to myself to be better than I was. I read these," he held up his copy of Principles of Philosophy, "when I was younger. I couldn't understand them then." He read them now, however, and seemed to gain insight after insight. Experience made him a more studious reader, and he marveled that the reading had ever been hard before. The language was dry, certainly, but it was not hard. He could understand now what Cosette had said when they first met, the words carried him away. "Truth be told I used to share your opinion," he confessed. "My mind turned off at the thought of fire being liquid."

"Ah, so you used to be practical."

Arno shrugged his shoulders.

"Beggar on the corner."

"I'll take care of it."

Arno moved to the beggar, in his fifties and the very definition of grizzly. He pulled out five assignats, all he had on him, and crouched down. "Here, citoyen," he said. "Find a warm meal on the other side of the river."

"... Merci, monsieur."

Arno walked back.

"You gave him money, didn't you?" Giraud shook his head. "Victor, I swear to god, you'll be as penniless as those beggars and confused how you got there if you keep that up. You think your wife will appreciate you spending that kind of money, what with you living in a
fancy faubourg like this? Antoinette, dearly as I love her, scrimps so many pennies I only get to eat out once a month. Less now that you come over whenever you fight with your woman."

Arno was about to reply when a messenger ran up. "Citoyen Dorian?" he asked.

"Oui?"

A letter was given to him, and Arno cracked open the wax seal.

_Arno. There's a riot at the Convention. I need help._

"Diable," Arno cursed. "Bon sang." He turned to Giraud. "Élise, she's in a riot at the Convention, I have to go!"

He took off down the street.

"Victor! Victor! If it's a riot how'd she send a messenger?"

Giraud's calls fell on deaf ears, Arno shoving his way through crowds along the _quai_ and over Pont Royal, crossing the Seine to the right bank and to the Convention hall. He made for the thickest crowd and climbed up a lamppost, summoning a burst from his eagle, begging for fireworks. There, at the corner, her fiery hair bright against the afternoon light. People were shouting left and right, "Death to the enemies of freedom!" "Down with the tyrant Robespierre!", some were shouting and carrying flags, some were breaking into fist fights, everybody was moving, and Arno didn't hear a single word about bread or starvation – just what was this riot about? He moved through the gaps, shrugging off his uniform so he didn't look like a _gendarme_, that was the last thing a riot like this needed.

Élise stood, just at the edge of the riot, cold in the summer heat, watching the mob with dispassionate eyes.

"I got your message," he said, "What's going on? What happened?"

"The fall of Robespierre," she said, turning to him. "He's been arrested."

"What?"

"Yesterday he made some overly vague threats about a purge against 'enemies of the state' and the Committee turned on him. They've arrested him, his brother, his mouthpiece Saint-Juste, and two others. They're going to take him to Luxembourg prison and the others elsewhere to keep them separate. He's scheduled for execution in the morning."

Arno nodded. "We're out of time, then. We'd best get to him first."

Élise leveled a look, and Arno could tell she was still bitter over their fight last night. Arno... he wasn't going to apologize for not being able to grant miracles. Even four months ago he had caved to her requests and – somehow – figured out how to get her in to see Danton, but as time wore on he knew that there were limits to what he was able to do, and Élise needed to understand them. No amount of explaining how far he could jump or how many people he could fight seemed to give her clarity on the subject, however, and for now he let it drop. He had slept at Giraud's place, well, it wouldn't be the first time.

They broke from the crowds, crossing back over to the left bank and moving through the Sorbonne to get to Palais Luxembourg. Élise, at least, had been there several times when she was finishing her schooling at debuts and banquets. Arno knew the _palais_ from the infiltration of the party of
Marce—Pontmercy... He shook his head.

He hadn't meant to hurt him so badly.

No, back to work: he knew the lay out and where the prisons were. He'd sent Pontmercy to free people that night, but he knew what wing to look at, and besides, he better understood how prisons were ran now that—

"We might have a problem," Arno said as they powered their way through a wider boulevard. "The police are filled with Jacobins, no one is going to be comfortable holding their leadership in their own prison, and the Commune has their own soldiers they can call upon if they think the Revolution is threatened."

"That's not a problem," Élise said, "That's an advantage. That means there's a high likelihood of people coming to break him out, and we can just join the crowd and get to him that way."

Arno was about to bring up that starting a riot wasn't the same as working inside a riot, that that needed at least six people to pull off effectively – more if the riot was bigger, but he knew that it would fall on deaf ears. Élise was about big ideas, thinking details would work themselves out, and more often than not Arno had to work out the details. He sighed as they reached the palais. Arno put his jacket back on, having lost his bicorn hat, and took Élise's arm. "Keep your hands behind your back," he said, "act like a prisoner."

"Will you blindfold me again?" she asked, a deceptively light tone her voice.

Arno pulled a few strands of hair from his tail and grabbed some dirt from the street to smear onto his legs. Puffing out air and looking bedraggled as he kept a firm grip on Élise's arm, pulling her along to be ahead of the swell of people and coming from a different street. He made a show of looking at the crowds marching to Luxembourg before entering.

"Law of Suspects," he said, "Said things were better when the Girondists were in charge."

"May Robespierre choke on the blood of Danton!" Élise spat. "The Terror is little more than fearmongering manipulation of the good masses!"

The guard didn't even blink, and Arno turned at the last minute, saying, "I saw the crowd coming in. Do you want an extra hand?"

The gen d'arme didn't say anything, just gave a faint nod as Arno left, eying the mob hard. Arno moved through the palais and to the courtyard, crossing it to where most of the prisons were. He moved through the halls, Élise occasionally saying something appropriately inappropriate. Robespierre was nowhere to be seen, so he tried another floor, but again there was nothing.

"Where is he, Arno?" Élise demanded, voice low and intense.

"I don't know," he answered. "It might be that they respect him too much to put him in a cell. That's an even bigger problem."

Tired of the charade, Élise broke apart from Arno and moved to a window, seeing the riot outside. Men in uniform were coming, the setting sun hidden behind clouds and thick, humid air, giving everything dark, ominous shadows. Quite a few had torches out, a rumble of thunder echoing through the windows. Arno went back to the duty man saw him talking to a guardsman with an embarrassingly weak chin.
"So we're clear?" the guardsman was saying. "Accept no prisoners from the Convention?"

"Agreed."

"Good, you're the last one. I'm off to Tuileries to get Robespierre."

"Bon chance, mon ami."

"Diable," Arno cursed. "Did you hear that?"

"That means he never left the Convention," Élise muttered. "We have to get back there."

Back to Tuileries they had to go, a half hour walk through the humid air. Élise was outright running, Arno hard pressed to keep up since she was always faster than him.

"That was François Hanriot," Élise said as they ran. "One of Robespierre's cronies. He wasn't arrested because he wasn't a deputy; I'm guessing that he's exploiting the loophole to get Robespierre and the others and take them somewhere safe."

"But where would they be safe?" Arno demanded. "You said Robespierre has been decreed an outlaw, he won't even get a trial!"

"Where else would he be safe?" Élise demanded. "The Jacobin Club, of course!"

"That's back on the left bank!" Arno grunted.

"Tais-toi, Arno! I'm not going to lose this chance!"

... Arno couldn't begrudge her that. They finally arrived at the Tuileries. Élise told Arno to wait outside while she swept her hair under a powdered wig, saying she'd see what she could learn. Arno didn't see any signs of the weak-chinned Hanriot, but he walked up to one of the guardsmen.

"I was just pulled to come here," he said, "What's happened?"

"I'm losing count of the number of coup d'états we're having in this Revolution," the guard said. "Robespierre's been arrested by those cochons in the Convention, but the prisons are smart enough not to accept him as a prisoner. Hanriot is mustering the guardsmen."

Arno nodded. "I was at Luxembourg," he said. "We didn't want anything to do with Robespierre's arrest. Does that mean he's still here, then?"

"No, Hanriot just came with two carriages and two dozen guardsmen. He's going to secret them off somewhere, we're to keep—wait, you're a gen d'arme, not a guardsman!"

"Doesn't mean I'm not a Jacobin," Arno said quickly. "I've been on patrol all day, had to hand over more Girondists to Luxembourg, and then they pull me here. I go where they say. Where's Robespierre then? Without him the Revolution is doomed!"

"Damned if anyone knows," the guardsman said. "Jacobin Club, maybe; or Hôtel de Ville, he's got some allies there, and honestly that's where the government should be, not in the king's palace, that sends a bad message."

"Then where should I go?" Arno asked.

His answer was a shrug. "Damned if I know."

Arno nodded, disappearing, and waited for Élise to arrive. Her news confirmed his: Hanriot had
come with guardsmen from the Commune and taken Robespierre and the other prisoners. Nobody knew where. "What should we do?" Arno asked. "The club or l'Hôtel?"

"We split our forces," Élise said, pulling at her powdered wig. "They've seen me at the Jacobin Club, they think I'm one of them and will answer my questions. You go to Hôtel de Ville and see if they're there. If you find Robespierre, get him to talk no matter what it takes. The Convention said they were going to raise an army, and the guardsmen will fall like wheat if they do."

"I understand."

They separated, Arno powering across Place du Carrousel and to a back alley before exiting to a main street, down to the quai where he followed the river upstream, pushing people aside and then deciding instead to take the road parallel to it. It was after sunset now, perhaps nine or ten o'clock, or wherever it was with the new decimal clocks, and with the overcast the night was even darker. The air was thick with humidity, and as Arno started to approach the Grand Châtlet rain started to fall. The crowds were starting to thicken, a sure sign he was on the right track, and he called on his eagle again, asking for a small pulse of insight. Instead he heard three other eagle screeches, the noise seared through his brain as he became oversaturated with information, grunting and realizing there was another complication to this mess. He had to be even more careful now. Diable.

Knowing they would spot him in an instant, he once more shrugged off his uniform coat, pulled his hair out wholesale, tried to look as different as possible. His chemise and surcoat were soaked with sweat, and no sooner had he had that thought that the heavens opened up. Arno silently expressed gratitude, that would reduce noise and visibility.

The Place d'Hôtel de Ville was filled with another crowd, Hanriot's National Guardsmen forming a thin blue line in front of l'Hôtel, pikes mostly, and a few muskets. The rain came down in sheets, Arno moving through the crowds, hair sticking to every part of his face.

"Connards! Murderer! Tyrant!"

"Never again tyranny!"

"The Commune stands for Robespierre!"

"Robespierre! Robespierre!"

"Remember Danton!"

"No, think of Robespierre!"

"Convention soldiers are coming!"

"What!"

"Be it known that the Paris commune," someone said with a voice that carried, "by dint of its actions protecting the criminal Robespierre, is now in open rebellion against the nation. Soldiers under the command of the National Convention have been dispatched to apprehend the traitor Robespierre and his followers. Citoyens are advised to stay in their homes while justice is carried out. Be it further known that Citoyen Robespierre, Citoyen Hanriot, and all their allies are declared outlaw! Any citoyen found to be aiding these criminals will share their fate upon the guillotine. Revolutionary justice shall prevail!"

"... I didn't sign up for this..."
"I don't want to meet the widow maker."

"Robespierre's going to get us all killed..."

"We'll never hold off this place if the Convention attacks..."

Arno reached the edge of l'Hôtel, finding a guardsman separate from the line. With the shadows and the rain he was able to grab the man and enter him into a chokehold, deprive him of his uniform coat and bandoliers. It wouldn't be a perfect pass, but even in the building the candlelight would only go so far. Nodding to himself, he moved to the right side of the building, moving under the massive arch.

There was a scream, so loud Arno jumped and pressed himself along the wall, surprised to hear it through the downpour.

"What the hell was that!" someone demanded. Arno could just hear it.

"Robespierre's brother. He just jumped out the window!"

"Diable!"

Arno moved into the yard like he belonged there, looking around and seeing the bod—"He's still alive!" he called out, running to Augustin Robespierre. Both of his legs were twisted at unnatural angles, both of them were broken. Arno crouched down. "Someone help me!" he said again, calling back, "He's still alive!"

"How?! Mon dieu, he is! Get him inside, get him inside!"

Arno lifted Robespierre's brother as he cried – "Please, let me die! I'd rather die here than the guillotine! I can't—"

"Tais-toi," Arno hissed. "Men here are going to die defending you!"

"Well said," said a guardsmen, flanked by two others. "Let's get him inside."

They hauled the broken man in, Augustin Robespierre nearly insensate, and flattening him out on a table. Arno looked at a clock. Midnight. He nodded. "Where is Robespierre?" he asked. "He should know about his brother."

"Upstairs, right side," the guardsman said.

Arno nodded. "Bon chance," he said.

Upstairs were more men in uniform, but not many more. The word of the Convention coming had spread like wildfire, those that were left were shaking. Arno, soaked, passed through their ranks without even a second glance, and he moved into the room that held Robespierre. He was just dismissing a man in a wheelchair, and Arno gave the man leave to go before silently closing the door and locking it. Robespierre was at a desk, writing something, oblivious to the world. Arno moved to the other corner of the room, closing that door as well; it didn't have a lock but he propped a chair up against it, his target still unaware.

"... Alone at last," Arno said softly.

Robespierre jolted to his feet, grabbing at a gun before seeing the uniform. "I have no orders," he said, sighing and sagging back to his seat. "I have no orders..."
"Well," Arno said, voice almost light. "I have an order." He moved to the desk and sat across from Robespierre. "Tell me about the conspiracy."

"You wouldn't believe me," Robespierre said, leaning back in his chair. "These days I feel like all I do is rout out corruption and conspiracy. The Virtues that hold this country together are dying as we speak, lost to those who would use our own language of Revolution against us."

"Without any idea whatever that you've become corrupt yourself?" Arno asked. "That in your hope to purge all corruption from government you've started purging anyone who had an idea different than yours?"

Robespierre looked up, more alert now, studied Arno. He withstood the stare, stayed perfectly still, held his gaze and did not change his expression. Robespierre stiffened, bolting to his feet again. "You're one of them," he said, "aren't you? Were you the one who killed Paton after he discovered you?"

He knew about Paton? Actually, no, wait, this confirmed that he knew about the Templars. Perfect, oh, perfect.

"Arno! It's me, let me in!"

Robespierre used the distraction to grab for his pistol, and Arno leveled his own, standing in less than a second and leveling it at Robespierre. "I wouldn't do that," he said quickly. "I'm not interested in killing you, citoyen, and besides, you'll meet that fate whether I intervene or not." He started moving back to the far door, kicked the chair away. "We just want—"

"Where is Germain?" Élise demanded, also lifting a pistol. "We don't have much time. Where is he?"

Robespierre didn't know who to point the gun at, and Arno and Élise moved away from each other, making the decision harder.

"Talk!" Élise shouted.

Robespierre was pale, started to shake with two guns pointed at him. Arno heard a gunshot elsewhere in l'Hôtel, heard shouting and the swell of motion. "We're out of time," he said, eyes locked on Robespierre, silently begging him to talk. "Explain the conspiracy one last time, before you no longer can."

"I... He... Why should I..."

But Élise was tired of waiting. "If you won't talk," Élise said, firing her pistol. "Then write."

Blood exploded from Robespierre's jaw in a horrific splatter, the man twisting with the hit and falling to his knees. Élise stepped forward, headless of the blood and shoved a piece of paper at him. "Where's Germain?" she demanded again, putting a pen in his hand.

He shakily wrote on the paper before collapsing to the rich carpet, blood ruining everything. He was moaning, nearly shrieking, and Arno unlocked the first door, giving the rest access again. He opened the door and saw—Cosette? Marcel? He slammed the door, relocked it. Merde, did they see him? He didn't think so... They would have started slamming the door otherwise...

"We have to go," Arno said, grabbing Élise as she was studying the paper. "We have to get out of here."
He all but ran down the hall, Élise pulling even then shooting ahead, seeing the Convention soldier flooding into l'Hôtel. Arno quickly had to remove his guardsmen uniform before someone decided to fire at him, pulling his hair back and tying it as he ran, disappearing into someone else. Élise took the left stairs, on the north side of the building, and soon they were on the street.

"The Temple," she said after slowing down. "He's at the Temple! Oh, I should have known, he worshipped Jacques de Molay, of course he would hide there. Let's go!"

Arno grabbed her arm, stopped her. "Élise, no," he said. "It's three in the morning, neither of us have slept, nor are we equipped for a full on assault."

"Arno—"

"No, Élise," he said, refusing to let go. "He doesn't know that we know. He's not going to disappear, and we want to kill him, not die trying. We're going home, going to bed, and arming ourselves. He'll be so focused on Robespierre – everyone will be – that the last thing he'll expect is an assault."

Élise glared at him, ready to commit murder, was going to commit murder, but Arno put on his best face, still soaked in rain, thunder rolling overhead. He touched her shoulder with his free hand, stepping in close. "Please," he said softly, "Be at your best when you face him."

"... Alright," she relented.

10 Thermidor, Y2 (July 27, 1794)

It started to be real to her as they reached the apartments. She knew where Germain was. She knew. Victory was in her grasp, he was right there for the taking. She would have her revenge... The numbness was gone, and the rage was nowhere to be seen, the malaise had receded, and she felt... she felt...

She attacked Arno almost as soon as the door was closed, spinning him around and planting her lips on his, overbalancing on her toes and sending them tumbling to the floor. It was dawn, the skies clearing and bits of sunlight filtering in; she banged her elbows landing atop of Arno, and she pulled back to smile at him. "We're there," she said. "We're really there."

Arno smiled at her, reaching up to cup her cheek. "It's good to see you smile," he said softly.

She kissed him again, thoroughly, content to burn through this happiness as long as it lasted. She pulled at his waistcoat, tongue plunging into his mouth to taste more happiness. Everything was wet from the rain, making clothes clingy. It was like their first encounter together, wet clothes and Arno's long hair sliding along his back in wet strings. Her entire body tingled, and for several hours she enjoyed every single thing he could come up with to please her, lingering in the pleasure, the feeling, knowing it would soon disappear, desperate to hold on to it for as long as she could. This was why she kept Arno around, infuriating frustrations and all, he could make her feel, and even when those feelings were getting farther and fewer between, he could still pull it off. He sat at her feet and worshiped her womanhood with his mouth, knowing every flick and trick that made her moan and gasp. His debauched face traced kisses up her abdomen, and then her bosom, all tongue and teeth, having already memorized every sensitive place she had and teasing it out and out and out, and for once Élise was not impatient, was happy to languish in the sensations.

He stretched her out slowly – always so gentle – first with his hands and then with himself. Only once he knew he could entreat on her all the way did the rhythm begin, and they rocked back and
forth, somehow having found the bed. He kissed everything, eyes, cheeks, the pulse of her neck before capturing her mouth, and the taste of herself that she normally hated on her other lovers she adored with Arno: it was a mark of ownership, that he was so thoroughly hers to do with as she pleased. He had chosen her over everything, even his birthright, and the sense of power over him was staggering. Arno was the perfect size, giving her the friction she always craved, and touching all the right places. Every time he started to slow, to ask how she was doing, she would reply with a buck of her hips, demanding he keep going.

He pushed and pushed and pushed, Élise riding the wave of pleasure as far as it could go, digging her nails into his back until at last she was swept away, and for a brief moment she could see a life without the malaise, where she was happy. Her in her rightful place, Grandmaître of the Order, everyone bowing to her as it was meant to be...

It was...

She woke in the late morning, expecting a smile on her lips, gladness in her heart.

It was gone.

The malaise was back.

Sighing, she sat up, pulling Arno's arm off of her and looking down at him. He was still asleep, dark circles under his eyes, hair spread out everywhere.

Élise reached back to the moment earlier, trying to remember the feeling. She looked down at Arno, slowly realizing that he had not entered into the fantasy.

She remembered last year, the crazy balloon ride, the giddy haze of sex, and Arno saying he loved her. He had said it many, many times since then, soft gentle professions when they had sex, hurt declarations when they were fighting, reassuring support when she was frustrated. He had chosen her over everything, even the Assassins, and she had wondered if the love was returned. That night she had decided she did love him, mistakes and repeated betrayals and all. She convinced herself that the malaise would leave her, she just had to wait it out.

But now, she knew herself better. She had been with Arno for a year, and she had not grown in love for him, nor had the malaise abated. She still remembered that he failed to deliver the fact he had been more successful in garnering leads than she, and desperation was a new facet of the malaise. For the last year he had been an enormous force of frustration, and even now, after they had found Germain through Robespierre, she could not ignore all of that.

