And now these three remain

by Kat2107

Summary

"Not long after that, Cahusac locks eyes with a reckless Betan woman who firebombs an Inquisitorial depot in Lyon." - Kyele, Ye Heirs of Glory

Set in a Dystopian AU where Alphas and Omegas are aggressively hunted and persecuted by Church and Inquisition.

Cahusac is an Alpha, Lieutenant of the Resistance and the Red Guards, which are, funnily enough, not mutually exclusive.

Jeanne Durand is a midwife, born of mixed parentage. She leads a sheltered life, helping the people she considers hers in silence.

Until they come for her family.

He likes the nice things in life.

She is angry.

It’s a match made in heaven.
Notes

This is kind of what a sentence in a wonderful fanfiction did to me.

- Inspired by Ye Heirs of Glory by Kyele
Jeanne-Marie Durand

The day Jeanne-Marie Durand comes into this world is a happy day.

Her parents sigh with relief and her mother cries, petting her daughter's fuzz covered head with a smile that seems impossible to dim.

Her father lights a candle thanking God that He let this cup pass their eldest child.

When their second child is born, Jeanne-Marie's mother cries, rosary beads sliding through her fingers and her father lights candles and Jeanne, seven years old - enough to know and too young to understand- touches her lips to baby Simon’s forehead and says "Welcome, little Odem."

She stops being innocent the day her father tells her the Inquisition caught her aunt Alice.

She hears the neighbour’ s stable hand talk the next day about how they ripped out her womb and dragged her through the town and threw her into a ditch for the wild animals to find.

That night she sneaks to her odem's bed (your brother, Jeanne, never your odem), four years old and the prettiest baby in the world, and swears to protect him.

She is safe, she can have a life away from her omega mother and little brother (odem, she says in the silence of her mind where she puts all the thoughts that make her scream and cry).

She doesn't understand why people think she might want that.

"The protective instincts of an Alpha and she is trapped in a woman's body." Papa sighs late one night, when she is supposed to sleep but can't because the inquisition caught another throwback in Lyon today, old Besset told them when he brought the milk, and she is quivering with rage and fear she 'd never admit to.

"So, she is basically you daughter, Phillipe?" her mother teases.

There is a ruckus and then her mother squeals with laughter, a little breathless, a little heavy.

As their bedroom door slams shut, Jeanne-Marie stares at her little odem's bed.

Jeanne is twelve and doesn’t understand how people expect her to not protect him and teach him and make sure he has everything he needs.

She can't understand how someone would want to hurt him, who runs through the garden, singing loudly and off key, only to sneak into their fathers workshop to "aid" him with a chair or a table, bringing her a crude facsimile of whatever piece of furniture papa had been working on as a gift later.

He ‘s wild and fearless and beautiful, her little odem.
Outside the stars are bright pinpricks in the night sky.

Jeanne-Marie looks up and prays to the holy mother.

Because she was a Beta too and so was her son and he said to love everybody and he is Jesus, so he is right.

Their third child is stillborn, because the only midwife they can trust reaches them two hours too late.

Catherine Durand clings to life, fighting with everything in her to stay with her family.

Jeanne fetches water for Madame Dubois, brings her of the herbs mama grows in her garden, while papa bundles the body of the baby into the blanket mama had made for her, another little girl.

Jeanne-Marie is fifteen. She wipes her mothers sweat covered face and changes bloody linens and when morning breaks she stands in front of the midwife, shoulders squared, eyes set and says:

"Teach me."

Simon cries when she leaves.

The day Phillipe and Catherine Durand welcome their third child, both almost into their fourth decade, it's their eldest who places the squealing bundle into their arms, blessing the pup with a kiss to his forehead.

"Welcome, little Aleph", she says. I will protect you, is what she promises.

Her mother smiles with tired eyes. Her father lights the candles.

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"Etienne! Pack your toys away!" The three year old ducks his shining red haired head behind the linen’s chest and giggles like the mad little creature he is.

Jeanne keeps the smile off her face barely managing to appear as the stern parent she needs to be to deal with her little Aleph.

Presenting him as her own had simultaneously been the best and most insane idea of her life.

It took strain off her mother, whose body had never quite recovered from the miscarriage, and brought the little alpha to a safer place in a world that got worse with every passing day.

She still misses her parents and her little odem like pieces of her heart, seeing them every month perhaps is never enough, but this is what she wants to do, what she needs to do.