He loved her.

But she did not love him.

Maybe in a different life, one where he hadn't hurt her so badly. They were good together, before her father's murder, and she could imagine life together, could imagine them being in love, getting married, having children. But not now, not after everything that happened, and certainly not after her heart had been torn to shreds and her mind lingering with an illness that had lasted years. She could not best the coldness in her, she could sense even now that when Germain had fallen, her illness would not magically disappear. The malaise was a part of her now, never to be shaken off, forcing her to have days where she languished in bed, unable to summon the energy to get up.
"I suppose I'm finally being honest with myself," she murmured.

Arno sighed, reaching out or her warmth, and she left the bed before he found her, unwilling to lie any more. Arno made her feel, but he was not enough, would never be enough, and she wasn't sure what to do with him after Germain was finally dead.

She dressed herself and sat at the desk by the window, looking for a blank piece of paper to write down... she wasn't sure what.

On the desk, however, she saw that Arno had at some point beaten her to it.

_Papa,_ it read.

_Diable,_ he still wrote to his father after all this time? Élise leaned back, jealous that he could do that when her own words died on her hand whenever she had tried. She read the letter.

_Papa,_

_I do not know if there can ever be peace between Templar and Assassin. M. de la Serre sacrificed his life for it, and I wonder what the man named Shay Cormac reasoned when he killed you._

Élise told me his name, last year. I've been afraid to write you for a while now, because of what happened that day, and what I became. But for the last several months I've been trying to better myself. I'm even reading Descartes. I remember how badly I hated reading it before, but now I see insight after insight, and my mind turns back to that question: can there be peace? I do not know, but I do know there can be friendship—and love.

I was raised as M. de la Serre's own son after your murder, and I grew to love his daughter as much more than a sister. She is beautiful, and fiery, and fierce, and has a terrible habit of getting us both into—and out of—trouble. I would give my life for her, but ours has been a troubled story. For years I was never sure if my feelings were returned. You see I broke her very badly. It was my fault M. de la Serre was killed, and I spent several years trying to undo that mistake. That is impossible; I know that now, but in its place, I want to fix the damage, the pain I have caused her. That, too, I would give my life for.

The road has been long. I have made many mistakes, but there have been small successes as well. We have just finished interrogating a man named Robespierre – and as I sit here I wonder what your opinion of him would be. In his early days of politics, he made eloquent speeches protesting the execution of criminals, said that fanaticism was born "of the monstrous union between ignorance and despotism," and yet he is now a fanatic himself of the highest caliber. The guillotine has worked 'round the clock since he and his allies instituted the Terror, and as a _gendarme_ I have been forced to arrest so, so many innocent people.

Is this, then, why the Brotherhood exists? So that we can cull those who drift from a path of light into a path of obsession and slaughter? A pity, then, that only Mirabeau ever considered me an Assassin. I have friends there, who even now check on me, care about my welfare and keep me safe by never speaking of their activities, but they are not enough to persuade so many others who see me only as risen as a Templar, too fond of its Grandmaitre, and now too tainted to see as anything other than a threat. I despair, and weakness overtakes me when I fear that Élise, too, will reject me as they have. You, M. de la Serre, Mirabeau, the Assassins... if I lose Élise, too, I fear what would become of me.

Even now, when we fight, my own insecurity makes me fall to my weaknesses. Without Élise I have nothing.
Perhaps I'll never be able to hold all her heart; it is too filled with many other dreams and deeds and adventures, but she'll have all of mine. For now, I am content with that.

Later today we assault Germain. Killing him will free Élise of the malaise, and then I'm certain that she can be put back together. My greatest fear is her desperation. The day I learned I could never undo my carelessness that caused M. de la Serre's murder, I also learned how far Élise would go to get Germain.

But I will be there, and I will not let her fall.

Arno

Élise learned back processing what she had read.

"Oh, Arno," she said, "You were always a fool."

She closed her eyes, looking forward, seeing Germain, and knowing how it would end. That was when she knew, knew he wouldn't be able to go through with it. The coldness in her heart froze over to a new temperature. She could not rely on him, he did not prioritize Germain. She had thought him cured of that askew priority in Versailles when he agreed to come with her. Now she knew nothing had changed. Bon sang. She should have left him in Versailles. Damn him.

He still thought he could save her.

Damned fool. Imbécile. As if he had any say in her choices.

That meant she was in this alone. As she always was.

She nodded, accepting the truth, and woke Arno. "It's time," she said.

She began arming herself, knowing only she had the will to do what was necessary.

Élise was already outside, waiting for him – no doubt impatiently.

Arno looked through his arsenal one last time: gun, sword issued from the station, that was it. He was pitifully armed, didn't even have a cherry bomb to distract any guards who might be at the Temple. He had no idea what he was going up against, he needed everything he could get.

He looked at Charlotte's hidden blade. The weapon of a person he never was.

"Je suis désolé," he said quietly, "Et merci. For everything."

He put on the hidden blade, tightened the straps, tested the release for both it and the phantom blade. He had ten darts, two poison and two berserk. Everything was in perfect working order, to be expected from the lady of Café Théâtre. He pulled his cuffs over the bracer, practiced again, but his muscles remembered the movements, and he breathed a sigh of relief, feeling even slightly better prepared.

It was afternoon, the sun hot but the air dry after the rainstorm. They crossed over to the right bank, into the Marais, and to the Temple. Élise took the lead as she always did, back straight and red curls bounding behind her. Arno followed, seeing a stiffness in her gate. Her mood had been dark when he woke, probably in anticipation of the coming fight. He let her have that space, let her mentally prepare as he did the same.

The last time he had seen Germain, Louis had been executed. Gloating in his victory, articulating
how life without titles was somehow a return to form, that having money was the secret to being invisible. What would he say now, he wondered. Wax more poetic about symbols and their inevitable fall, or praise de Molay for... whatever reason?

No, those thoughts were immaterial. This was about fixing Élise: avenging M. de la Serre, proving to Élise he was a better person, showing that he loved her in every way that counted. They would kill Germain, and Arno would put her back together again, and maybe they could settle down somewhere in the country, herding goats or some such. Their children would be beautiful, and Arno would make sure they were loved as he was loved – more than, if possible.

... But Élise would not want such a simple life.

... Or perhaps she would, after she had been cured of the malaise. He had no idea of her ambitions after killing Germain – she had been raised a Templar, and he had no idea what her goals might be. Actually no, he corrected himself, he knew exactly what she would do, grab every Templar she could get her hands on and make them do her bidding, restructure her Order to her vision. But what would be her vision? Would she honor the truce her father and Mirabeau had enacted? Arno privately hoped so; so many people had died in the last few years, hell in the last few months to the guillotine, and more blood would not fix the changes as France tried to make itself into something new.

And what would Arno be? After everything was over? His promise to himself to be a better person was one thing, but he could be anything, dead to the world as he was. Would he continue to be a policeman with Giraud, or would he make himself into something new?

Well, he would be whatever Élise needed him to be. That was all that mattered.

The resolution settled his mind as they entered the Marais, and they walked around the Temple surreptitiously, seeing the high walls and locked gates. Had the Temple ever been open to the people? The royal family had been prisoners there after their disastrous attempt at escape to Varennes. He stiffened, realizing Germain probably had unhindered access to the family, the queen, the woman who was so scared by the citoyens of France. What did the man do to her, to them, alone in that massive structure?

"... We should split up," Élise said, staring at the Temple.

Arno looked to her, saw her black mood. "I'm not sure that's—"

"Less chance we both get caught that way," she said, voice empty and cold. She was under the malaise again, and Arno knew when to back down.

"I supposed that's true," he conceded.

"We'll rendezvous inside." Then she turned, eyes hard, even intense. "If you get a shot at Germain," she said, voice low, "You take it."

She held his gaze, and Arno knew what she was really saying: Germain comes first, before either of our own lives. Arno opened his mouth to answer, but she turned before he could, walking away. He sighed and climbed to a roof.

"Haven't done this in a while..." he muttered, crouching down and closing his eyes. He was above the world, above the people, above the problems. He called on his eagle, drawing focus, and snapping his eyes open to look for pops of color. He didn't see anything, but he heard fireworks, mixed with a rumble of thunder, up and up, at the top of the Temple.
Arno nodded, knowing where he had to go.

He glided down to street level and moved to the shadow of the fortress, beginning to climb the vertical surface of its barrier walls. He held to a narrow crevice as he heard two sets of boots approaching, the guards talking as they went.

"I don't like it. Between Rouille, Lévesque... and now I'm hearing rumors someone killed la Touche. It takes a while to replace people like that."

"You worry too much. The Grandmaitre has everything under control."

"That Jacobin Robespierre thought the same thing. Heard he's facing the widow maker in a few hours." Arno lifted himself to the walkway, crouching low and ducking to a barrel and it's shadow. He could see inside the grounds now, saw that a veritable maze of smaller buildings, a church, a cemetery, and the Temple itself, rising from the earth and breaking up to the sky. Built by the Templars in the middle of the thirteenth century, Grosse Tour was not the only keep, the Tour de César also rose up from the ground. Inside was everything needed to run the fortifications, apparently even to this day, as Arno saw the grounds infested with people, all with red in their hats, all armed in some way. This had been where Louis had been held until his execution, Marie Antoinette, Louis' sister Mme Élisabeth, the Dauphin Louis XVII, and Princess Marie-Thérèse before she was exiled.

He followed the rampart, ghosting behind the two guards who were still talking about the thunder last night, about how the Temple had been glowing under the storm. The rampart was butt up against one of the buildings, possibly the church, Arno wouldn't know until he scaled it, and he leapt up to a window sill as soon as he was able, working his way up and up until he got to the steep slant of the roof. He poked his head over the lip, saw no one, and scrambled up. A bell tower signifying the church was on the other side of the complex, and Arno stepped carefully as he moved to the other side of the roof. Shadows disappeared, a cloud passing across the sun's path, and Arno looked out over the edge to see what the complex looked like.

The church had something next to it, an abbey perhaps, that connected it to the Grosse Tour, the perfect way up. He dropped to a lower roof of the building he was on, trying to determine how he could get there without signaling some kind of alarm. He asked for another pulse from his eagle, he saw at least half a dozen guards below. That would be difficult...

Arno snapped open his phantom blade, edging as close to the edge of the roof as he dared without getting spotted and took careful aim. There was one brute, thick and in leather armor, bicorn hat and a lance half-again as tall as he was. Wait for it... wait for it...

"It seem like the Grandmaitre spends a lot of time in the catacombs to you?"

"You haven't heard? He thinks he's Jacques de Molay reborn or some such."

"... You're joking."

"Not even a little. He's probably down there trying to commune with his past life or something equally ridiculous. Mad as a hatter."

"I don't think... No, I don't think de Molay is even buried down there."

"Like I said, mad as a hatter."

There! He was finally turned away! Arno fired and scrambled back up the roof, blood racing through his veins as he turned to see if he hit the target. He only had one other berserk dart left...
He waited, four breaths, then six, then eight. The biggest brute spun his pike around, slamming it into the skull of a **sans-culotte** with a fitted jacket. Perfect! Arno gave the brawl about ten minutes to grab every guard in the vicinity before slowly lowering himself to ground level and skirting around the fight. This was the hard part, don't be seen...! He all but flew up to the roof of the abbey and waited, but the brawl continued to do its job, and Arno had free reign to climb the tower. Excellent! He couldn't believe his luck.

There were but two riflemen, both of whom the phantom blade eliminated. Arno began his climb, seeing the clouds thicken as he did so. He saw a dark figure in the center of the tower roof, back to him, and Arno climbed over the lip of the safety rail on silent boots. No sign of Élise.

"*If you get a shot at Germain, take it.*"

Arno extended his hidden blade.

Only Germain turned, sword in hand, and lifted it, *light glowing from it*, and Arno ducked behind the column of the central belfry and then *lightning erupted from the sword*.

What the *hell* was that?

"So the prodigal Assassin returns," Germain said. "I suspected as much when la Touche stopped sending his tax revenues. I assume my pawn Robespierre was you're doing as well - or did he finally realize who was giving him conspiracies?"

La Touche was dead? Since when? And Robespierre... was the Incorruptible a Templar?

"No matter. His Reign of Terror served its purpose. So many enemies were slain thanks to him, so many Assassins, we've all the time in the world to build our New World."

The air was beginning to charge, Arno could feel his hair standing on end, and he skulked around the corner of the pillar giving him cover. He could just see Germain moving across the small space of the belfry, the sword was glowing again, and Arno had the time to actually watch as the lightning burst from the sword, stretching out hundreds of feet over the edge of the tower, branching in a flash of light that Arno was temporarily blinded. He blinked rapidly, utterly terrified.

"Why so persistent, Arno? Is it revenge? Did Bellec indoctrinate you so thoroughly that you do his bidding even now? The blind hatred of the Brotherhood? Or is it love? Has de la Serre's daughter turned your head? You two were always together as children as I recall."

Germain turned again, Arno quickly moving back the way he came, around the corner. How did he know about Bellec? All that time above ground? He asked for a pulse from his eagle for help, felt the sensation of unifying with another eag—Germain *had* and eagle? *Someone who wasn't an Assassin had an eagle?* The eagle was so strong! The strongest Arno had ever encountered, full and supple and granting no headache to Arno at all, it was awake and searching, such a loud pure call that consumed everything. Arno held his breath, heart threatening to beat out of his own chest, certain with an eagle like that Germain would see him through stone and kill him, but Germain kept his back to Arno, and taking a risk he moved in to strike.

He managed to get a hand on Germain's shoulder, blade surging forward to plunge into the murderer's back, but then there was light, and Arno flew backwards, his entire body shaking and even his very soul flickering. He lost all motor functions, he could not move his limbs as he wished, could not even *think*, and when he finally regained himself, everything still shaky, Germain was nowhere to be seen.
"How... what?"

Where did he go?

Arno dithered, still trying to feel his extremities, fumbling to get to his feet.

The catacombs. Someone said something about the catacombs.

Arno didn't dare climb, knew he would fall to his death if he tried to use his arms when they shook so badly. He found a door and was — somehow — able to open it, stumbling down the stairs. Several guards were about, but they were all glued to the window, wondering if another thunderstorm was coming. Arno moved passed them, down a circular staircase, more in control now, able to flex his fingers and roll his shoulders. He came out on a lower balcony of some kind, saw two riflemen looking out over the compound. He used his phantom blade on one and quickly ran up to the other and felled him. The shaking was almost gone now, and rational thought was starting to realize what had happened.

That sword.

It had the power of lighting.

What the hell was going on?

Merde...

He rubbed his hands together, gauged the distance, and leapt across the gap to the church roof, his hands finding something to grab onto at the last second. He grunted, blood still pounding, and he wondered where Élise was. Arno stuck to the roofs, afraid of fighting through guards if anyone else had a sword that shot out lightning. Catacombs. He had to get to the catacombs. He moved to the graveyard, saw another dozen guards, and loaded a second berserk dart. He took aim and... no, he needed the fight to be further away.

He skirted around, ducking from log pile to grave marker to fence, moving along to the other side and finding a suitable target. He kept low, afraid of who could see him even on an overcast day, and took aim a second time. He fired, leaned back behind his fence, and waited for the sounds of fighting. Then it was back the way he came, glancing back as he did and... there, the entrance was empty. He breathed a sigh of relief.

A full speed sprint cut him across the open ground and down the steps and underground.

Candlelight was a rarity, Arno's eyes slowly dilating as he kept his eagle awake, following Germain's clear eagle-shriek like a beacon. Right, left, left, and then right again. Élise was running up to him and they met at a juncture.

"What happened?" Élise said. "What were those lights at the tower?"

"Germain's got some kind of weapon," Arno explained, "I've never seen anything like it. It controlled lightning and..." he looked down at his hands, better but still visibly shaking. Élise looked on curiously, lips pressed into a thin line. She knew something, and she looked up at him.

"Did you get him?" she asked.

"... He got away from me," Arno confessed.

She didn't reply, didn't frown, didn't do anything but turn down the juncture they were standing in.
"Here," she said instead. "This is a Greek cross, not Latin. Templars used that when they were first hiding themselves. If Germain has been in hiding here, this would be the best place for it." She gripped the cross and twisted it, the ancient sound of pulleys working as the stone edifice rolled away. The noise was damning, Germain would know they were coming...

Élise didn't even think, just ran through the portal, sword drawn. Germain in front her as her only goal.

"Élise," Arno hissed, crouched down and following her. She didn't know what that sword could do—it was glowing! He straightened and lifted his phantom blade, watching as Élise ran and... and... now! He fired, and could just hear Germain grunt as the bolt of lightning went wild. Arno ducked behind a stone wall, Élise scrambling to the side as she realized just how dangerous that damn sword was. She looked at Arno, face incredulous.

"And Mademoiselle de la Serre as well. This is quite the reunion, both of you! I assume the loss of d'Églantine and all my investments in the East India Company was your doing, that was almost clever."

Oh, this was just like Place de la Révolution. Germain wanted to talk. Arno looked at Élise, tried to grab her gaze. "Stay hidden," he said, tightly controlling his voice. "Keep him talking." Time, he needed time.

Élise nodded, crawling away on all fours, looking for a new place to hide.

"Did you think this day would never come?" she demanded. "That because François de la Serre had no sons to avenge him, that your crime would go unanswered?"

"Revenge is it? Your vision is as narrow as your father's."

Arno called his eagle again, feeling the headache coming on but needing all the information he could get. Natural light was beaming down from above, but there were pots of fire hanging from ropes—there was a word for it, Arno couldn't think of it—and that meant there was a second floor somewhere. If this was architecture from the middle ages, then stairs would be...

"You're one to talk about narrow vision. How wide of vision was your grab for power?" Élise demanded.

"Power? No, no, no, no, you're smarter than that!" Germain called back, a sneer in his voice as Arno traced his way around. "This was never about power. It's always been about control. Did your père teach you nothing? The Order has grown complacent, rotted from within! We've abandoned purpose for base pleasures! For centuries we've focused our attentions on the trappings of power: the titles of nobility, the offices of Church and State. So obsessed with clinging to the trappings of power we abandoned our purpose: caught in the very lie we crafted to shepherd the masses."

"I will kill you," Élise hissed. "That is no trapping of power!"

"Have you heard nothing I've said?" Germain demanded. Arno found the staircase, at last, and moved up, seeing light above him. "Killing me won't stop anything. My design is larger than my own life. When our brother Templars see the old institutions crumble, they will adapt. Shay Cormac is already working in England to great success, and in the wake of this new revolution, a new order will be born, one that chains men with gold and silver instead of worthless titles who's value rots over time. Our brothers will retreat to the shadows and we will, at last, be the Secret Masters we were meant to be. So come! Kill me if you can, I've already won! It changes nothing!"
Arno finally was above it all, his eyes taking in everything. The Gothic architecture provided a veritable plethora of places to leap across and land on, and he could immediately trace a path almost directly above Germain. He extended his hidden blade in preparation, licking his lips and taking a deep breath. He needed Germain to turn...

"You're mad!" Élise shouted. "I remember your expulsion, your heresy over Jacques de Molay!"

"I am Jacques de Molay!" Germain shouted, turning around, "He speaks through me! How can you prevail?"

Arno leapt, from one buttress to a thin iron beam, and jumped, blade high and hoping gravity would be fast enough.

But Germain turned, his dual-colored eyes smiling as he lifted the sword. *Merde...!*

"The darkness cannot protect you boy. You'll have to do better than that."

Arno landed, blade sinking into Germain's shoulder just as the Templar fired. The lightning erupted, a second, direct strike – point blank, and Arno flew back, hitting something and falling to his side, sliding to the ground as his entire body jolted and jolted, fire spidering through his entire body, through every blood cell. He moaned, trying to turn over, head banging on the stone, his body was so out of control. He didn't know how long he flapped about, slowly became aware of a hand on his cheek.

"Arno! Arno!"

"... Élise..." he was able to gasp. His limbs were shaking less, he couldn't flex his fingers but he could move his legs and arms.

She smiled to see his reply, turned to survey the damage. Arno managed to turn his head, blurry vision seeing Germain struggling to his feet, holding his wounded shoulder. He fumbled for the damn sword.

"He's getting away!"

"Wwaait," Arno slurred, flopping to get an arm under him. "I need a few more seconds..."

"I can take him!"

"No you can't," Arno said. "Nnot alone. Wait for me!"

Élise looked at Arno, looked at Germain, looked at Arno again.

And she turned and ran after the target, sword drawn and aggressively pushing him back.

No, no, wait! Arno stumbled to his feet, seeing Germain fall back under Élise's assault, saw her jerky, half thought out motions, realized she was unintentionally cornering him where the sword was. Wait... "Wait!" Arno shouted, finally getting moving. "ÉLISE!"

But Germain wrapped his fist around the sword, lighting building up in it, and Arno ran as fast as his shaky limbs could manage, across the dais, over the lit candles, towards the explosion he knew was coming.

Light flooded his eyes, blinded him, and the crack of thunder was so sudden and violent, Arno flew back again, stumbling and rolling over, and he heard something falling, felt a spray of dust.
He wasn't sure how long he lay there, senses returned to him slowly, but his mind was not quiet. When he could hear, all that sounded was silence. When he could see, all he saw was the far side of the dais, he was not looking in the right direction. When he could feel, the stone underneath pressed against myriad bruises and nerves of fire. When he could move, he staggered to his feet, turning around.

And there she was.

Prone.

Still.

Lifele—

"Élise," he said. "ÉLISE!"

He ran towards her, all but falling to his knees. He took her head in his hands, turned it gently to face him, and he knew the horrible truth. The burst of lightning had been so great as to shatter stone, black scorch marks not feet from where he was kneeling, and so close to the lightning strike there was no hope. Her body was limp, and half of her face was burned from the electricity, mangled. Her head lolled to the side, and Arno leaned back on his haunches, realizing the terrible truth.

She was dead.

Élise de la Serre was dead.

A low, pained cry was pulled out of his throat, pain expanding and all consuming. She was gone, she was gone, she didn't wait for him, had rushed ahead, had done what she said and sacrificed everything to kill Germ—He turned, heard a low, masculine groan, saw Germain swaying into a sitting position, just as burned as Élise but somehow still alive.

... No. Not for long.

Arno stood, flexed his fingers, still slightly shaking, and was able to extend his hidden blade. He stepped over the lightning strike, knelt down to Germain, and held the other man's gaze. Arno was numb as he slowly, methodically, pushed the blade into Germain's neck.

Arno was mute, said utterly nothing.

Germain, however, was not mute. "No questions? Fine, I'll speak for myself. I did not understand the visions that haunted my mind, you see. Great towers of gold, cities shining white as silver. I thought I was going mad. Then I found this place, found Codex Pater Intellectus: the words of Jacques de Molay. I understood then, that somehow, through the centuries, I was connected to Grandmaitre de Molay. That I had been chosen to purge the Order of decadence and corruption that had set in like rot, and to wash the world clean, and restore the truth the Father of Understanding intended."

"That seems to have gone over well," Arno sneered, wanting the man to die already. He twisted the blade, trying to get him to shut up.

"Well," Germain was still saying, "Prophets are seldom appreciated in their own time. Exile and abasement forced me to reevaluate my strategy, find new avenues for realization of my purpose. Isn't that the whole selling point of this Revolution? 'No matter the cost'? New order never comes without destruction of the old, and this is perfect grounds to cull the old and breed the new."
Nobody could plan for a Revolution, but anybody can see opportunity and take advantage of it."

Germain turned, or seemed to. "It appears we part ways here..."

And, at last, there was silence.

Arno pulled his hidden blade out of the neck, leaving the body and no longer caring. He went back to Élise, turned her burned face aside, choosing instead to look at the side unmarred by her death. He caressed the face. Oh, Élise... Élise...

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Élise...

"Any sign of rain?"

"No, Antoinette," Giraud said. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"I don't understand," his wife said, opening the lid of a Dutch oven to check the stew. "I've never heard of a thunderstorm without rain. Even last night, we had more rain than thunder."

"Well, it's been hours," Giraud said, "Long enough for me to come home – without a partner I might add – and listen to you nag about the weather."

"Don't be like that, mon amour," Antoinette said lightly, "Or you won't be satisfied later."

"You wouldn't dare..."

"Papa! Papa!" his daughter Anne said, running from upstairs. "The man is here!"

"The man, petite? What man?"

"The one you walk with. He's carrying someone!"

Frowning Giraud stepped out of the house, looking first one way and then another—"Nom de dieu!" he cursed. "Antoinette! It's Victor, and his wife!"

Victor was shuffling down the street, his redheaded wife in his arms, sagging like a sack of potatoes. Giraud ran down the street. "Victor! Victor, what's happened?"

His partner didn't seem to hear him, kept shuffling along, headless of the body in his arms. Giraud moved to grab the wife, felt Victor's arms shaking from the weight, and on looking he saw the horrible bun marks. Diable, and she had been such a looker! "What happened?" he asked, trying to pull the weight away from his partner.

Victor turned, not quite looking at Giraud, and Giraud knew his friend was going to lose himself in a bottle for this, he looked so lost, and he didn't know what to do.

"Père?"

"Antoine, go to the station, tell them what's happened, get someone over here, tell them we'll need a grave digger. Come on, Victor, let's get you inside."

He didn't know how long it took, but he was able to get Victor in his home and – after a herculean effort – got the poor man's wife out of his arms and stretched out on the floor, tablecloth covering her for respect. Antoinette grabbed all the children and ushered them upstairs to look after his
sickly mother, and put a hand on her husband's shoulder. "Bon chance," she said softly.

But Victor was as dead to the world as his wife was, silent like a child, unable to speak as friends at
the station came to get the story. The man was numb, unable to talk, just stared at nothing. Giraud
and his friends did the best they could, but all they could conclude was the poor woman had been
struck by lightning – they didn't even know where to bury her.

"Versailles..."

Giraud snapped his eyes to his partner. "Victor?"

"... Her home was Versailles..." his words were barely a whisper, Giraud needed several seconds to
hear the words.

It was the only thing he said.

Giraud got Arno to bed as best he could, but the next morning he was gone, and Giraud knew he
would never see him again.

Chapter End Notes

Whew, what a chapter!

Small stuff first: We played to history as much as we could - i.e. how Robespierre was
ousted, Augustin's attempted suicide etc. Robespierre himself, well, he couldn't talk
the previous day because the conspiracy he'd uncovered was the one where he was
tricked into gutting French citizenry over imagined conspiracies. How's that for irony?
No one would believe him, Germain gets to orchestrate a bloodletting of his enemies
both Templar and Assassin, and Robespierre is the one they all blame. It's not perfect,
but it's a better twist than the game in our opinion.

We also get some small signs at how much Arno has grown again. He's reading
Descartes! Good job, Arno! He's even learning from it - though he isn't perfect yet.
Given the choice between the Assassins and Élise he still (literally) slams the door on
the Assassins. (Metaphor. We couldn't resist :P). Like he says in the chapter, he thinks
he can fix Élise. Like a lot of other abuse victims, he feels responsible for her
wellbeing - he knows she's ill, and is doing everything he can to make things easier for
her because she's suffered so much. Exactly like we did for our abuser.

Élise by contrast has a very, very small moment of honest self reflection: she realizes
she doesn't love Arno. And then her NPD delusion quickly rewrites that to thinking
that she has the right not to love Arno because he's betrayed her and that he will never
kill Germain over keeping her alive - and that keeping her alive is him exerting control
over her when NO ONE is supposed to control a Templar. And like she has with so
many others, she cuts him out. It remains to be seen if she would go back to him after
Germain, our abuser cut us out over and over but needed us to validate their... their
everything, so at least we think she would totally drag Arno back.

Astute readers will notice Arno's letter to his father has what is essentially Arno stating
why the Assassins exists and even being a proponent of it. Oh Arno, you're doing
everything right, you just get in your own way.
The memory itself we played pretty straight - not a lot needed to be changed. Hm. Wonder whatever happened to La Touche... didn't someone have an assignment in Versailles...?

But the inevitable happens: the person closest to Arno is lost and, like when he was a child, he retreats into himself and his silence.

Next chapter: St. Denis and Franciade.
He couldn't stay in Paris. He couldn't stay in France.

Élise...

He didn't know what he felt, but he just knew he couldn't stay.

He had loved Élise. Loved her with every fiber of his being. Back when he was a houseboy, he knew he never had a chance, but he would sometimes dream of what his future would be like, and it was always married to Élise. After Monsieur de la Serre's death, Arno was no longer a houseboy, and he had hurt Élise without any intention of doing so. When he tried to picture his future, it was lonely. After he was Attainted, and had lost himself in Versailles, when Élise and he had gone back to Paris, he had often thought of what married life with her would be like. They lied and said they were married, they shared a bed, and Arno pictured idyllic life.

That wasn't what he had. His time with Élise wasn't the painting of perfection he had dreamed of. It wasn't the same as what he'd seen with Charlotte and Augustin, or Jérôme and Camille, or even Élise's parents. Those couples worked together, cared for one another, radiated love. That's not what life with Élise was at all. She was cantankerous, condescending, moody, spiteful. She held the smallest transgressions against him for weeks, would bring them up in fights even months later. She never took the time to understand what it was he could do and where the limitations were. Always, her refrain was "You're an Assassin, aren't you?" and he could never seem to get her to listen to what that meant. When she was hit hard by the malaise, she would strike at every weak point he had with viscous vitriol.

But there were times.

When the malaise wasn't overpowering her, when he was able to provide something she asked for that actually lead somewhere, Arno could see the briefest of glimpses of what married life might be like after Germain. When the cause of her malaise had passed. When he had fixed his mistake. Fixed her.

He kept telling himself that those brief snatches were worth it. That it was fine that he preferred working late as a gens d'armes to avoid going home. That it was fine that he left early to get a start on the day to leave her sooner. That it was fine that he never mentioned which friends would visit him because it was safer for him if she didn't know.

It was fine.

Because once Germain fell, it would all be well again.

Now Élise was dead.

Arno was supposed to be sad. Upset. Angry. The shock of it had certainly hit him hard.

But he felt...

Relief.
And that was so wrong. Élise was the love of his life, so why was he relieved that she was now gone? And that feeling of relief twisted with regret because there was so much of what could have been that came in small moments. So many if onlys. If only he had delivered the letter, if only he wasn't ten minutes late, if only he had kept Élise with him, if only he hadn't been hit by the electrocution of that damn sword, if only...

And twisted with the relief and regret, was also loss. Because Arno had loved Élise for so long, he couldn't remember not loving her. And despite the relief and regret, there was still loss.

He was so messed up.

What the hell was he feeling?

What was he supposed to feel and why wasn't he?

Why had she not waited for him?

Why did she value killing Germain over loving him?

Whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy...

He couldn't stay in Paris. He couldn't stay in France.

He had once investigated a murder over hot chocolate. The son was in charge of his money and estate. He had a shrew for a mother and he had wondered why the son just didn't see her anymore if she was going to be cruel to him all the time.

Now, he wondered if there were small happy moments that kept him going back.

"Nom de dieu!"

Arno looked up. He had been sitting in the dark waiting for them to come down. He didn't know where else to go.

"Bonjour," he said tiredly. He had been crying so he coughed, to clear his throat. "Desolé. Ah, I didn't know where else to go."

Tissot frowned heavily, then lit more candles since the sky was only just starting to lighten.

"Dorian," Tissot greeted, clearly on guard. Once there was more light, Tissot took a look at Arno and his guarded face softened the barest of touches. "You look like hell."

"I've been damned there, might as well look the part," Arno replied dryly. His eyes sagged again. So damn tired. He took a breath, forced his eyes open. At his feet was his small bag. He had gone to the rooms he had rented with Élise and grabbed what he could. Clothes, of course, his box of letters for his father... he would have to start them to Élise now... all weapons he had... all the food that was there... "I can't stay in Paris anymore," he said quietly, staring down at his feet. "I can't stay in France."

For a moment his throat clogged, and then it was gone.

"You're a weaver. Or some sort of textiles trader. Get me somewhere far away from here. I can't... I can't stay here."
Tissot sat in front of him, measuring him closely, eyes slightly narrowed. "Your other friends?"

His vision misted. He blinked, then he could see again. "Cosette doesn't have an assignment that I know of yet, Fabre is the Roi des Thunes and won't have access to that sort of thing, and Marc—Pontmercy has made it clear he doesn't want to see me." He shook his head. "I'm not looking for an Assassin way out. Normal, mundane means. I'll work on a ship if I have to... Just..." His eyes were drooping again.

He pressed his palms into his eyes.

Tissot was still measuring him. "Why?"

Arno winced. Heavily. "Élise... she's dead..." he choked out. "All I want is more wine... S'il vous plaît, I can't stay here."

Tissot leaned back, and let out a heavy sigh. "Come on. Once the children are awake, we can get you to bed. I'll see what I can do."

Arno nodded, even as his eyelids once again started to drag down.

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14 Thermidor, Y2 (August 1, 1794)

He had been woken up once to get some food in him, but otherwise Arno slept most of the day and subsequent night away.

Thus, the following morning Tissot brought Arno to the family parlor and sat him down, Camille by his side. The children weren't there, but Arno had no doubt that they were either hiding somewhere, or the oldest had taken them out somewhere.

"Je vous remercie," Arno offered first.

"I think we should be saying that to you," Camille said softly. "You saved my life and kept my husband sane. We owe you a great deal."

Arno shook his head.

Tissot snorted. "We owe you. Don't bother denying it. You are a Brother. We will help you."

"I do have a shipment of fabrics heading to Egypt from Marseille," Tissot said. "You will be my guard to make sure they get there and don't suffer from pirates. The ship leaves in six days on the twenty-first."

Arno nodded. He doubted he'd get passage immediately. Waiting just under a week would be fine. He hoped.

He was such a mess.

Camille studied him, as her husband had measured him, and nodded to herself. "Since you are here, can we ask for your help with something?"

"Bien sur."
"It's Assassin, in origin."

Arno winced. "I'm Attainted."

Tissot scoffed. "We aren't what we were, Dorian," he said softly. "Between Tuileries, the guillotines, riots, even those of us who have been incredibly careful have been killed. We number barely over a hundred."

Arno winced again. When he had joined, there were just over two hundred. Five years and now the Assassins were at half strength?

"You won't be dealing with Templars, you won't even be fighting. But we need you to fetch something one of our allies hid before he was guillotined."

Arno paused, thinking. It would just be fetching something. No investigating, no intrigue. But...

"Won't you get in trouble? For having an Attainted man like myself doing this?"

Camille frowned at him. "That doesn't matter, Citoyen Dorian. We know the content of your character. We trust you. That's enough for us."

His eyes misted again.

"I... Thank you. I will help."

Both nodded as one.

Tissot leaned forward. "What do you know of Condorcet?"

Arno shrugged. "Mathematician."

"Philosopher," Camille replied. "He was an ally of ours. He disappeared for two days before his guillotining. Granted, he'd been hiding for months here in Paris, and he spent that time writing some sort of manuscript. Jérôme was the one who brought him supplies."

Tissot nodded. "Back in March, before this new calendar, Nicolas told me he didn't feel safe anymore. I told him I could arrange for safe passage, but he didn't wait and fled. He made it all the way to Clamart and that surprised me."

"Oh?"

"He had always told me he'd go north. It would be quicker to get to a ship."

Arno blinked.

"I went back over my notes from all the times I spoke with him. I think he wanted to get to Saint-Denis. Excusez-moi, Franciade."

Something about Saint-Denis tickled the back of Arno's mind, but he set it aside.

"And?" Arno asked politely.

"Nicolas, he had a pet project that he wanted passed when he was on the Assembly. It was rejected, but he liked to talk about it. He wanted another aristocracy, but this time for savants and intellect instead of bloodlines. I didn't care for it. It would have been based on reforming education, making a hierarchy of experts, guardians of the Enlightenment and grantors of liberty or some such. He did
get a lot of education reforms in, but his idea of favoring brains over blood..." Tissot sighed, rubbing his face. Suddenly, Arno realized that Tissot looked older. That in the years of the Revolution, Tissot had aged. Between the cloak and dagger of Assassin work, having all those children, running a business, there was more grey in the hair. More lines on the face.

Did Arno's face reflect the same? From all the stress and worry and uncertainty?

Tissot sat up again. "Nicolas, he was a marquis. But he only made anything of himself through his brains. Twenty-two and publishing how to do integral calculus... Anyway, I went back over some things. He was all in favor of Louis's trial, but he was opposed to the death penalty. It got me thinking. Saint-Den—Franciade, that's where all the Kings of France are buried. He always made a point of mentioning Saint-Denis."

Arno's jaw dropped and his eyes widened. Then he offered a flat look. "That's over one thousand years of kings and queens," he said just as flatly.

Tissot shrugged. "It's the only thing I can think of. It makes sense, and if you knew Nicolas, it would too. It's not something I can articulate, but it's the only thing that works. Between always mentioning Saint-Denis, then being found in Clamart, the opposite direction, his holding to aristocracy in a different form..."

"So you want me to search a necropolis."

Tissot shrugged. "It's a three day ride to Marseilles from there. That gives you three days to poke around. Worst case scenario, I can arrange for different passage."

"Please," Camille said, "we're stretched too thin. Will you help us?"

... How could Arno refuse?

He couldn't stay in Paris. He could at least get to Saint-Denis – rechristened Franciade to remove more stains of the Church from the country – and not be in Paris. He couldn't stay in France, but that would take longer.

"Bien sûr."

Saint-Denis, now Franciade, was originally named after a Bishop of Paris who was beheaded for his faith as he tried to convert the Gauls to Catholicism. The oldest records of the town were from the second century, when it was a Gallo-Roman town named Catolacus, until Saint Denis came. After Saint Denis's beheading, it didn't take long for the name to change to the venerated saint. It was the French King Dagobert I that rebuilt the small chapel to a monastery and granted many privileges, including holding a market that would, over time, have travelers as far as the Byzantine Empire come to trade their wares. After Dagobert I's death, he was buried in Saint-Denis, and just about every French king after him was buried there as well. In 1140, Saint-Denis was granted more privileges when Abbot Suger was counselor to the king, and the basilica was enlarged, an early example to the start of Gothic architecture. As history marched on, Saint Denis was almost depopulated by the Hundred Years' War and the Religious Wars were hardly kind. But Louis XIV granted favor to Saint-Denis and the next Louis did the same, particularly since his daughter was a nun there.

Saint-Denis had history, much as Paris did, and Arno was immune to most of it.

All he cared about was the Basilica of Saint-Denis. Over forty kings and thirty queens, to say nothing of princes, princesses and those close to the family where buried there. That was a lot of
grave robbing.

Naturally, Arno waited till night fell. He had already, discreetly, climbed up the north tower and had sequestered himself in the belfry. Unsurprisingly, the bell had been removed, likely to be melted for coins given how much France's economy was all over the place. As darkness fell, he slipped through a door and started descending the stairs. He had been cautious in his approach. He had the clothes of an abbot, but it would be suicide to wear them on the streets, so he waited until he was heading down the stairs to don them. Most of the looser cloth hid his actual clothes underneath. Under his robes he had a pistol, just in case things went bad. After all, this was France. Things had been going bad for a long time.

Too much death...

Candles were still lit down in the knave, and Arno looked around carefully.

This was... not what he was expecting.

Arno hadn't been in a church since he had killed Sivert. He knew that Notre-Dame had suffered under the pushback against all things religious, but now, years later, it seemed even outside of Paris was the same as inside Paris. The Basilica looked ransacked, any hints of gold or relics were gone or broken. The recumbents, life-sized statues of the deceased lying at rest, had clearly been hefted or moved in search of treasures.

_Merde._

Arno raised his single candle, looking around and trying to decide where to start.

"Ah, you're an unfamiliar face," a wizened old voice said.

Arno turned to see an ancient Benedictine monk shuffling over to him.

"_Bonsoir,"_ Arno greeted politely. "I apologize for arriving so late, but I just arrived in town this evening."

"Hmmmm," the old monk squinted at him. "I'll admit, I'm surprised to find such a young man as you wearing your robes so openly. Most of us don't dare with all the hubbub going in. It's been years since we were forbidden to wear our robes outside of church and last year all churches were shut down."

Arno shrugged. "I'm on a pilgrimage. More for myself than all the chaos."