A midwife's work, saving lives, hiding those helpless to defend themselves, doing what she can with what little God gave her.
She has a small apartment in an hotel a few streets over from the Hôtel-Dieu on the Presque-ilses, a bedroom, a kitchen, a few raised garden beds in the private inner courtyard to grow herbs for her work.

Not all she needs, never quite enough, but just sufficient to save a life if necessary and if there is maybe a bit of weed between the herbs, maybe a little flower that brews into a tea that prevents an Omega from conceiving or suppresses heats altogether...

With the Inquisition cracking down on the throwback threat as hard as they do, nobody needs those anymore.

So how would a young midwife know?

Nobody who could tell her ever steps through the house to enter the enclosed courtyard.

It is a bit tragic, really. But the weeds are sure pretty.

It's a shame, she needs to pull them out regularly.

Madame Dubois works in the north of the city, Jeanne in Lyon itself. It's not ideal, but between them and the work they do, they bring a bit of help and save more than one life.

It's almost tiny seeds of hope between all the fear and despair the Inquisition brings. Nobody is going to help the throwbacks.

They need to help themselves and where they can't it's the beta's duty to lend a hand as the Lord and Saviour has decreed.

"Inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it to me."

Etienne's blazing shock of hair appears again below the embroidery that adorns the wall of the main room.

"Mama?"

"Clean up your toys, you little menace. I don't want to trip over your sword." His pout makes her laugh, which only has him glare harder and trot off to the bedroom, wooden sword clutched tightly in a small hand, all tiny alpha indignation and a toddlers temperament.

He will be back within minutes and demand hugs.

Her neighbors like to comment on how nice it must be to that he looks much as his father as he does. She doesn't correct them.

They believe the sad story of Jeanne Lemaire's short and tragic marriage with a fervor that has her suspect they know it's a ruse.

Well, Madame Lefevre, widowed herself by tragic circumstances and thus come into the ownership of this little hotel, knows for a fact from her sister, Madame Dubois, who delivered the boy, how painful and horrible it all had been.

The young man had wanted to come to the aid of a man on the wrong end of a mugging and paid his
heroism with his life. And Jeanne hadn’t even been gone from home for a year and so soon found herself back in Lyon.

So sad.

The child doesn't speak about his father, but his grandpapa fills the role commendably, his doing too was the sword without which the little one rarely leaves the house.

He’s a wild one, that one, growing up to be as brave as Jeanne's made-up husband, they say.

There are days when she lets herself believe that it will be alright.

A knock on the door has her race to close the bedroom door, hiding her Aleph out of sight.

Etienne has already learned how to keep quiet.

Outside her door is no Inquisition squad, only Jaques, her cousin, a beta too, and working as a messenger. He’s ferrying family news as often as he does paid messages, but somehow he rarely ever has good news to tell.

Today, too, his eyes are red rimmed, deep lines of worry cut into his pale face.

He doesn't need to speak, Jeanne wishes, he didn't.

"They came for them in the morning light. Your father shot two of 'em and they killed 'im for it. Your mother won't survive the day. The things they did to her...."

Jeanne stops his shaking, tear soaked fall of words, hand raised like a barrier.

"I don't want to know." Her fingers curl into her palm until the nails cut into the skin. "I can't know."

Jaques stumbles, one hand braced against the wall, his face a mask of grief, of pain. The same pain that catches up with them every time again, ever since the day they came for his mother Alice.

It takes minutes until he can control himself, his nod strained, his voice too close to breaking.

"They took Simon. Bringing him to Lyon for public execution."

"He's just a child" Jeanne cries and wants to spring forward to grab him, as if there was any guilt to be shared on his part.

"He's a throwback, Jeanne." is the answer with the weight of too many losses sitting heavy on the man's shoulders. "They know no mercy with his kind, all you can do is protect the little one."

She thanks him then and closes the door in his face.

It's a two day trip from their village to Lyon. Not much.

It's enough to call in some favors.

There is an unaligned Omega in the harbor district she helped whelp a year ago, he’s quick and
nimble and a thief and makes a great team with his Alpha who, incidentally, also is a thief and a smuggler.

There's an Alpha in the city guard whose first grandpup she saved, a little minx of an omega, wonderfully alive, but loud, God help the poor carrier, that pup can scream.

There's a beta woman who runs a Tavern with her alpha husband and each child is a new gamble and lots of prayers to a merciful god. They distill their own spirits in their backyard, a worker’s favorite with a reputation of being especially horrible. They say it's so bad it burns.

The Inquisition may try to take what's hers, have, for as long as she can remember.