"Unorthodox," the old monk nodded. "I am Dom Germain Poirer."

"Arno," he replied, offering with a bitter smile, "no title available."

"Hehn. I've had students like you before," Dom Poirer replied. "Come on. I'm almost done here. I can offer you dinner and you can question me."

"Question you, _monsieur?"

"You're either going to pay proper respects or you're one of those rapscallions trying to grab anything of value from this place. I'm archiving everything that's taken, so I need to know what you're looking for."

Arno blinked, not quite believing his luck.
"You'll have to help me. These old eyes aren't what they were, young Arno." Dom turned, gesturing for Arno to precede him. "Seventy-years does a lot to a man's eyes."

Arno snorted. "I doubt much escapes your eyes, monsieur."

"Go ahead. Keep flattering me. I hope you don't mind chicken. I don't have much else worth eating."

"I've survived worse offerings," Arno replied blandly.

Unsurprisingly, Dom Poirer guided Arno to the shabby abbey where he was staying, decay and destruction having been distributed here as well. It seemed the Church wasn't in good standing here anymore than back in Paris. Not that Arno was surprised. He hadn't really known anyone who liked the Church.

Dinner was small and not overly palatable, but filling. Other monks stared at Arno, but kept their distance. Despite all of his acting as a pious monk on a pilgrimage, it seemed no one believed him. But then, given all the hatred the Church had earned and how much of that hatred was being loudly declared by the Revolution, it wasn't really a stretch to say that any clergyman would be dubious and skeptical.

He should have chosen a different approach.

"Ah, you see that things aren't all that welcoming here," Dom Poirer observed, leaning back. His sharp eyes were observing closely. "You're good at acting like a man of the cloth, young Arno, but your soul is in too much torment. We're all a little bitter here, but yours isn't the same."

Arno gave a wry, broken laugh. "Bitter is bitter, isn't it? Does it matter why?"

"To me? No. I don't much care for all the hullabaloo going on. I've lived through one war within the Church. I'm sure I'll survive another war on the Church."

Arno raised a brow and drank from another glass of wine. He wasn't sure which number this was. "You have advice on survival?" he asked blandly.

"Oh yes," Dom Poirer chuckled. "Starting with don't stick your neck out, but I suspect it's too late for you on that score."

"Maybe just a little," Arno said wryly, looking down at his drink. "I've already bottomed out once. I'm trying not to at the moment."

"Ah, an avoidance of temptation." Dom Poirer smiled warmly and kindly. "Shall I recount the story of Jesus fasting for forty days and forty nights and the devil constantly offering him temptation after temptation?"

Arno offered a flat look, even if his lips were curling at the edge. "I rather think everyone's heard that story once or twice."

Dom Poirer chuckled. "True. But it doesn't stop having meaning just because you've heard it many times before. Forty days and nights, that's almost a month and a half. But if you look at it in terms of language, it simply means a really long time. We don't actually know how long Jesus fasted and how long the devil tempted him. It could have been a week, it could have been months. I haven't found anything in any of the archives here in France to answer that question. But that's not the point of the story."
"Oh no," Arno said dryly, "the point is to just have faith in God and there is no more temptation ever."

"Balderdash." Dom Poirer pulled the wine away before Arno could pour another glass. "The point of the story is that temptation is difficult. Jesus faced temptations that we can't fathom. But we, as humans, face temptations every day. Do we cheat someone because they are unsavory or rude? Do we agree with hatred and cruelty for a cause? For how long? France has been facing temptation for years now. And it all starts with men."

Arno raised a brow. "I fail to see how the Third-Estate wanting to have some sort of say in how it's treated is a temptation."

Dom Poirer shrugged. "That may be how it started, that may be a noble goal, but what has it gotten us? I've guarded the archives here for twenty years before we started publishing volume after volume of the Collection of Historians of Gaul and France. The science of observation tells us that while France appeared stable on the outside, the inside was clearly churning. That churning has overcome the stability and still has not settled. An upset stomach churns, but eventually fades. The same will be for this. What form that will take, only time and observation will tell."

Arno snorted. "Careful, you sound more like a philosopher or a scientist, than a monk."

"Please, young man," Dom Poirer replied. "I'm an archivist. I'm compiling as much as I can for the National Archives. I once fought for all the knowledge the church held to be shared for the joys of studying, and was taken from my congregation as a result. All anyone can do now is keep doing what they're best at and let the rest blow over."

"Doing nothing means you don't have a say in how things end up."

The old monk shrugged. "Do I look like that matters? I'm almost seventy-one. Whatever settles isn't really going to affect me. Young men like you likely care more. I met a philosopher a few months back. We talked a great deal about science and history and religion. But he cared too much about the Revolution and the direction it was heading. I understand he was guillotined a few days later. Philosophers don't matter much in this Revolution if they have the wrong political alignment. The Church no longer has a place in politics. So now, we wait and see what's to become of us. So I keep archiving. It's the only thing I know how to do."

"Well, at least you provide a skill that the Convention still wants."

"And you have no skills?" Dom Poirer raised a brow. "To any outside observer, you'd pass as a monk in a heartbeat. You're built strong enough that you could be a policeman or a soldier. You're polite and well-spoken and could be any merchant or trader or educated man. You're a chameleon. You should be on the stage."

That actually had Arno burst out laughing.

The stage. What a horrible idea.

"Well, it's time to toddle off to bed." Dom Poirer eased himself up. "I'll show you where you can sleep."

---

Arno snuck out in the middle of the night and once again snuck back into the Basilica. With only his candle for a guide, he took a deep breath and called for his eagle, concentrating on what Condorcet would have done. He saw fireworks over four crypts, spread out in the necropolis. Right. Those were going to be heavy to open. But as he approached the first one, he
realized that it had already been opened. Carefully, he lowered his candle and tried to look inside in such poor light. *Hmm, nothing here.* The next crypt was the same. The next crypt was untouched and Arno had to push. His back screamed at him as he shoved and shoved, until at last, he was able to see inside by candlelight. This crypt was untouched! Good!

*It's not here...*

Arno growled.

Then he heard voices coming down the stairs. *Merde!* He blew out his candle and ducked behind the crypt, listening intently.

"When will we return to Paris?" asked a tenor's voice, young sounding.

"Once *it* is found," replied a grizzled voice. "Don't ask what *it* is, we won't be told. It will be finished when the general says so."

"Then where is the 'it'?"

"Damned if I know. The temple door is *supposed* to be nearby. Did you even *read* the map?"

"*Desolé,* Capitaine Rose, but I thought it said—"

"You've wasted my time with this. If you can't read a map, you're no use to me!"

"Sir!" the young tenor hissed, "you're questioning my honor!"

Rose growled. "You're free to break your contract. But I am also free. All of France is *free* now. And with my freedom," the growl dropped to menacing, "I have savage tastes."

The young tenor audibly gulped. Arno risked a glance. Thick-necked, heavy brow-ridge, so pale so that he looked like he hadn't seen the sun in weeks. That was Rose. The young infantryman beside him had a weak chin and was trembling.

"I... I misspoke, capitaine. Ah—I have heard that an archivist has a list of all the relics looted from the necropolis here. I believe I can take you to him. This Dom Poirer has been keeping records of everything taken from the crypts. It will be a lucrative alternative to this... temple."

Arno ducked back down and listened.

"That's *not* what I want," Rose growled back. "Do you *want,* what I *want?*"

"... *Oui.*"

"*Bien.* Then we are in agreement. Find that temple."

"Of course, *monsieur.*"

They turned to head back up, and Arno risked moving from behind the crypt and hurried forward on silent feet. They had mentioned a map, that might be useful down here... He closed the distance, could smell tobacco, reached out...

*Got it.*

They left and Arno waited for a while before relighting his candle.
Now, back to my own grave robbing.

He called on his eagle again and saw two more crypts as possible. Sigh.

The first one he went to was unadorned, no recumbent upon it. He held his candle carefully, looking at it and wondering why this crypt was a possibility. If Condorcet was aiming to hide his manuscript in irony of the crypt of the kings, this grave wouldn't—

Louis IX.

The only king of France to be canonized as a saint.

Arno let out a low chuckle.

Condorcet couldn't get more ironic than that.

Unfortunately, this crypt had also been opened. So Arno looked inside once more, being careful. It had clearly been disturbed, but recently. Very recently by the dust. In fact, it looked like the dust had been shifted by something being placed inside. Parfait. Now if only I knew who took it after Condorcet had been through all that trouble to place it.

It looked like he'd need to talk to Dom Poirer.

He was actually rather enjoying the prospect.

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16 Thermidor, Y2 (August 3, 1794)

He woke up with a splitting headache. But he could still see (moderately) straight and he decided that meant he hadn't had too much wine the previous night. If he woke up and couldn't see straight and couldn't move, that was bad. However, after getting up and (albeit, slowly) getting dressed, Arno decided that on the whole, he was fine.

Really... he was fine.

... he was a mess...

He'd had another nightmare. Élise running away from him, lightning blinding everything, her screaming, either for him or at him, he was never certain... He rubbed his eyes as they misted again.

He couldn't stay in Paris. He couldn't stay in France.

He was finally out of Paris. Time to get out of France.

But he had work to do first.

He could only pray that distance would make anything better.

With a deep sigh, Arno put on the abbot clothes again, then headed down and started looking for Dom Poirer. He found the monk in a small office surrounded by papers and scrolls and books that looked ancient. Arno couldn't help but blink. "How old are these books?"

"Ah, young Arno, you're still here." Dom Poirer turned, gesturing Arno to a chair that had three hefty tombs on them. "Clear that off. How can I help you?"
Arno lifted the books and felt his back protest after pushing open crypts the previous night. He seated and rubbed at his temples, willing his headache to decrease. He'd gotten dressed, it was time to *function*, and a headache wasn't helping. "Sorry to disturb you," he said softly.

"Hmmm, I'm surprised you're up already. You drank far too much last night."

Arno gave a wan smile. "I'm not incoherent, so I don't think I drank as much as you say."

"Ah, one of those," Dom Poirer replied lightly, leaning back in his chair. "You drink like a fish."

"I try not to."

"You weren't particularly successful last night. But you did keep up with conversation, so that's worth something."

Arno offered a broad, wry smile. "Perhaps, but what is that something worth?"

"Hah," Dom Poirer huffed a laugh. "Something that can't be calculated though monetary calculations. Now, what can I do for you?"

He offered a conciliatory smile, "I'll admit that you had me last night. I am here under somewhat false pretenses."

"Oh, really? I never would have known," the old monk replied, his wizened voice light and amused. "Yet you still wear the robes?"

"I am a chameleon, after all."

"*Touché.*"

Arno sat a little straighter, shed his more spiritual demeanor and affect. "I'm trying to track down the trail of the *Marquis* of Condorcet after he left Paris. He was found in Clamart. From what I understood from friends, he wanted to flee north. So I was left wondering why he didn't." Arno offered a brow, and waited.

And waited.

Dom Poirer just sat there, utterly comfortable in the silence.

Arno sighed. "So did you meet Condorcet?"

"Ah, there *is* a question you have." Dom Poirer smiled broadly, wrinkling his face further. "You'll have to forgive an old man the few amusements I have."

"However would I survive," Arno replied dryly. "Condorcet?"

"I believe I mentioned him last night."

"You did," Arno replied. "You said he was too concerned with the way the Revolution was going and guillotined a few days later. You said nothing else."

"Really? My old age must be catching up with me," Dom Poirer turned and sifted through the myriad of papers on his desk. "Ah, here we are. He actually was kind enough to ask for a tour of the tombs. He never took anything, but he studied and listened and asked questions. He had the most questions about King Louis IX."
"I never saw him again after that."

Arno nodded to himself. "I think rather than taking something, he put something within one of the tombs."

That actually surprised Dom Poirer. "Why on earth would he do that? If he wanted something hidden, he had to know that the tombs are being ransacked."

"That was the point," Arno said. "From what I understand, he knew he was going to face the guillotine. But he had been working on a manuscript. He didn't want it hidden away or destroyed, so where better to make sure it was discovered and published after his death?"

"Than in a tomb that's being ransacked for golds to repay the national coffers," Dom Poirer summarized. "Hmph. I never would have guessed. I'm guessing you're the one he was hoping to find that manuscript?"

"Yes." Or close enough. "So, did anyone take anything from King Louis IX's tomb?"

Dom Poirer chuckled. "The Lord does indeed work in interesting ways."

Arno frowned. "And what does that mean?"

"Nothing, nothing." Dom Poirer reached back to his papers again. "I've an address for you. Old red house, ask for Léon."

So it was, an hour later when Arno's head wasn't quite so bad, that he was walking down the hot, damp streets of Franciade without the clergy clothes to find this Léon person. He pulled out a handkerchief and blotted his forehead, huffing out a hot breath into the hot air.

Old red house... old red house... ah!

He stepped up to the door and knocked. Within a few moments the door opened and a middle-aged woman, dark brown and gray hair peeking out of her bonnet, answered the door. "Oui?"

Arno nodded to her politely. "Bonjour. Does Léon live here?"

The woman sighed. "Has he been arrested again?"

Arno blinked. "Not that I know of," he replied slowly.

She nodded. "A lot of people would like to see his hands cut off. He's a vicious thief, that one."

Bien sûr. "I need his help."

"He went to the windmill yesterday. I've not seen him since."

"Merci." He turned to leave, wondering how "vicious" this man Léon was.

"A moment," the woman called out.

Arno turned. "Yes?"

"If you see him, give him my name. Madame Margot."
"Bien sûr, Citoyenne," he replied, with perhaps a cheeky grin. "Merci."

"Please, tell him to come home."

Arno nodded. This Léon was probably Margot's lover. Time to go find a vicious thief.

Arno ducked into an alley and climbed the nearest roof, getting as high as he could and scanning Franciade for a windmill. The church and abbey were to the east of his location, the tallest structures in the entire of a town, one of the less important structures in a town known for the Basilica, necropolis, and the market square.

Arno pursed his lips. He had an objective, the last thing he needed was a drink.

Find the "vicious thief" Léon, bring him back to his lover Mme Margot, get Condorcet's manuscript or work or papers or whatever he had hidden, and drop it off, head to Marseille and get out of France. Away from his loss and his mixed feelings, away from Élise...

Élise...

He shook his head. *Not drinking.*

There, the windmill he was looking for was well to the south, small because of the distance. He didn't see a main road, and as he worked his way back down to the narrow streets he made sure to always keep track of his direction: always vaguely south, cutting alleys or under clothes lines as needed. The windmill itself stood on what passed for a hill, stone walls securing the height from landslides. As he crested to the back of the hill he saw a collection of tents, military issue; carts and barrels and an actual cannon. What...? What was *artillery* doing just outside of Paris? The armies were everywhere *but* Paris: securing the roads from Austria, south towards Italie...

Arno frowned as he crouched down. Even with a cannon there was only one man in the blue uniform, moving about the tents and collecting what looked to be reports. Everyone else was in little more than rags, riffraff laborers, hired to do... what, exactly?

"There's an intruder in the tunnels," a guard said as they walked back, Arno crouching lower by the collection of barrels he was hiding behind.

"Connard Léon I bet," the partner said.

... Of course the thief would be in the thick of whatever this mess was. Anything to make life harder than it already was. Arno only had two more days here, he couldn't afford to dally. Taking a deep breath and hoping his headache had dispelled enough, he called on a small burst from his eagle. There was the gothic entrance behind the windmill, the source of whatever presence was here, but there was a second pop of colors on the other side of the hill. Arno backed up, giving the camp with a military officer a very wide berth.

The hill had given way to a mudslide in the past, the hill just... stopping and dropping several dozen feet. Arno saw wood boards pressed into the mud – not a mudslide then, an excava—Rouille! The September Massacres two years ago. Bonaparte had told Arno that Rouille, as part of the National Guard, was heading an excavation in Saint-Denis. He had been on his way to track him down when he spotted the man in Paris, part of the prison massacres.

Now fully alert, Arno frowned, tilting his head. If Rouille had been assigned here, then Germain had wanted something here – what could it have been? And why was Rouille in Paris that night – giving a report to Germain? Then why was he a part of the massacres? What was down there...?
"... and what does any of it have to do me?" Arno asked out loud, catching himself. Whatever they were looking for didn't matter, nothing mattered, because Élise was dead and that was all he had. She made it clear how little he was worth; how little he did to support her and how bad he was at helping her. He didn't like how low she made him feel, didn't like how her *malaise* had oscillated between keeping her in bed or keeping her angry, unable to break free of the prisons of her mind except in small bursts. Their last night filled his mind, her insatiable appetite for him and impatient need. That, that had been Élise as she was meant to be: happy, powerful, confident. That was how he wanted to remember her.

But then he would remember all the things she would say to him when the *malaise* overtook her, and the relief that she could never say those things again swept over him, followed immediately by the guilt that he even felt that way. *Bon sang*, he wanted a drink.

He almost left, then and there, unwilling to get involved in a mystery when he knew it would end in tragedy – everything ended in tragedy – and he couldn't stomach another one.

But... that damn thief Léon was down there, and he needed that manuscript.

Arno pulled off his worn surcoat and his waistcoat, biting at the cuff of his sleeve and ripping it, getting a fist of mud and smearing it on his *culottes* to better look the part of a day laborer. He hadn't shaved in over a week, so he could certainly pass. Leaping down to the base of the excavation entrance, he rolled up one sleeve, hunched his shoulders, and grunted as he entered.

Below ground everything was cut into straight lines, massive slabs of stone – Arno didn't know how to identify it – covered with candles or oil lamps. Buckets of rocks or ground stone were everywhere, as were pickaxes, shovels, sledge hammers, anything to break apart the solid rock for the excavation. Wood streaked in stone powder created slopes for wheel barrels or scaffolds for further deconstruction. Bonfires were lit to give light, shadows danced everywhere. Arno didn't see any laborers yet, and he followed the path of the excavation warily, uncertain what he would come across.

After perhaps ten minutes of wandering he came across a scaffold that lead down; he peered over the edge and saw a collection of the laborers – far burlier than he could ever pass as, with their tools picking apart at every nook and cranny of the underground caverns. One or two would stop to hold something up to the light, giddy at a find but trying to be quiet, as the other laborers – raiders, Arno realized – would steal whatever was found.

Grabbing a bucket, Arno moved down to the raiders and started putting rocks inside the bucket, playing the part.

"*Capitaine* Rose finally caught him," one of them was saying.

"Léon? I hear the *connard* killed two of our men."

"Serves us right. We shouldn't be disturbing the slumber of kings."

"Oh, don't tell me you believe in ghost stories," a third raider said

"I've seen one down below. Late at night," the first said, shaking his head. "Heard the screams."

"And how much had you been drinking, I wonder?"

There was a muffle of laughter as Arno lifted his full bucket and left. The thief had been captured... where would one hold a thief, then? Back above ground? No, there was little more than a skeleton crew up there, all the work was here, below. There were probably secondary camps for the raiders,
the tents above were meant for the people in charge. That meant going deeper into the tunnels. Arno closed his eyes and asked for another short burst of his eagle, hearing a clatter of fireworks and the pops of color drawing his eye to a well-hidden tunnel back up the path he had taken.

He entered, emptying his bucket as he went but keeping it as a prop. Torches lined the narrow spaces intermittently, the air always tinged with its smoke. Arno filched an oil lamp, putting it in his bucket in case he needed it later. The weight of all the earth above him was pressing, prickles of anxiety spidering along his senses. Was this how Élise felt? Always anxious, always unsafe after so many attempts on her life were nearly successful? Small wonder she was so impatient. Did that excuse her treatment of him?

Focus. *Focus, merdeux.*

The tunnel branched off more than once, leading to massive caverns that sometimes were filled with raiders, sometimes empty of everything but rats. Fireworks kept his path steady, though his head was starting to hurt. He wondered what time it was, but didn't dare bring out the watch to check – he would go running for a bottle if he did.

"You ever meet a noble, Léon?"

Arno froze. He could just hear the words. Above. He looked up, eyes adjusted to the dim light now, saw he was by massive planks of wood to hold up the wall of the cavern he was in. He started scaling.

"You ever heard a noble talk? Descended from God, they were. Threads of gold arched from between their blessed legs into holy chamber pots. And then, Léon? Fountains of rubies spilled from their necks and rained down upon all France. Now, a man born deep within the lowest circle of hell can rise to the very top of Olympus itself."

"Untie me, *connard!"*

Arno blinked as he crested the wood, moving down a short tunnel and looking over the lip, seeing the "vicious thief" Léon, not a man but little more than a boy, tied up with rope and glaring up at Rose: neck still thick and snorting something from a snuffbox. Rose was chuckling at the boy's — *nom de dieu* he couldn't have been older than ten – profanity, condescendingly bending down and putting his hands on his knees. Ostensibly he was meeting the boy Léon at his level, but Arno had seen that sneer before, knew Rose still held himself above the child.

"Is that what you want, *petit homme*, to rise up?" Rose sneered again. "I see it in you: ambition. You're just like me."

"I'm nothing like you," Léon spat, struggling against his binds. "I'm not threatening people to get what I want, I'm doing it myself!"

Well, well. The boy had spirit.

Rose straightened, looking down his nose and taking another snuff. He looked to one of the raiders. "Kill him," he said, before leaving.

"*What!?* No! Let me go!"

Arno growled low in his throat. The boy was innocent, he didn't deserve to die, the cold-blooded —!

... And he had Condorcet's papers, and he was a thief, and Arno needed him.
The second thought was only a faint whisper compared to the first, however, and Arno judged the
distance. He only had his gun, and in these tunnels that was the same as lighting a flare announcing
"trespassers here!" If he could do this quietly... He jumped down, landing on silent feet and
keeping to a crouch.

"... the ghost of the kings!" the boy muttered, having seen Arno.

The raider turned around.

So much for the element of surprise...

Arno straightened and advanced on the raider, the man's surprise giving Arno plenty of time to
move inside the reaction radius. The man tried to lift a fist but it was woefully too late and
woefully poor form. Arno caught it almost lazily, using it to twist the man around. With his back
exposed, Arno kicked at a knee, forcing him to the ground and giving him the perfect angle to grab
his neck and twist.

The body fell in a heap, and Arno bent down to loot it, finding a knife – it was dull but it would
serve.

... Next time he went on a "simple fetch quest" he was arming himself to the teeth.

... Élise...

Not drinking.

"Stay back, monster!" the boy cried out, backing up as he saw Arno approach with the knife.

Honestly... "I'm not a ghost," Arno corrected. "Madame Margot sent me."

The boy, Léon, stilled in surprise. "Madame Margo?" He shook his head. "You are trying to
confuse me!"

"Woman in her forties, dark brown hair streaked with grey, large hips, torn apron," Arno recited.
"Brown eyes and a mole under her left, right here," he added, pointing. "Still confused?"

Léon blinked, and didn't react as Arno knelt down and cut the ropes. Freedom made the boy jump,
and Arno had to grab his shoulder to halt him.

"Not so fast," he said, "We need quiet to get out of here. The whole reason I came is because I'm
looking for a manuscript. It was taken from a tomb under Saint-Denis. Louis IX, sound familiar?"

Léon actually smiled, face lighting up. "I have it," he said confidently. "It's in my fortress, we can
get it later."

"Then let's go," Arno said, taking the knife and hiding it in the small of his back. "Here," he said,
taking the leftover rope. "Wrap this around your wrists, pretend you're still caught. I'll take you
outside without raising suspicion."

Léon looked at the rope doubtfully. "They all know me here," he said. "Nobody will fall for that."

Arno gave a dark smile. "Watch," he said.

"No, I know a better way," the boy said, darting away from the rope and then ducking into a tiny
crawlspace.
Arno frowned. "You know I can't fit in there," he said, crouching down, but the boy either didn't hear or ignored him. *Stupide petit morveux...* Arno straightened and took the tunnel below where he had fallen from, vaguely following the direction Léon had gone. He tried to call his eagle for help, but he had already used up all the time he had getting there, his head threatened to split almost as soon as he thought of it. Rubbing his temples, he hoped the child didn't lead him into an entire band of raiders – he could do precious little with a dull knife if they swarmed him like bees.

He heard the raiders before he saw them, making his steps slow as he tucked around a corner. The *petit morveux* was just barely visible, in the shadows of some barrels. Arno moved over, pushed him deeper into the shadows for his safety. "Why did we stop?" he asked, keeping his voice light to hide his irritation.

Léon pointed over the barrels and Arno straightened slightly, counting. Eight raiders, all huddled around one of the bonfires, flat bits of metal serving as plates as they ate. Perfect, they were distracted.

Arno gestured that Léon follow, the boy gulped and shook his head, unwilling to budge an inch. "They won't see us," he explained, but the *petit homme* kept shaking his head, unwilling to move.

"I thought that earlier," he whispered back.

Arno took a deep breath through his nose, realizing the boy wasn't going to move. He only had two days here – a day and a half, now, possibly less. He couldn't afford this...

Did Élise feel that way? Frustrated when Arno wanted to help the people of France instead of pursuing Germain? Was that why her words were always so harsh?

A low growl rumbled deep in his chest and he stood to his full height, marching boldly down to the bonfire and grabbing the first raider he could get his hands on and snapped his neck. The others jumped to their feet, shouting, some moving in to avenge their friend, but Arno pulled out the dull knife and gutted the first person who tried to move in. These were not worth the blood he was spilling, utterly untrained and laughable to him. He moved through the seven like water, and in only a dozen strikes all of them were down, bleeding or dead. He looked up to the barrels, put his hands on his hips. "Happy now?" he called up.

"How did you do all that?" Léon asked, running down. "You're the best fighter I've ever seen!"

Arno rolled his eyes. "I wouldn't go *that* far," he muttered.

Léon moved up one of the ramps, steps confident. "Where did you train?"

"In Paris," Arno answered.

"Whoa... I practice behind our house. I don't really have anyone to train with. All the freedom fighters are in Paris, like you."

Freedom... Arno shut down that thought, asking instead, "What about your mother?"

"*Madame* Margot?" the boy asked. "She's not my mother. My mother is Morisco, a Moor. She had to go back to Espagne, that's why she had to leave me at the orphanage. She'll come back when France is safe; with all the churches shut down it should be really soon."

Arno pursed his lips to prevent himself from saying the truth: the mother had abandoned him. Just like... just like Élise had abandoned him... under the Temple. She had chosen her revenge over Arno. She had chosen... she hadn't loved him the same way he loved her, and he was a fool to
deluding himself that it had anything to do with the *malaise* or her thirst for vengeance. Élise might have had all of his heart, but he did not have all of hers, and now he wondered if he ever did. He would think back to their adventures as children, all the trouble they would get into, and all her chiding, calling him a baby and pushing him to go further. All their lovemaking, the Arno practically ritualized how to please Élise to the fullest, but he could count on one hand the times she pleased him. Had it always been like that? Had Arno always been... the lesser half of the relationship?

He closed his eyes, reminding himself of Condorcet and this boy having the papers.

Léon crawled over to an unassuming mass of stones, getting on his knees and pulling the pile apart. "You're going to need a weapon if we're going to save France," he was saying, pulling the rocks aside.

The boy had such dreams – no, they were just delusions. Just like Arno's. "Don't worry about it," Arno said. "Just leave that to the profess—where did you get that?"

"I stole it yesterday," he said brightly. "That's why they were after me."

Arno took the weapon, a sword, and pulled it out of its sheath. "This is an officer's sword," he muttered, giving it a test swing. Perfectly balanced, well made. The boy got this from the raiders? Impossible, nobody down here was rich enough or skilled enough for something like this.

The cannon above... could the military *actually* be here?

"It's a good weapon, isn't it?" Léon said, face bright. "See? I know what I'm doing."

Arno looked at the boy.

"And what exactly *are* you doing?" he asked, "Stealing this," he waved the officer's sword, "From a military man?"

"Saving France!" Léon said brightly. "I need a real sword to practice and get better at killing the bad guys. But now that you're here, it's going to be a lot easier."

"Listen," Arno said flatly. "We have to get the manuscript first."

Léon looked at Arno, suddenly guarded. "Why? Is the manuscript important?"

... Arno took a deep, silent breath. "It's the bad guys who want it," he said, hoping he sounded convincing. "We have to protect it. From the enemies of France."

And just like that, the boy brightened again. "I see," he said. "It contains secrets for the Republic!"

Arno bit his lip, the *petit homme* nodding to himself and moving through the tunnels again, beyond the savagery Arno had just committed and through another narrow corridor. Arno kept his eyes open in the dark, pupils dilated to their maximum and soaking every detail. Léon moved through the tunnels with the speed of someone who knew them well, ducking when he had to and always utterly still when one of the excavators was near. They reached a sheer wall, and the boy frowned, looking up. "There used to be a ladder here," he whispered.

Eyes tracing the sheer face, Arno could see a rout. "Get on my back," he said, kneeling down. Léon did so hesitantly, and Arno straightened, getting used to the weight before backing up and taking a running start. He reached the first handhold perfectly, and started making his way up.
"Whoa... You're better than all the stories," Léon said.

"That's because the stories aren't true," Arno said, his bitterness starting to bleed through. Must be late in the day, the craving for burgundy was starting to build in him. "There aren't any heroes in Paris."

"That's not true," the petit homme said. "Look at you!"

Arno winced, desperate to get above ground. He cleared the wall and he recognized his location. He let Léon down, the boy already sprinting forward and to the exit. The air was muggy again, now that they weren't so deep underground, and the angle of the sun said they had spent most of the afternoon below ground. Arno followed the boy around the carved out land, up the hill. He realized belatedly that he was heading towards the military camp, and Arno was quickly bent down, hissing for the boy to come back.

The skeleton crew now had at least half a dozen soldiers, trained and seasoned in war and far more dangerous than the raiders below. Arno bit back a curse, wondering how he could find a uniform coat; he'd feel a lot better if he could blend in...

And then he saw him.

Bicorn hat, tricolor pinned to it. No longer in a captain's uniform – that's right, he was promoted to general after he was wounded during the Siege of Toulon. Napoléon Bonaparte. Wasn't he one of the leaders of the Army of Italy? What was he doing here?

"I take it you're Rose?" Bonaparte was saying, an adjunct or an aide de camp at his shoulder.

"Commandant Bonaparte," the thick necked Rose said, saluting.

"Any progress to report?"

"Only this," Rose said, now polite and formal in his speech. He handed over a piece of paper. "This is in the tunnels, spent the whole day making the sketch as accurate as possible."

Bonaparte nodded, pulling something out and holding it to the piece of paper. Arno could just make out the shape, a key of some kind...? Léon looked ready to run up and take it, and Arno kept a painful grip on his shoulder, pulling him closer to him, deeper into the stretching shadows.

"Find me the door that this key unlocks," Bonaparte said, voice smooth, "and I shall reward you beyond your wildest dreams."

Rose saluted again, backing up and leaving the camp. Bonaparte watched for a time, before turning to his adjunct. "No one of import has inquired after our activities?" he asked.

"Rumors, sir, about someone asking questions about a man named Condorcet; he was on the Assembly before he was guillotined."

Bonaparte narrowed his gaze. Arno had seen that before, the shrewd look he had at Tuileries, when they were both looking for treasure of different types. He never did learn what he'd found in that armoire de fer. "Then why did you summon me?" the general was asking, "with such urgency that I had to leave Nice to come here? Was it Rose?"

The aide de camp pursed his lips, measuring himself, before saying: "Commandant, if I may, why do you employ such a man as Rose to find the Temple you showed us? He cares nothing for us or our aims, he hires former brigands and petty day laborers, lets children sneak into the camp and
steal things. He's self-serving and unprincipled and—"

"What does a rat want?" Bonaparte asked suddenly, magnetic eyes suddenly flat.

The adjunct frowned. "Food of course," he said finally, throwing a half-eaten apple to a pair of rats at the end of the camp, near Arno and Léon. Arno frowned, tugging the boy closer, seeing the spilled oil the rats waded through to get their meal.

Bonaparte nodded. "You appeal to their self-interest," he said. "That makes them your allies. But you've miscalculated, Lieutenant. Rats are animals, and so are humans. The human animal. I know the human animal. What they fear, what they love, what they want. Is Rose a bad man? Undoubtedly. Will he plan to betray us? Most assuredly. But what you fail to understand, Lieutenant, is that I can control him. I can control any man, and turn him to what is best for France. And if Rose is so foolish to overreach his place..."

Arno grabbed Léon as soon as he saw the motion, heard the gunshot and the flash of heat as the oil caught fire, the rats screeching as they burned, running away.

*Merde,* what had happened to the man? What changed him? Or was Bonaparte always this ruthless? This callous with human life? They had met with Bonaparte putting a gun to him, would he have pulled the trigger under different circumstances? Arno thought... was everyone in his life so callous to those around them? Was this always going to happen? People getting power and abusing it as soon as they have it: the king, the Girondist and their war declarations, the Jacobins, Robespierre, now the reactionaries determined to purge the Jacobins the way the Girondins had been purged, did it ever stop? One was cut down and another took his place, the cycle never ended, was there ever any point...?

"The masses will gladly renounce their freedom," Bonaparte was saying, "if all can entertain the hope of rising to the top. With the artifact inside the Temple I will bring them the illusion of hope. And I will lead us to glory. My sights, Lieutenant, are far grander than a greedy capitaine of some graverobbers. The next time you want to pull me away from unifying France, do pick a better excuse. I ride for Nice now."

Bonaparte left, the adjunct saluting as he did so.

Arno all but dragged Léon from the camp, down the hill and away from the windmill. He kept a firm grip on the child as they moved back into the Franciade proper, mind lost in the hurt.

"We have to stop him," the boy was saying. "You saw him! That little man wants to find a treasure down there that will let him... let him... we have to save the people of France!"

Arno shook his head. "Rescuing them only delays the inevitable," he said. "If we stop the Commandant, another would just take his place. It's pointless to even try."

Léon looked up at Arno as he was tugged down the streets. "What's wrong with you?" he demanded.

... More like what wasn't wrong with him. Arno was a mess, he knew it, was desperate to leave France to stop being it; needed somewhere that didn't hurt so much so he could patch what was left of him together and be... be whatever he wanted. Not a drunkard, he'd done that once and it wasn't to his taste, but damn if he couldn't taste a bottle right now, feel the burn down his throat, wish he could be whisked away to that hazy world where he was so pleasantly numb...

He looked down to Léon, unable to find the words... no, having *too many words,* to explain what
had happened to him. He settled for the obvious: "You're going to get yourself killed for nothing *petit homme.*"

Léon's face changed, the brightness that had lasted all through the tunnels fading away to something darker, more guarded, an echo of Arno's own face as he finally wrenched himself free of Arno's grip.

"You're not a hero at all, are you?" the boy accused. "The manuscript at my fortress, it has nothing to do with anything, does it?"

Arno gave the boy a level glare, crossing his arms. "Those papers are my ticket out of the country," he said honestly. "Away from all the bloodshed."

Léon was aghast, the *petit homme* stepping back in horror. "What about the future?" he demanded, voice raising. "A free France where we all take care of each other?"

Arno had had enough. "It's a lie," he said, "all of it. Everybody wants to be taken care of but nobody is willing to take care of anybody, and in the end you're alone, and everybody is gone. You need to grow up: Forget France, you're on your own."

That's what Arno needed. To be on his own. To stop needing Élise, or M. de la Serre or Mirabeau or—

"What happened to turn you into such a *connard,*" Léon hissed.

Arno winced, but he knelt down. He wouldn't condescend to this child, not like Rose did. He would tell him the truth. "You can't save her," he said, pain bleeding through his words as he admitted the cold truth. "She's never coming back. Nothing you can do will ever fix the decision she made or change the fact that she left you. The truth is she didn't love you. Not the way you wanted, not the way you needed, and in the end, *she chose herself.*"

Léon was staring, face pale, his tiny Adam's apple bobbing as he gulped. Then, rejection.

"You are just like *them,*" he hissed, turning and running away.

Arno was left, kneeling in the mud, having just exposed his pain, and had it thrown back in his face.

... *Merde.* To hell with it, he was getting a drink.

Arno glanced at his glass, trying to remember how many drinks he had had; he couldn't remember, but he was perfectly fine with that.

"*She chose herself.*"

That was what it boiled down to. Élise put herself first, and the more Arno thought about it, the more he realized it stretched back long before the *malaise,* and he couldn't reconcile all the love he had for her and his *unmitigated stupidity* in failing to see how uneven the relationship was. All he could think about was every dark thing she had ever said, her accusations that he didn't love her, that he didn't love M. de la Serre, saying he wanted her to fail. All he could think about was the days she lay in bed, unable to get up, her impulsive acts of rage, and he *didn't know what more he could have done.* He had broken her, and nothing he did could fix her, and *why hadn't he been enough,* and all he wanted to do was forget everything.
"... I've been looking for you, monsieur."

Arno looked up, surprised he could still see straight. Surprised he could still hear straight.

Mme Margo sat on the other side of the table, bringing an extra candle to see better. It was full dark outside. "Thank you for returning Léon."

"... Good luck with him," Arno offered, unwilling to unleash his bitterness on the madame but needing to express in some way what exposure to that petit homme had done to him.

The older woman didn't leave, sat with him as he finished his cup and moved for the bottle. Empty. Bon sang.

He turned back to her, saw she was staring at him, eyes full of...

"I had a son, once," she said softly.

"... I'm sorry," he said, offering condolences.

She shook her head. "No. He's alive. Or he was, when I left him." She looked down, a ghost of a memory shadowing her face. "I began the orphanage afterward."

Arno shook his head, leaning back. "Now that's love," he said dryly.

"Sometimes love is a prison," she said, the words breaking through Arno's numbness with the accuracy of the words. His eyes widened, tilting his head to see her better. "His father taught me that," she continued, still looking down to her memory. "I loved that man with all my heart, but nothing I did was ever enough for him, and he took from me whenever it pleased him – even when I didn't want it, even when I was in pain."

What... what was she saying... why did her words echo his thoughts... what...?

"My son... as he grew older he took his lessons from his father, and that was when I knew I was nothing to either of them." She looked up, and her eyes were glassy, bright in a way that reminded Arno of Charlotte Corday. Bellec's other student had an eerie calm to her, and even through her tears Mme Margot had the same serenity as her eyes looked back to the past. "I walked to the river," she said. "Only it was frozen over, and I couldn't break the ice to go in. I didn't have anywhere else to go, and I didn't know how to escape the prison."

A dry sob escaped her, and she looked down again, pulling her dirty apron up to clean her face. Arno stared, uncertain what to say, uncomfortable that he felt so like her, so isolated, so... in prison. That was what being with Élise had been like, at the end: a prison. He dreaded going home at night and left in the morning as soon as possible, he watched her moods with razor sharp focus, hated every inch of their arguments, hated drinking after them just to settle his mind, and yet this woman knew every facet of what it was like, Mme Margot did. Just as Charlotte Corday had known about Bellec's turns, his vulgarity, his drunkenness.

Kindred spirit. That was the word Arno was looking for.

Mme Margot was a kindred spirit.

Once she was in control of herself, she looked up, and in her eyes was steel. "This," she said, gesturing, "the orphanage, this is my true calling. This is how I can make the world we live in better, by showing those children just the slightest bit of love so they can recognize it if – when," she corrected herself, "it graces them in the real world. They deserve to know happiness even when
the whole of France is tearing itself apart. They're growing up knowing nothing else before the Revolution, all they hear is how people in Paris are trying to save the country, protect it from our myriad enemies, and all of them think they are heroes.

"That's not what we are," Arno corrected.

Margo leaned forward. "What does it matter if you are or aren't?" she asked. "If it gives those children – if it gives Léon – something to believe in, something to hold onto while he processes what his own mother did... why would you take that away from him?" she demanded. "Léon tells me you could have been the savior of France, and you in turn remind him exactly why his mother left him, as if he didn't already know. You couldn't even let him grieve as he saw fit."

Arno blinked, a little slow to pick up. "I told him the truth," he said.

"No," she countered. "You told him your truth. Nothing is true in these times, not the papers, not the spies from foreign countries, not the clergy; all anyone can say is what they believe, but that Declaration that was written at the beginning of all this said it shouldn't be done if it hurts another. And that's what you've done."

She leaned back, away from the candlelight. "Is there anything wrong with being a hero for a little while, if it grants a small kindness on a grieving child?"

Mme Margot stood, finally, and looked down at Arno.

"Or would you prefer to be a drunkard for the rest of your days?"

Chapter End Notes

Ah, the DLC.

Yet again we pull from real life. After the Escape, the two of us felt such relief that we didn't have to be around the abuse and negativity anymore, and in equal measure we felt guilty that we left because we were so convinced that our abuser couldn't survive without us, would end up killing themselves if we weren't around to assuage every negative thought and absorb it like the little sponges we were supposed to be. The first week we were gone we literally sent an email every morning explaining how to cook our abuser's meals (since we had been in charge of that since we were teenagers), where to shop for food, and how to make withdrawals from the bank and other chores that we had taken over. All because we felt obligated to do so.

As always, these kinds of things are complicated and messy. Things don't just "get better" when the abuse is over. Relationships with abusers are filled with honestly happy and good memories, and those are what sustain someone, thinking "If only x, then things can go back to Y," especially if the victim - like Arno and us - is convinced it's their job to look after the abuser.

But enough about that, the DLC itself is very well written, this is the most coherent Arno's character has ever been in the game and there isn't much we needed to add other than trim the gameplay fat (especially in the next chapter).

Among other things Arno finds yet another kindred spirit like Charlotte Corday and
Urbain Fabre, this time in Mme Margot, who was so abused she tried to drown herself. Ignoring the utilitarian use of having someone who's a fellow abuse survivor share their stories, it also points out that people suffering abuse actually aren't alone. Being in that environment can be absolutely suffocating and isolating, and if anyone out there reading this fic is suffering anything like abuse - you aren't alone. There ARE other people who understand. Do whatever you can to find them. We literally went to therapy in secret to get the help we needed.

Arno meanwhile keeps acting like a goddamn Assassin without realizing he freakin' is one: he's curious for the sake of curiosity before stopping himself and asking what it has to do with him, he's a bloody chameleon going from one guise to the next with simple changes, and he actually recited the first tenet of the Creed while he was protecting Léon, did anybody notice? Gawd, how long will it take for him to notice...?

Next chapter: For I am an Assassin
17 Thermidor, Y2 (August 4, 1794)

Arno woke up blearily with light trying to pierce through his eyes and into his brain. *Ergh, not morning...* Where was he again? Not Paris. Okay that was good. Still in France. *Merde.*

Slowly, other bits of memory started to reconstitute. Bonaparte was after some artifact below ground... Having some sort of key that only needed a door to be found... Dom Poirer and conversing... Léon... being a hero...

He groaned and buried his head further into his pillow, trying to block out the light. *Diable.* He'd have to make it up to Léon somehow...

But he only had today to get that damned manuscript before he had to start riding to Marseilles to get to Tissot's ship.

Arno let out a long, weary sigh.

If he rode late into the night, he might be able to shave off a day's travel to Marseilles...

Fine.

An hour later, with a splitting headache and squinting at the morning light, Arno shuffled through the streets of Franciade, cursing light, wine, and his dependency on it.

He arrived at the red house and knocked on the door.

"*Madame Margot?*" he called softly.

The door opened and there she was, a four-year-old in her arms, and a six-year-old clinging to her petticoats. One look at him, and she smiled. "He's out back."

Arno nodded and was let into the house and he bit back a sigh of relief to be out of the far-too-bright sunlight. The back contained a small, walled in yard. One corner was devoted to a small garden, one wall had laundry hanging, and in another corner was an old tree being banged at by Léon and a stick.

Arno walked silently up behind Léon, who seemed to be hitting at the tree with his—it wasn't a stick it looked to be an old broom handle—might, clearly angry about something.

Arno let out a sigh. "*Petit homme,*" he greeted.

Léon immediately swung around, eyes wide, "sword" up.

Arno gave a flat stare. "We have, at best, two days before I need to leave to catch my ship."

"So what?" Léon replied testily.

Arno rolled his eyes. "So you don't want sword lessons?"
Léon's eyes immediately brightened before going back to guarded. "And the enemies of France?"

"One thing at a time, petit homme. If you can't swing a sword, you can't help me deal with them."

The delight that washed over Léon was palpable. "Bien sûr, monsieur! How do we begin?"

Arno narrowed his eyes, assessing, and Léon immediately stood straighter under the inspection.

"Right. There are two things a swordsman needs before he can swing a sword well."

Léon nodded eagerly, eating it up.

"Strength, and endurance." Arno knelt down to Léon and gently guided Léon's arms and broomstick. Both arms were straight out, holding the broomstick, and Arno kept his hands just under Léon's. "A fight, when you have all the advantages, will be very short, and there won't even be a contest. You can't plan on that always happening. A regular one-on-one fight lasts anywhere from three to ten minutes. More enemies takes longer. Hold this broom like this, without touching my hands, for as long as you can."

Léon nodded firmly, his face in tense concentration. Arno started counting out the seconds. At two minutes, it was clear Léon was struggling, and at just over three minutes, Léon's shaking arms touched Arno and he called the time.

"That was hard!" Léon exclaimed.

Arno nodded. "The next thing we'll do is simple." Arno stood and crouched into a fencing stance. Léon smiled eagerly and tried to mimic him and Arno got down to his knees to adjust footing and bend of the boy's knees. "This will be the same idea, you need to hold this as long as you can, because most fencing forms are based on this bent-knee posture." Sure enough, it didn't take long for Léon's legs to start trembling.

"Alright, petit homme, there are two things you can do that will, over time, fix these." Arno stood, brushes off his knees. "First, anything that requires lifting for Madame Margot, you are now in charge of. She needs to get a flour delivery, you're doing it. She needs a heavy pot or pan, you're fetching it for her. The more lifting you do, particularly from a crouch, the stronger you'll get. If Madame Margot doesn't have anything for you to lift, you'll be hanging from your fingertips to try and improve your strength."

"Got it!"

Arno then spent the next hour teaching Léon one very simple fencing stance and "fencing" back and forth very slowly with him until he felt Léon had the motions down. This was familiar from his time teaching under Agustin.

Léon was sweating and hungry by the time they finished, arms and legs shaking, and Arno sent him to go wash up. By now, the sun was beating down on him, and the muggy hair made his clothes feel like they were clinging to him. He headed inside to try and remind his headache that he didn't need it anymore, thank you, and that it was time to go away. The dimmer interior of the orphanage was far better for Arno, and he helped Madame Margot start getting lunch going.

"You know how to cook, Monsieur?" she asked, surprised.

"I did work at a café for a brief while when I was in Paris. I fetched all the ingredients our cook would need for the day and sometimes I'd watch her. When I was a child, I was a houseboy and on rare, very rare, occasions, I'd get to help in the kitchen. I know enough to make things palatable
and edible. That's about it."

Mme Margot smiled.

Lunch was a chaotic affair, with a half-dozen children needed to be fed and few wanting to wait as the littlest were tended to. Arno did what he could, keeping the older children at bay and working with them, giving Mme Margot time to feed the youngest. Léon, oddly, was a great help. Once the youngest were set, the oldest were fed and Mme Margot took the youngest upstairs to set them to bed and Arno focused on keeping the oldest children occupied.

Finally, once all the children were fed, Arno sat down to have his own meal. His headache started to fade as he ate, but all he wanted was wine to drink, which Mme Margot, wisely, didn't let him touch at all.

Léon stayed with him, eagerly chatting away as Mme Margot finally settled down to have her own lunch.

Arno looked to Mme. Margot. "I'll be heading out this afternoon; I need to find someone."

"I'll come with you!" Léon declared.

Arno turned, offered his flattest stare, and raised an eyebrow.

"What? We're saving France!"

"What did I tell you this morning about strength and endurance. You need to rest up this afternoon. You worked hard all morning, but your limbs are still shaking, correct?"

"N-no they're not!"

Arno put on his unimpressed face. "And another question. Did you understand anything you overheard yesterday?"

"Enough to know that those were the enemies of France!"

"But can you actually explain what their plan is?"

Léon scowled.

"To fight the enemies of France, it's not just sword work. There's a lot of debate and reasoning," Arno explained, using his spoon for the last of the stew. If only there was bread to soak it up...

"The best defenders of France never lifted a blade, they used only their words, like..." Arno paused, feeling washing over him, "like Mirabeau and Danton. To defend France requires intelligence. Being able to judge situations." Arno offered a hard look. "When did you last study?"

"Wh-what's that got to do with anything?!"

"Right, so while you're resting your achy limbs, you're going to catch up on your studies this afternoon."

"But! But!"

Arno turned to Mme Margot. "I'll be back this evening. Earlier, if things go well."

"I understand," she said, eyes sparkling.
"Wait a minute!"

Arno stood, and brought his dishes over to the sink.

"I'm coming with you!"

"Not if you want to do something this evening," Arno replied lightly.

"This evening? What?"

Arno shut the door behind him and slipped away.

"That's not fair!" he could hear behind him.

Arno ducked down an alley and then climbed up to the roofs.

Now, to find that aide-de-camp, and find out more about that golden key.

Now that he was above, he took a moment to just breath.

...Working with Léon had... felt good. For a few hours, he wasn't feeling the loss/regret/confusion that was swirling around him about Élise and Germain, he'd been able to teach, which he hadn't done since being at Café Théâtre, and he hadn't realized how much he missed it. Maybe when he got to Egypt, that would be what he'd do. He could remake himself as a fencing instructor. He filed that thought away for later. He gently called for his eagle, and immediately regretted it.

Right. Hangover still hanging over.

But still, he'd seen fireworks popping over the market place, so he headed in that direction, sticking to the roofs for speed and to avoid detection. The last thing he wanted was for a description of him to reach Bonaparte.

Once he reached the market, he sat down and observed for a while. This market was closest to the military camp, so Arno saw several soldiers, likely off duty, and noted that the market had an astounding variety of wares from all across Europe.

Ah, there you are. Thankfully without needing to call his eagle, Arno saw the aide-de-camp perusing the stalls. He could just make out the lieutenant's face, and it was clear he wasn't pleased. Arno followed from the roofs, staying close, but not letting his shadow be seen. The lieutenant was clearly being cautious, looking around frequently.

And where are you scurrying to?

Eventually the lieutenant reached the outskirts of the city and looked around repeatedly before entering a dilapidated home. Arno watched carefully, and saw a barefoot man, thin shirt against the Thermidor heat, almost sickly pale like he hadn't seen the sun, enter the building. Raider. Arno silently climbed down and hung by an open window before checking inside, and slipping in. Through loose floorboards, Arno could see the lieutenant stiffly pacing by the raider.

"You weren't followed?"

"Of course not," the man replied, at complete ease.

The lieutenant nodded, stopping to face the man. "What do you have for me this time?
"Silver," the raider replied. "Nearly enough to fill a chest. Lots of jewelry from old queens."

The lieutenant nodded, and Arno could just barely see a greedy smile. "Give it to me."

The raider nodded. "The Commandant still suspects nothing? I heard you had him come here."

The aide-de-camp snorted. "Capitaine Rose is an issue. I was hoping that the Commandant would deal with him. Alas, it seems he is far too occupied in Nice. The lieutenant let out a heavy sigh. "Regardless, your usual fee, plus a promotion, will come down through the usual lines tomorrow."

The raider shifted his stance, and even though he was only seeing the back of his head, Arno knew the dirty man was smiling. "Très bon. A pleasure doing business with you."

The lieutenant nodded and the raider shuffled out.

*All alone. Perfect.*

Arno descended heavily down the stairs, letting his presence be known and he clapped his hands as he stepped forward. "That was lovely," he complimented. "So much information."

The Lieutenant was clearly pale and sweating, and not just from the Thermidor heat.

"I'll have you arrested!"

"You will do no such thing," Arno countered, keeping his head and hood low and keeping the sunlight behind him to keep his face in shadow. "Give me that golden key or I will reveal your thievery."

The lieutenant scoffed. "I'm merely seeking a harmless profit!"

"Like a rat hungry for apples?"

The lieutenant paled even further. "How did you—"

"Surely," Arno replied lightly, "the Commandant will find the comparison... Enlightening."

"I don't have it on me," the lieutenant said stiffly.

Arno flashed his eagle. "Right hand breast pocket. Because you don't trust Capitaine Rose to not lift it for himself."

"Fine, take it!" the lieutenant pulled it out and threw it at Arno. "This is madness anyway. All that treasure and we're trying to find a non-existent door."

Arno barked a bitter laugh. He'd never have thought a sword that could spill lightning could exist. It did. The door likely did as well.

"Merci. Now get out of my sight. Go back to your profiteering."

"Connard," the lieutenant bit out as he stalked towards the door.

*Bien. Arno watched the lieutenant head down the street before slipping back up to the roofs. He tucked the key into his own breast pocket and headed to his room. The evening was going to be very eventful, if things went badly, so he wanted to be sure he was armed. He'd already had the officer's sword and the dull knife from the previous days' excursions, but as he went through his bags, he also grabbed his lockpicks, a few smoke bombs that Tissot had insisted he take along, and
some cherry bombs.

He looked at Charlotte's hidden blade for a long, long time. When she had given it to him, she had said that he was an Assassin. He didn't believe her, but he couldn't part with it any more than he could part with his father's broken watch. The one time he had worn it was to go after Germain. Élise had died.

Arno shook his head. He couldn't look at the blade as what it represented. He had to think in terms of what he would be facing in a maze of tunnels and ossuaries underground. In which case, the hidden blade was ideal. A quick death, and silent. With a heavy sigh, he rolled up his coat cuff and slid on the bracer.

He wondered what was below ground that had Bonaparte so invested in searching. So invested that he aimed... for what, ruling France? The world? What "illusion of hope" was Bonaparte searching for?

And where had he heard of artifacts and temples before?

*You're not ready for that yet, boy. You barely understand the Assassin Templar war, you'd walk right out if you knew about the artifacts.*

Bellec had mentioned something about artifacts. A box his father had been carrying...

*You'd walk right out if you knew about the artifacts.*

Arno stopped dead in the streets.

Artifacts...

Germain's sword. It's odd design. Arno had seen strange grooves in it, and it wasn't any metal he could recognize when he had hidden it down in the Temple under piles of bones. It could shoot lightning.

*You'd walk right out if you knew about the artifacts.*

Arno suddenly felt very, very cold in the hot, muggy Thermidor air. What sort of magic or sorcery did these artifacts hold? And Assassins strove to... what? Protect them? Destroy them? Not use them, that much was obvious from the records he'd studied before he understood what the hell an "artifact" was. And the Templars... well... if Germain had been any indication, they would use them.

"*Merde,*" he cursed. There weren't enough foul words in existence for this lovely little revelation. *Diable,* there was no way this was the same, right?

*Merde, merde, merde, merde, merde.*

He was suddenly very, very glad that he was armed to the teeth.

He reached the orphanage and knocked politely. Léon was the one who greeted him brightly, "We can go now, right?"

Arno stepped in and closed the door. "*Non,*" he replied with a lightness he was certainly not feeling at the moment. "We aren't going anywhere on an empty stomach."

Léon's pout was petulant, but he didn't argue the point.
"Are your limbs feeling better?"

"Oui..." Léon grumbled. "Just sore."

Arno nodded. "Again, practice and time. You don't become a swordsman overnight. It takes years of practice and hard work. Getting to be good at anything takes years of practice and hard work."

Arno once more helped with dinner, though less with the preparing and more with the wrangling of children. Some of the older ones kept reaching for his sword, and Arno just kept slipping out of reach.

Arno eventually sat down for his own meal while Mme Margot got the children washed up for bed. Léon stubbornly stayed nearby.

Right. Might as well explain the events of the evening.

"Once I am done, we're going to start looking for the artifact that the Commandant mentioned."

Léon leaned forward. "But how? Do you have a map to the Temple in your coat?"

Arno smiled broadly and pulled out the map he had filched from Rose under the Basilica. "Maybe," he said lightly. He had studied it earlier. "The entrance that they're looking for has to be down here." He gestured to some of the sketches on the side of the map. "It seems that there are symbols that are guiding them."

"I've seen those before!" Léon was bursting. He ran upstairs immediately, somehow evaded Mme Margot demanding he get washed up for bed, and came barreling back downstairs.

"See!" On the table, Léon dumped what might have been some sort of plate or flat, circular art piece. "A chakram from India."

"What a sly thief," Arno observed. He studied the designs, seeing how closely they matched with the designs on the map.

"So what happens now?" Léon asked eagerly.

"Now you show me your hidden entrance to the caverns."

"Yes!"

"Let's go."

Mme. Margot came in. "And we're are we going?" she asked lightly.

"Go away!" Léon whined. "We're busy."

Arno offered a flat stare.

"Ah, excuse us please, Madame Margot. We have business to attend to."

"Better," Arno murmured, standing and sliding the plate into his waistcoat. "Madame, if you wouldn't mind, I would like for you to accompany us."

"What?"

"We need a good disguise, and a family taking a young child out for a stroll before bed seems as
good as any."


But Mme Margot smiled broadly. "I think that's best," she nodded and Arno was fairly certain that she understood what he would ultimately be doing. "Let me inform Mademoiselle Gagne that she needs to stay a bit longer tonight."

Arno was already folding up the map. "Merci," he said.

Arno held a lantern to light the way and Mme Margot held Léon's hand. It was clear that Léon needed to work on his acting skills, since he didn't look like a tired little boy at all. But they managed, and Léon's insistent tugging was its own story, in a way, to prevent others from looking too closely. They were on the outskirts of town, at the base of a hill and what looked like a rockslide. Léon had let go of Mme Margot's hand and was weaving through the wilderness. Arno followed easily, holding up the lamp, but Mme Margot had to hold up a candle to keep a more careful eye on her footing.

Bien. Now to get to work.

"Léon, you need to stay here."

"Que diable-?"

"Léon," Mme Margo hissed.

He took a deep breath. "You need to protect Mme Margot," Arno explained. "And when I come back out, I might need your help."

Léon was beside himself. "Non! I'm going with you!"

Arno looked hard at the boy, seeing far too much. "What have the heroes of the revolution been fighting for, Léon?"

"A free France!" he replied promptly.

"And a safe France. Where everyone is protected. This is your chance to be a hero of France. Protect Madame Margot."

Responsibility fell heavily onto Léon's shoulders. "I will protect her with my life!"

Arno nodded, held up the lantern, and entered the tunnels.

The map he had stolen was... basically easy to follow. He was only turned around twice. Once he saw raiders and turned down his lantern to sneak around them effortlessly before lighting it back up. It was unsettling to be down here. The Basilica was strange enough with a thousand years of kings and queens and family buried there. This was over a thousand years of people in the ossuaries. Bones piled neatly with no means of determining who was who. Rats scurried about everywhere, running from the light, and the sound varied from muffles to echoes.

Everything here unnerved Arno, and it got stranger as he traveled down another ladder to find no more bones, but instead massive slabs of stones that seemed to be cut with remarkable precision before placement. A few bore the strange grooves he'd seen on that terrifying sword Germain had
wielded. Illusion of hope. Throwing lightning. Arno could feel his stomach churning and his heart quickening.

What the hell was he doing here? He just needed to get the manuscript from Léon. He didn't need to do all this rigmarole to do it. Just follow Léon and get Condorcet's manuscript. He wasn't an Assassin. He shouldn't be doing this.

But he remembered the light in Léon's eyes as he spoke of the heroes of France and of Mme Margot telling him that one could do what one wished as long as it didn't harm anyone else.

So he went deeper underground.

Ahead seemed to be a massive cavern, and Arno dimmed his light, crouching and slipping forward. The fabled door that everyone sought was massive, but easy to spot by the carving of the odd key that the lieutenant had so kindly given him. The walls were sheer and smooth, but of such a massive size, Arno had no idea how it was accomplished. The buildings of France used large stone blocks, but nothing to the degree of this solid stone. Was it carved out of the earth itself? And if it wasn't the sheer wall with the massive door, the walls were made of massive blocks still far too large for any man to handle, and off centered. It made no sense. Yet despite the clear solidity of the construction, it was clear that time immemorial had worn it away. What seemed to be stairs of such size as to accommodate cities in procession, decay had collapsed many of them. Wooden platforms and stairs were strewn about, evidence of far more recent construction, with barrels and bags, likely of powder or rubble cleared away, Arno wasn't certain. The modern construction seemed almost infantile compared to the grand structures surrounding him. But in the center of the cavern was a massive stone rectangular prism of some sort of obsidian, carved at the top with an eye radiating light underneath it. Lanterns were strewn around to provide some light, but Arno noticed that the door seemed to be under some sort of blue glow.

What the hell was this place?

In front of the door, in the firelight was the thick-necked Capitaine Rose, raiders around him, glaring at a professional man, tricorn hat askew, glasses pushed up his nose. There was angry conversation going on and Arno carefully navigated the support beams to get closer and understand what was going on.

Finally, he heard Rose explode.

"Are you, or are you not an expert lock pick?!

The professional man shrank back, his tricorn hat falling from his head as he pushed his glasses further up his nose.

Arno watched in horror, as the locksmith stepped forward, trembling, and attempted to put his tools into the keyhole. In horror as he watched lightning build from across the room, below some sort of opening in the ground, and flowed up over everything, turning the cavern as bright as daylight, and coursing through the door. In horror, as the locksmith never had a chance, and was sent flying back, skin smoking, corpse still trembling, scream still echoing.

The raiders were all shuddering, hair standing almost straight up, hushed whispers of fear going about.

Rose just growled. Turning he shot one of the raiders right through the head. "We are opening this door. Anyone else want to cower like a little girl? Now go get another locksmith! Find a different way in! Break down the walls! Anything!" Then he stalked off.
That connard!

Rose was a vile piece of human flesh, cruel and vindictive. Arno bit back his growl and sat back above everything. He needed to think this through. Lightning, electricity, had been discovered by that American, Benjamin Franklin almost... what, forty years ago? What had been learned since then? Arno didn't know, because he didn't read about it. Most of what he'd read dealt with philosophy, all the publications in the streets were about the Revolution. How did one stop electricity?

Arno thought long and hard on what to do.

The one thing he could say with certainty was that electricity moved in a continuous line, whether from sky to ground, sword to Élise, or... He looked back down at the cavern. Where had the lightning started in order to get to the door? Could he break the line so that he wouldn't be hurt when he used the key?

Hmmmmmm...

Carefully, Arno navigated the upper beams and paths of the cavern, keeping his lantern dim as he approached the opening that the lightning had come from. He watched the raiders in the cavern as they nervously flitted about, getting axes and picks to try and chisel away at the wall as far away from the door as they could. Already, echoes of their hammering filled the cavern and Arno nodded to himself.

Silent and careful... Silent and careful.

He climbed down below the cavern and carefully stepped down. Made it. He turned up the wick of his lantern and raised it high above his head to look around.

And immediately bit back a scream as he backpedaled into a wall. He covered his mouth, trying to swallow the panic as he stared up at some sort of... wraith. Bon sang, when the hell had he put bread upside-down on a table to deserve this? What was next, a beast of Gévaudan, or lutin, or quinotaur, or a fucking tarasque? Weren't they supposed to live in a rational age?

Arno continued to stare at the... wraith... the... dame blanche... convinced he was about to die some sort of horrible, excruciating death.

But nothing happened.

After several deep breaths (and then a few more and a fervent prayer for wine...) Arno dared to move. At first, all he could move was the toes in his boots, still choking down the terror, but finally he (slowly) moved. The dame blanche did nothing. Just floated there, a hand raised. Arno waved his lantern from side to side, but nothing changed. Breathing a bit more steadily, Arno started to walk, but still, the dame blanche did nothing.

Arno let out a blast of air from his lungs in relief, and leaned forward, hands on his knees, trying to laugh as quietly as possible and just how fucking ridiculous this was. A dame blanche. Guarding some sort of artifact that could provide the illusion of hope.

Face it, Arno, you've walked straight into a fairy tale.

He raised his lantern and carefully walked over to the dame blanche, and then bowed appropriately. "Your pardon, mademoiselle," he offered, trying to remember the bits of older French that he'd studied with Élise years ago. "My deepest and most sincere apologies for disturbing your slumber, but I seek entrance to yonder gateway."
The *dame blanche* said nothing, did nothing, just floated there. Arno carefully walked around her. Nothing. No reaction.

Well, if she wouldn't say anything, neither would he. Finally he dared to look around (though he still avoided putting his back to her...) and once again raised his lantern. It seemed there was some sort of cave in centuries past, ones from above and filtered down with mud and dirt that had dried out. His lantern's light seemed to reflect symbols on the walls, but he had no idea what they meant. It looked almost like writing, but not of any kind he'd ever seen.

In order to survive a *dame blanche*, one needed to do what she wished, and Arno didn't understand the symbols at all to do so. With a sigh, he called on his eagle in hopes for some sort of hint.

*HE IS HERE! ...MUST MOVE TO AWAIT THE NEXT... TIME TO MOVE... COME...*  

Arno gasped and fell to the ground, clutching his head.  

*Que diable*—

His head was swimming, and whatever those... *whispers* were, it didn't disappear once he cut off his eagle. In fact, his eagle seemed to have united with *something* and information was *singing* in his head.

Make it stop!

But when he looked up to the luminescent symbols again, while they were still foreign and indecipherable, he could somehow understand them.

*Return the disc.*

The whispers kept chattering away and Arno's vision seemed to waver and twist and he clutched at his head harder, avoiding looking at either the *dame blanche* or the strange symbols that he could now *somehow read*, squinting as his eyes watered and his head ached and it made no sense and *what the hell*?

But as he tried to focus his eyes, he noticed something.

Under the *dame blanche* was a circle, and it was faintly glowing.

*YES! RETURN THE DISC! MOVE TO THE NEXT LOCATION!*  

"Urgh..."

That circle under the *dame blanche* was the same size as the "chakram" that Léon had lifted. He pulled out the disk with its unusual symbol on it, and studied it. It seemed to match one of the symbols on the wall. *Return.*

God, if it made the whispers stop, *fine*!

"Your pardon again, *mademoiselle,*" he grunted, still squinting through watering eyes and trying to hear anything beyond the whispers. "I believe I acquired an item that belongs to your honorable self. I shall return it to you at once." He crawled forward, bowed low again, and carefully placed the disc in the circle.

The damn whispers *giggled* triumphantly

The *dame blanche* disappeared, but Arno didn't move at all as he heard screams above him that
made his blood run cold.

"Ghost! Flee if you value your lives!"

"Run!"

"It's real! The ghosts are real!"

"I quit! Get me the hell out of here!"

Slowly, and once again very carefully, Arno climbed, this time up, to the main cavern again.

**HE COMES, HE COMES!**

"Tais-toi," Arno whispered. God, he thought hangovers were bad, that was *nothing*.

Slowly, Arno approached the door. He pulled out his key and reached it forward, very aware that he couldn't very well dodge lightning if this wasn't the correct answer that the *dame blanche* wanted.

He let the key touch the keyhole and waited.

Nothing.

"Allow me," said a voice behind him, gun barrel shoved into his ribs. Arno stiffened cursing that he had been caught unawares, as *Capitaine* Rose moved into his line of sight, snuffing tobacco. "What skill stealing the key from the lieutenant, I was hard pressed to open this without him."

"Listen," Arno said, "You don't know what's behind that door."

"Of course not," Rose said, smiling darkly. "But those that do will pay a lot for whatever it is. Assuming I don't like it for myself."

"No," Arno corrected, feeling a second gun press into his back. "You don't know what you're dealing with."

"Tais-toi," Rose said, snide grin fading into impatience. "The only reason you're even still alive is because you knew how to open this door. You don't need all your limbs to do that." His eyes shifted. "Knock him out 'til we need him."

And, like at Versailles, the butt of a rifle filled his vision to strike his face. This time, however, Arno had training and experience, ducked his head to the side and pulled back as far as he could. He couldn't prevent the strike, but instead of being knocked out he was knocked senseless.

"Should I notify the Commandant?"

"Tell him I resign."

Arno was left locked in his own mind as his head throbbed with the blow, feet dragging along the uneven ground and rope pulling at his wrists and arms. His dull knife and officer's sword were removed from him, something Arno could barely catalogue for the pain in his head. It was worse than his worst hangover, and all he could think to do was moan.

... What now?

What more could he do?
... *What more could he do?*

He had tried for years to undo his mistakes, only to learn when it was too late, that they could never be undone. He had tried to fix the people around him, only to learn at the bitter end that they did not want to be fixed – not Bellec, not Élise – they were content to think the worst of everyone, even Arno himself, and never once bent in their beliefs, rigid and unmoving. Arno had tried and tried and tried, most especially with Élise, and it had all been for naught but more blood and more death. Now it was all gone, Arno was untethered, unmoored, unmade. What could he do if he could not fix his mistakes? What could he do if everything he held onto disappeared?

... Who was he? Who was he if he couldn't keep his father alive? M. de la Serre alive? Mirabeau alive? Bellec alive? Élise alive?

Who was he but a failure?

Moaning, Arno rolled onto his back, wrists pinched behind him, and he fumbled with his feet.

Was failure the only thing he could do? No one could love him, then. Who would want to associate with a failure? Who would want to look after a disastrous mess like him, who would endure the effort it took to put a broken mess like him back together again? No one. No one would want that job. No one would believe in him. No one—

"There you are!"

Arno blinked, realizing dimly that his sight had returned to him. His head still throbbed, but he could hear, see, smell. He was back to his senses, and there, above him, was the *petit homme*.

"... Léon?" he asked, voice rough, confused. "... How did you find me?"

"I snuck back in after *Madame* Margo finally went to bed," the boy said brightly. "Once I knew she was safe I had to come here and make sure you were, too. You're a hero of France, I have to make sure nothing happens to you so you can save us."

... What?

"Léon," Arno said, confused, "I'm not a hero."

"Of course you are," Léon said, "You're from *Paris*. I'm sure all the other heroes there are waiting for you."

Waiting for him? Who would wait for him?


"*Oh, Arno. It's not your responsibility to fix her.*"

"*I wish you could see yourself the way I do.*"

"*The more I get to know what he did to you the more I wish I could resurrect that connard Bellec and kill him all over again.*"

"*Look Victor. You ever need a place to sleep. Look me up.*"

"*But you did enough. That's what counts. You always do enough.*"
"Mon frère..."

"Do what you do best: keep thinking."

"You're the novice that came from a Templar family that rose to every challenge that was thrown to you - even when it wasn't right or fair... you have a heart and a sense of principle, and that's very rare in this world."

"Here, monsieur. Pain can't be starved out or drunk out, it must be eaten out."

Was Léon right? Were they waiting for him? Even after all this time? After all of his mistakes?

"But we believe you will. Rien est vrais. Tout est permis. Your room will still be here when you return."

"... I don't have a home..."

"Yes, you do. You have one with us."

Arno's eyes snapped open, wet with realization. Groaning, he made himself sit up, throbbing head or not, as he realized the truth.

"All anyone can do now is keep doing what they're best at."

"Petit homme," Arno said softly. "... Thank you."

"Of course, monsieur," Léon said, unaware of what he had just given Arno.

Arno wasn't nothing. He wasn't unlovable – he wasn't even unloved, as he was with Élise. Cosette and Charlotte had told him where his home was. Augustin and Fabre expressed what his worth was. Marcel had called him brother. Yvette helped him through his grief with Mirabeau. These were people who would not waste their time with someone unworthy. These were people whose opinions he valued – cherished, even – and though he himself didn't see what they saw, the very fact that they saw something... it meant there was something in him. Something worthwhile.

He had spent the last year, since leaving Versailles, seeking to apologize for his mistakes, realizing he had a second chance: he could be anything, but at the time he didn't know what to be.

Now he did.

He knew what he could be – what he was – what he always was, if those he so valued were to be believed.

He knew what he had to do.

"Let's go," Léon said. "Let's go save France."

"No," Arno correct. "I am going to save France. You are going to go back to your training. And when you're think you're going to fall, when you think the world will break you, you will go to Café Théâtre on Île Saint-Louis in Paris. Do you understand, Léon?"

The boy blinked, and even in the dim light his small face turned bright pink, possibility flooding his features. "Oui, Monsieur," he said.

"Good. Now go."
Léon disappeared into the shadows, and Arno closed his eyes and looked inward. Could he still hear the *dame blanche*?

**HE IS HERE TIME TO MOVE NEXT LOCATION...**

*Merde* that hurt every vessel in his brain, but that meant it was still here, *Capitaine* Rose had not yet found the artifact. There was a window of opportunity, and Rose would fall.

For Arno was an Assassin.

And it was passed time he started acting like one.

Léon had cut his bindings, and Arno rubbed his wrists and took inventory. Knife and sword were gone, but they hadn't found the smoke and cherry bomb, and they hadn't realized his bracer was in fact a hidden blade, meaning he only had Assassin weapons on him. He stood, felt a throb in his head; he touched the sore spot, and his hand came back with blood. He pursed his lips.

"Time to prove them all right," he said to himself, rolling his shoulders and calling for a microburst from his eagle. The *dame blanche*'s voice swept over him again, louder and overwhelming, but with it came a sense of age in the necropolis, what was "new" and what was very, very old. His eagle provided an instinct less like fireworks and more like those beams of light that had been at the locked door and its relief, where the *dame blanche* had been waiting for someone to return her *chakram*. That was where he had to go.

He followed his extra sense, the *dame blanche* not needing an eagle to unite with him.

The door he had unlocked was open, and beyond it was a massive cavern – how far below ground were they? – that had an unholy blue light cast upon everything. The raiders were at the base of a massive series of stone steps, huddled together and afraid.

"What's wrong with all of you?" Rose was saying. "There's treasure to be had!"

"But, the *dame blanche*..."

Rose growled, pulling out a gun and shooting one of the laborers. The spray of blood and the flash of the gun echoed across the chamber. Everyone shuddered, clustering even closer together. Arno crept down the stairs, extending the phantom blade. If they were that scared, then like this... He lifted his arm and took careful aim. Distance was everything, and he crept further and further down. He licked his lips and gave a long, meandering whistle, letting the acoustics bounce it around directionlessly, scaring the raiders even more. One more step, one more... there!

Arno fired and ducked behind a pillar, listening as Rose fell, reloading his phantom blade. No berserk darts, that would make this go quicker. Instead he gave another whistle, pitching his voice up and lengthening the sound to his best impression of a feminine howl.

"It's her!"

"She's back!"

"*It's not worth it!*

Everyone started running up the stairs, tripping and falling over themselves to get out of the temple, screaming and cursing and shouting. They ran right passed him, invisible because they were so lost in their own fear, and disappeared back to the necropolis.
"Mademoiselle," he said politely under his breath, leaving his hide-spot and moving to the bottom of the steps, "Forgive me for invoking your duty to scare the frightened away, and forgive me for spilling blood in your place of rest."

He touched the ground of the temple and looked over to Rose's bo—he was still breathing?!

Arno knelt down. Rose's eyes glared at him, blood pooling not from his neck but from his shoulder. Arno's aim had been off.

"Do you have last words?" Arno offered. "How did you and Bonaparte even learn about this place?"

"... Commandant knew it... don't know how... was told to steal the treasure..."

Arno frowned. "Told? By whom?"

"... Soldier... deliver it... lady Eve..."

His eyes lost their light.

Arno reached up to close them. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I'm sorry you're efforts brought you no reward. Repose en paix." He gave the body a moment of silence, a moment of respect, before checking pockets for pieces of paper or missives, stuffing whatever he could into his shirt for later work.

He stood, eyes taking in the temple with more detail. Walls came up in sheer faces and stout edges, it was almost like the pictures of Egypt Arno had seen in his studies underground. He frowned, wondering if there was a connection. The dame blanche was calling him again, lines of light emanating from the far side of the temple, a ghostly blue color. The far side held a raised dais, thick black stone etched in blue light, unholy and surreal. Arno wondered if he wasn't dreaming, if the dame blanche had been displeased with his work and was seeking to haunt him.

... As if he didn't have enough ghosts.

Upon the dais was a – nom de dieu – a severed head, perfectly preserved, mouth agape, eyes wide and glowing. Who was this?

"Stop," Arno said, holding his head, the pressure unbelievable. "Please... stop..." The whispers were voices, loud and eager and responding to his very thoughts. Too much information, his eagle was unified with something godly and his mind couldn't take it – he was certain he would go mad —! He collapsed to the ground, shaking, head splitting open with information in allegory and metaphor and shadow. He moaned, curling into himself, before at last the voices departed. He was left prostrate, panting, afraid to move.

Eventually he was able to crawl up to his hands and knees. His eyes were dilated, oversaturated
with information, like he'd had eight eagles in his mind. He head hurt from neck to crown, he almost couldn't see straight between the pain and the detail. Arno put a shaky foot under him and worked to stand, swaying on his feet for an eternity before he felt steady.

... move out next location next event next calculation look inside from mouth to mouth...

Geneviève was still there, whispering, the *dame blanche* quietly insistent. Arno moved up to St. Denis' head. The glow was less overpowering now, a dull flicker inside the mouth.

"... Mademoiselle, am I to reach into this venerated man?"

... yes...

Arno took a deep breath. "*Monsieur,*" he said in his most formal tone. "I must disturb your slumber at the missive of another saint. I beg your forgiveness, and pray you understand."

Scrunching his eyes closed, holding his breath, he traced his hand into St. Denis' mouth. His fingers touched a smooth, round surface. Grooves. What...? Could it be...? Arno pulled it out, and when he opened his eyes he saw a sphere of the same metal and design of the sword he had left under the Temple. He frowned. Artifact indeed – would it spit lightning? Arno shook his head, tucking it into his belt. He knew better than to ask questions, the *dame blanche* Geneviève would answer at full volume and he still had to leave this "small shrine" and get back to Léon.

The necropolis above was empty of any souls, and as soon as Arno exited the temple the door closed behind him, content to sleep.

He exited the ossuaries, climbed the hill to see it was dawn, the sun cresting St. Denis' basilica that St. Geneviève had asked to be constructed. The humidity in the air had at last broken, meaning there must have been a thunderstorm last night. He could smell dry air, a breeze touching his skin as the sky gloried in shades of gold.

It was beautiful.

A fresh tear rolled down his face. He scrubbed at it, annoyed.

18 Thermidor Y2 (August 5, 1794)

Léon was asleep at the window, having waited up for Arno. Mme Margot smiled to see his return, the frown and commented on his pallor.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," she said softly, mindful of the boy's sleep.

"... I suppose that is accurate..." Arno said, bewildered.

The *madame* left him to his privacy, touching Léon to wake him up. The *petit homme* moved groggily, rubbing his face and humming as he struggled to wake, until his eyes took in Arno.

"You're back!" he shouted, causing cries upstairs of the younger children. "Have you done it? Has France been saved?"

"I don't know about saved," Arno said, "But disaster has been – at least temporarily – averted."

The boy was ecstatic, running upstairs to let the entire orphanage know adventure had just taken place and that *he* had had a part in it. Arno found himself smiling, and he turned to see the same
smile on Mme Margot. "I need to thank you," he said softly, leaning against the door frame. "A lot has happened in the last few weeks, and I was..." He frowned, looking for the right word. "I was lost. I was a mess. I was..."

"I know," Mme Margot said. "I was there once, too."

"You helped me through it," Arno said, bowing his head. "I didn't think anyone would. Je vous remercie."

"Vous," she repeated. "Such formal words."

"Formality duly deserved," Arno said. He looked up at the ceiling, the clamber of footfalls and the noises of waking children. "If you ever need help, send a letter to Café Théâtre in Paris. We're," he smiled, a little self-effacing. That was the first time he'd included himself in the Brotherhood. "We've taken a beating with the Revolution, but we'll do what we can."

"Oh, I almost forgot!"

Léon had run back downstairs, grabbing Arno's wrist and tugging. "I have to take you to my fortress. You had wanted a manuscript, n'est-ce pas? It's in the back yard."

Arno had one place to visit before he returned to Paris.

He returned to Versailles.

Versailles was much as he'd left it.

And Versailles still hurt, as Arno remembered.

But as he dressed in his old police uniform, the hurt was... duller. His one mistake here, that was five years ago now. There was a distance. And since he wasn't here to drink himself into a stupor, he could notice that while he still held regret, still held guilt, still held the wish to atone, it wasn't foremost in his mind. He dropped off an item at a shop and then walked towards the station. There, he asked and was guided to, a grave.

Élise Dorian, née Élise de la Serre 8 Novembre, 1768 - 10 Thermidor, Year II

Arno lay down a bouquet of fresh roses, just budding.

"Bonjour, Élise," he said softly. "I had thought that I'd write to you, as I do with my father. I was never able to say goodbye to him. I just wandered away. Monsieur de la Serre recommended I write him, and, in a way, I was keeping him alive by doing so. It was a childish way for a child to grieve. I can't do that for you."

He sighed. "I loved you, Élise. With every fiber of my being. I wanted you safe; I wanted you happy; I wanted to help fix you after all you'd been though. But you were too ill. The malaise twisted you, changed you. I'm not sure by how much. I don't know how much of what I saw in you at the end was there before everything went to hell. I can only hope that you are once more as I wish to remember you. That you are finally free of the malaise, that you can now be happy.

"I wasn't able to say goodbye to my father. I'm saying goodbye to you. I will think of you often, probably every day for the rest of my life. But I won't write to you. If I did, I'd have to keep
acknowledging that I never really knew you at the end. That the *malaise* had penetrated you far more than I understood. I'd have to question how you would respond as the you I remember fondly or the you I knew at the end. So I wish you the best. I wish you health. Above all, I wish you peace.”

Arno left, tears streaming down his face, and never returned.

He returned to Paris. It was nearing dawn and he knew how he wanted to approach the day. He had read through Condorcet's manuscript, how the conditions of humanity boiled down the three points: the destruction of inequality between nations, the progress of equality in one and the same nation, and the improvement of man.

Arno could see why Condorcet was an ally of the Assassins. So he quietly entered the Tissot's shop under the cover of darkness and laid the manuscript where it would be easily found by the family. He probably should have met with them, but Arno had a different goal in mind. He had been working to repair his mistakes. He had apologized to many. But there was one group he needed to apologize to before he did the hardest part of the day.

So when Yvette came into the kitchens of Café Théâtre to start cooking for the day, she nearly screamed when she saw him laying out materials for her as he sometimes did when he was up early enough. Claude seemed to have heard something and came running down as best as he could limp and stopped dead when he saw Arno there.

Arno offered a small, embarrassed smile. *Diable*, this felt hard to do for some reason.

Yvette quickly ran to get Charlotte and Augustin, and Arno was inundated with questions as Célestine, Paul, Jacques, and Gretel arrived.

Arno kept his answers mostly truthful. Élise had died, and it wasn't a good death. He had been a drunkard for a while, and had been piecing himself back together since then. The staff may not have had the order of events correct, but Charlotte, Claude, and Augustin likely understood.

The Café was closed for the day, despite Arno's protestations, and they all sat in the dining hall.

"It was wrong of me to leave," he said heavily. "I abandoned all of you when you've never been anything but good to me and tried to help me. You all deserved better than that. I'm sorry."

"Don't you go apologizing," Yvette said crossly, even as tears glittered at the corner of her eyes. "We've all been in love with the wrong person at least once, we've all lost a love in some way. And we've all ignored friends and family when we shouldn't have."

Arno gave a wry, almost bitter laugh. "You were most vocal that Élise wasn't good for me, Yvette," he replied. "I didn't listen."

"Children never do," Charlotte replied gently.

Augustin nodded. "You are still very young, Arno. You need to try things on your own, fall, and learn from mistakes. Some mistakes can never be fixed or undone, but you must still *learn* from them."

There was a weight to what Augustin was saying, and Arno wondered if that tied in to Augustin's interpretation of the Creed.

"I believe I've learned a great deal. Or I hope so."
Célestine was smiling. Had been smiling broadly since she had seen him. "We'll, of course, be helping you to move back in," she said. "I didn't see any bags, will they be arriving soon?"

Arno offered a sheepish smile. "I left a bag upstairs. That's all I have."

"I'll get right to it!" she stood. "I'll air out your room and set everything to where it should be." She kept smiling, then she squealed. "Ooooh! You're back! We weren't the same without you!"

Despite all decorum she came over and hugged him fiercely before rushing upstairs.

Arno shook his head. He turned to Paul. "I know you've been straining under being both intendent and steward. When would you like me to Interview about getting my old job back?"

Paul smiled warmly. "No interview necessary. I'll be glad to have the help. We can start going over the accounts this afternoon."

Arno suspected as much, but that wasn't why he mentioned an interview. A glance at the three other Assassins showed them give a subtle nod. Claude stood, dropped a hand the size of a cannonball onto Arno's shoulder, and disappeared. The Interview would be arranged.

"Oh, I have to get cooking," Yvette smiled. "I'll be making a pâté. I know you love those. It will take some time, and I need to get right to it to make it perfect."

Jacques was just smiling as Célestine had been. His wife, Gretel, had been hired on as an assistant to Yvette and scurried away as well, giving him thanks and welcomes as she passed, grinning just as much as her husband.

"Monsieur," Jacques said. "I don't think we can express how worried we were and how happy we are that you're back." He also stood. "Café au lait?"

"You know me so well."

That left Assassins in the room.

Charlotte and Augustin were beaming pride and Arno wondered why he'd left all this in the first place. But first thing's first.

"I found an unusual artifact," he said, "a strange sphere with odd groves that glows and whispers. It told me it needs to get to Al Mualim in Cairo."

Surprise flitted briefly across their faces. Augustin quickly stood. "I'll arrange it. We'll need a full briefing on what happened." Then he smiled gently. "After your Interview."

Charlotte stood. "It's good that you're back, Arno," she said softly.

"Madame Gouze," he stood, "I have something of yours." He glanced around, made sure it was safe, then pulled up his sleeve to unstrap her hidden blade. "You were right. This was useful. I'm really not sure I can thank you enough for all your support and wisdom over the years."

She took back her hidden blade, eyes shining, and pulled Arno into a hug.

"Je vous remercie, Charlotte."

"You are most welcome, Arno. Never forget that."

To say the rest of the day was a celebration in the Café was something of an understatement.
That night, Arno was finally able to shake of Célestine – *married*, now, to her lover – and her determination to place everything appropriately in his room. True to Charlotte's promise, nothing had been touched: green wallpaper, dark wood, the desk everyone had bought for him, the small table by the bed. The worn rugs had been replaced with richer Persian rugs, soft on the feet, and as Arno sat at an upholstered chair in the corner he looked out over the truest home he'd ever had. He closed his eyes, took in a deep breath, smelling the air.

"I'm home..." he murmured to himself.

The quiet settled over him, and as it did the tears came again. Not grief, not over Élise or his long list of failures, but relief. Relief that he was in a safe place, that he would be looked after here, *healed* here. He wasn't sure what the Brotherhood would do, after all the damage he'd wrought, but here, at least, he could put himself back together. He would learn the value he had, and come to terms with what he'd done in his life.

"Arno..."

He looked up, saw Pontmercy in his green surcoat, at the *fenêtre-porte* leading to the gardens.

Arno sat up straighter, wiping his eyes. "I didn't realize I'd see you so soon," he said.

"I volunteered," Pontmercy said, stepping into Arno's room. "Word's spread like wildfire that you're back."

He nodded. "I'm sorry," he said, first and foremost. "I'm sorry for the pain I caused you, and the damage I did. I can't make it right, but I want to start over." He stood, holding out his hand. "You called me brother, once, and I didn't realize at the time how deep that word goes. I'm not sure I do now, but I want to learn. From you."

Marcel looked down at the hand, looked back at Arno. He stared a long time.

And then, he took his hand.

"We both have a lot to learn," Pontmercy said. "I didn't realize what that woman put you through, and I wasn't there for you when you needed me."

Arno shook his head. "I'd hurt you—"

"We hurt each other," Pontmercy corrected. "Let's do what we can to move past it."

Arno followed Pontmercy out to the gardens, down the back staircase to the streets, and to the ramp that lead to the riverbank of the Seine. Fabre was there, palm rubbing the stump of the arm he had lost at Tuileries, massive axe leaned against the entrance to the sewers.

"The rats were wondering where you'd disappeared to," he said by way of greeting. "They couldn't figure why it was suddenly so easy to sneak into Saint-Germain. Thought the guillotine had found you."

Arno smiled. "Nothing that merciful, unfortunately."

"Nothing that *tragic*," Fabre corrected. "You dying would have been a loss for the entire city of Paris."

"They don't even know who I am," Arno said, shaking his head.
"Tell that to my rats," Fabre corrected again, grin splitting his face. "Tell that to Giraud Durand and his family, tell that to the customers up above who've been asking after you. Hell, tell that to Tissot and Lisette and Gabriel and a bunch of us down here." He freed his hand and slapped it on Arno's shoulder. "It's good to have you back," he said. "Diable, we've missed you."

Fabre took position at Arno's other shoulder, and they entered the sewers, the tunnels twisting and turning before entering the locked grate that took them to the Sanctuary, where his best friend waited. Cosette didn't say anything at first, just smiled and wrapped her arms around him, squeezing with all her might. Arno hugged just as fiercely. "I've missed you," he said into her shoulder. "You did so much for me, and I didn't even realize..."

"You did the same for me," Cosette said, kissing each cheek. "I only wish I was as sensitive to you as you were to me."

He followed his escort into the Sanctuary proper, two to three dozen assassins assembled to watch his arrival. Charlotte and Augustin were there, as was Claude from Café Théâtre. Beaumont glared at Arno, and he felt a trickle of nerves. He couldn't shake away everything that had happened down here: the challenges and the suspicion. It would be a lot of work to show everyone here what he'd learned, and just one look at Beaumont made him realize that some people would never change their minds. He would have to live with the damage he had done.

But that was assuming they would even take him back. He swallowed hard as they passed under the grand staircase, down to the ceremonial chamber. His eyes were on the floor, he was a little afraid to look up, but he did and saw two white hoods. The Brotherhood fanned out around the room and Arno stepped forward and – theatrically to his mind, but no less sincere – took a knee.

Trenet: "Arno Dorian returns to us."

"Yes," he said.

"Why?"

Arno took a deep breath. "Élise de la Serre is dead. François Thomas Germain, Grandmaître of the Templar Order is dead. I—"

"So you come back to us, thinking if de la Serre is not here, then we are all that's left?" Beylier asked.

"Non," Arno answered, "Though I understand why you would think that. Little have I done to engender myself to the Brotherhood. It was as you said, Maître, I was obsessed with finding Germain and redeeming myself of my part in the death of Monsieur de la Serre. I was obsessed with erasing the mistakes I had made, and later obsessed with fixing the woman I had broken. It was all for naught, and realizing that nearly ruined me."

"And now?"

Arno bowed his head lower. "When I first came here, after my Interview, I was told that I had Died, and was reborn as a member of the Brotherhood. I thought it was ceremony, rhetoric for the sake of it, detached from the symbolism and the meaning of the words. It was not until after my expulsion that I realized how Dead I was, how much opportunity lay before me. And still I hesitated. I did not know what I wanted to be. I did not know what I was. I clung to the familiar, to Élise, thinking she loved me as I loved her. After—" his voice cracked, his eyes welling, and he needed several seconds to control himself – this was the last place that he could afford to break, he could break upstairs, in the safety of the Café. Here he needed to be strong, clear, persuasive.
"After her passing," he said, voice shaky. "I thought I was done, that I was nothing and should just... disappear. I sought to leave France all together, to be somewhere that didn't hurt as much, where the memories weren't as painful, where I could be the nothing I always thought I was.

"But I was wrong," he said, head down, staring at the floor and willing as much conviction into his voice as he could muster. "There are people here who see something in me that I do not. Mirabeau told me that the Brotherhood was waiting, waiting for me to realize what everyone who comes here realizes, and that I would see a remarkable change. Maître Trenet, you asked me, when I was Attainted, to recite the Creed. I couldn't then."

He lifted his head, not enough to look up to the Council, but enough.

"I can now."

A long pause drew out, the quiet disrupted by the sensations of the Brotherhood around him; the shift of weight and the small breaths of those who understood just how far he had come. Someone clapped a hand to their mouth – Arno suspected Cosette.

"Then recite the Creed," Trenet said, voice flat.

Arno closed his eyes, looked to the words, the lessons the last five years had taught him.

"The Creed of the Assassin Brotherhood teaches us that nothing is forbidden to us. Everything is permitted. Once, I thought that meant we are free to do as we would. To pursue our ideals, no matter the cost. Jacobins, enragés, Robespierre and his ilk, the Girondists, the Royalists, all of them did exactly this: they broke and rewrote every law they could find to shape the world to the ideals they held. Even now, I'm certain the reactionaries coming out now that Robespierre is dead are doing exactly the same thing. Germain sought his ideals, thinking he was Jacques de Molay reborn. Élise... Élise pursued her revenge, forsaking everything and everyone. I thought I could undo my mistakes, to create an ideal where I never failed to deliver Chrétien Lafrenière's warning. An ideal where Monsieur de la Serre was still alive, and Élise was unbroken. How I got there didn't matter.

"But I was wrong. Not a grant of permission, the Creed is a warning. Ideals too easily give way to dogma. Dogma becomes fanaticism. Pierre Bellec idealized the old ways to the point of trying to purge the Council in order to purify it. He killed Mirabeau because the idea of peace with the Templars was antithetical to killing every last one of them. Robespierre usurped the very government he took control of and sent thousands to the guillotine he once feared to be a political tool. More and more, people are pushed further and further away from where they started, without ever realizing they are being radicalized, without ever realizing they are being twisted, without ever realizing they are hurting everyone around them.

"No supreme being watches to punish us for our sins," Arno continued. "In the end, only we ourselves can guard against our obsessions. Only we can decide whether the road we walk carries too high a toll. I paid my price, and it was only after that I learned that it was too high. I lost Élise long before she died at the hands of Germain. Her revenge pushing her to fanaticism and away from life itself. She told me she would sacrifice everything to get to Germain, and she did. Even herself. Bellec's fanaticism made him willing to kill everyone in the Brotherhood so that he could restore it to some kind of power he thought we didn't have. Germain changed the entire format of the Templar Order, disavowing aligning with political and symbolic figures and instead residing in where the power derives: money, and he killed M. de la Serre and all of his supporters to do it in his fanaticism. Robespierre slaughtered the Girondists simply because they were moderates, not radical enough, not fanatic enough. These are the people the Brotherhood fights."
"We believe ourselves redeemers, avengers, saviors. We make war on those who oppose us, and they in turn make war on us. We think we are right and chose to kill those to do not stand by the ideals we set, the Creed we hold. We dream of leaving our stamp upon the world, even as we give our lives in a conflict that will be recorded in no history book. All that we do, all that we are, begins and ends with ourselves.

"I have failed the Creed repeatedly," Arno said, dipping his head back down. "I thought killing Germain would fix everything, and I did not realize how fanatic my obsessions had become. After Mirabeau's death you banned me from assassinations, and only now do I realize you were trying to give me space to learn the Creed. But I did not know, was too obsessed, to see what you were trying to do. Instead I tried to continue my investigation, wrote Élise my findings, never realizing she would come when I had found a lead.

"I killed Frédéric Rouille when I found him during the September Massacres, because I did not think of the cost of going against the Creed. I knew I was going against your orders when I worked with Élise on finding Marie Lévesque, but I thought the ends justified the means. I used Marcel Pontmercy, thinking I was helping him, even as I compromised him. Cosette tried to help me and I ignored her, instead going after Germain at the execution of Louis. I failed the Creed and lead to the death of a Brother, Jean-Louis Rivière, who was sneaking into Germain's circle.

"I pursued my ideals and the Brotherhood paid the price. You cut me out to teach me of the blood I was spilling and still I didn't learn. It was not until Élise..."

Moisture fell to the tiled floor, and Arno closed his eyes, sniffing in a heavy breath. He opened his mouth to speak again, to say more, but a hand touched his shoulder.

He looked up, blinking, and saw Trenet, still in her white robes but hood down. She knelt down in front of him, her severe face gone, replaced with a soft smile. His other shoulder was touched, and she leaned in, kissing his wet cheeks.

"Bienvennue," she said gently. "Welcome to the Brotherhood."

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Epilogue

15 Vendémiaire, Y4 (October 7, 1795)

"Yes, Maitre Trenet?"

"Arno. Good. I wanted you to know, we still don't know who this Eve is that the Apple was to be delivered to, but your work in solving that series of murders connected to ancestral Templars has given us a new list of possibilities." She looked up from her work. "I have a new assignment that you might not be comfortable with, and I wanted your opinion first and, if necessary, a name of someone else to give this to."

Arno frowned, tilted his head. "Of course."

"After that royalist revolt a few days ago, the Convention has a new hero: Napoléon Bonaparte."

"... I thought he was smeared after Robespierre. He was arrested in Nice, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but he got out a few weeks later. He failed reclaiming Corsica back from the English and avoided the demotion to infantry in Vendée and is recently back from Constantinople. He was the one who fired grapeshot into the royalists."
Arno nodded. "That sounds like him. Controlling the human animal."

Trenet paused, gave Arno a long look. "We never learned what he took from the *armoir de fer*, but whatever it was led him to that temple in Franciade. He now has the gratitude of the Convention: fame, wealth, whatever else they will throw at him. With access..."

"He can now do more," Arno said, nodding.

"Look," Trenet said. "You've made it clear that certain assignments won't be healthy for you, and I've tried to honor that as much as we could afford."

"I know, *Maître*, I've noticed. And I thank you. You need someone to watch Bonaparte, is that it?"

"Yes."

Arno nodded. "I can do it, I think. For a little while, at least. But if the Convention puts him back on the Army of Italie..."

Trenet nodded. "I know you don't want to leave Café Théâtre. We'll do what we can."

"*Merci, Maître.*"

"*Bon chance, Assassin.*"

Chapter End Notes

aaaaaaaaahhhhh so much to saaaaaaaaayyyyyyy...  

We'll start by hoping you all enjoyed the little ghost story of the dame blanche, who Arno rationalized as St. Geneviève, and OMG St. Denis. Like, wow what a great ghost story to have. Also - the French have a superstition about putting bread upside down on a table. That's kind of wonderful.

But Arno's luck continues to hold out, he's caught and he enters a downward spiral. But unlike other downward spirals, one person shows up and stops the descent - and though the two of us HATE child characters we tried to make it work, and to make "Rose will fall; for I am an Assassin" the whole raison d'être of the fic. Arno's spend the entire fic denying that he was an Assassin, calling them a cult and never including himself as one of them, but at last he realizes what the readers and everyone else in the fic does: he's totally an Assassin. Ah, so much yes! So many feels! And the fic isn't even done yet!

Next is Arno saying goodbye to Élise, something we will someday have to say to our abuser, too. Like everything else in this fic, Arno's emotions over it are messy and complicated, but he understands them now far better than he ever did at any other point of the fic.

And the Café Théâtre just about explode to welcome Arno home. Like that verse int he Bible, "For my son was lost, and now he is found." Arno took the long, windy path, but he's finally where he's supposed to be, and he proves it by doing something he hasn't been able to do: he recites the Creed, and it's amazing. His end game dialogue is so poignant, but given over a montage one can't know who he's saying it to. The two
of us always thought he was saying it to the Council when he came back, and just like Mirabeau predicted, there was a massive change. Welcome back Arno. Welcome back!

This fic is one of, if not the, most personal fic we've ever written. About 60%-70% of Arno's headspace is ours - how he reacts to certain situation, how he feels about Élise during his expulsion, some of his actions. Élise, too, has a lot of moments from life - some lines are lifted directly from out abuser to make it as real as possible. Our abuser has BPD versus NPD, but there are enough overlapping symptoms that we felt comfortable in writing it. Some chapters are raw in a way other fics aren't, and to our pleasure our reviewers were able to feel it.

That's particularly amazing given how messy the start of the fic was. It took us a while to find our feet, and as a result there are certain key points that really aren't conveyed well: Bellec's verbal abuse isn't even a quarter as clear as Élise's (like, geez, I don't even think people realized Bellec was calling Arno merdeux - shit - all the time. Imagine someone only ever calling you shit!), we never once had a scene about the fights/challenges Arno suffered while he was underground - from Beaumont or Tissot or anyone else, and probably a hundred other things.

But despite al that, there are some amazing moments in this fic, and in the end Arno finds his family, his "real" family. All we can do is smile. Imagine if Ubisoft had done something like this - Arno now a full Assassin just in time for the Napoleonic wars. Actually... that gives us an idea... we never did assassinate La Touche on screen, what if... Hold that thought. Let's see where it goes before we announce anything.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!