She will not let them have it.
Richelieu sent Cahusac to Lyon to organize the relocation of three throwbacks across the border to Savoy.

Dernier, an operative of the underground hoping to retire, who will in turn take an Alpha sibling pair barely out of puppy hood with him. Exposed by their father’s new wife.

How charming to know that family is something you can count on.

When the starved and injured pups had arrived at the estate, too scared to talk to anyone but Jussac who rescued them, BB took Cahusac back to Paris and spend an evening pouring alcohol down his throat.

Then they dragged him back to their shared hotel and put him to bed, sitting in his room the rest of the night, watching over him, wrapped around each other on his dingy recliner. That thing happens to be so worn, whoever dares lying down sinks into it and it’s a piece of heaven, uniquely comfortable and special and Cahusac has a thing for special and unique. BB have a thing for each other and they won’t mentioned it and he will not comment, but while they absolutely did want to make sure he didn’t drown in his own vomit, they also needed to show him that family is something you can count on.

And they love that recliner.

So, because Cahusac loves these idiots, he let them.

The pups and their new guardian will leave tomorrow, masqueraded as part of a merchant’s entourage, transporting three waggons of silk across the border.

Lyon, despite its closeness to Italy and Spain, or perhaps because of it, is one of the safest routes into Savoy.

Nobody expects the Underground to smuggle throwbacks through the Archdiocese right under the nose of Marquemont, Primate of Gauls and Archbishop of Lyon, one of Rome’s most zealous supporters in France. A man strictly caught in procedure and blind adherence to the will of the Vatican.

A month prior, he declared war on Betas supporting throwbacks, promising death under torture for anyone found helping the animals.

It’s only a matter of time until the merchant’s guilds get the edict overturned, because traders accusing their competitors of heresy is bad for business, but until that happens and they rein in the man with threats of withheld money, Betas and throwbacks alike are in more danger of exposure than usual.

A fact of which Cardinal Richelieu is very aware and in staunch support of, of course.

Which is why he sent one of the most trusted Lieutenants of his Guard as a messenger, carrying letters to declare his support and to convey his blessings to Marquemont and additional letters and
gifts to the Inquisitor of Lyon, Beaumont.

Nobody needs the man, intelligent, but greedy and blessed with a certain laziness, to prefer Marquemont over Richelieu.

The leader of the Resistance sent one of his lieutenants to get the throwbacks out of the way.

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Cahusac likes Lyon.

He expects to stay for at least a month.

He expects to see a play or five, attend some readings - there has been word about Louise Labé’s poetry given special notice in one of the theatres.

He knows he will drink good wine and eat exceptionally well, courtesy of a few very good inns and restaurants in the city.

The Lieutenant of the Resistance already mourns all the sleep he will lose over other people’s lives, but such is his existence and this is what he lives for and what he believes in.

Cahusac is a man of strong beliefs.

He believes in God.

He believes in the devil and all the evil humanity is capable of.

He believes that Jesus Christ would never condemn a man based on how God made him.

He believes fervently in the necessity of occasional violence and also in the good sense to avoid it.

But among all the things a man in his position might believe in, three always have ranked higher.

First, there is duty.

A duty to his people, to Richelieu, a duty to the Resistance; to fight as long as there is breath in him; to save as many of his people as possible.

Second, there is loyalty, because no man should walk this earth alone.

There is loyalty to Jussac- not only for being his commander, but for being the man who picked him out of the gutter and gave him a chance - and to his brothers, Bernajoux and Boisrenard. As aggravating as they sometimes might be, they are pack.
They took him on as baby Aleph as soon as Jussac dumped him on them, never once questioning his right to be there. They put him through the wringer and pampered him back to his feet, only to beat him down again and again until he was able to hold his own; at which point they grabbed him by the scruff, very literally, and dragged him in front of Jussac and Richelieu to declare they were keeping him.

And third, there is pleasure.

He can withstand hunger and go without sleep for days, longer if need be; part of this his Alpha strength, the rest is learned necessity.

Whenever that need doesn’t present itself though, he avoids missing out on the good things in life like the plague.

It’s something his adolescent self decided on when Richelieu accepted him into his service.

Because on the likely not so distant day on which Cahusac’s life will end, probably in a rather messy and likely very painful fashion, the last thing he wants to have to ask himself is if he should have said yes.

So he says yes on principle.

And Lyon practically begs to be said yes to. Music, theatre, poetry, dealers in fake relics, wine, printing, architecture and last, but not least, the silk.

A man can dream a lifetime alone about things to say yes to in Lyon.

“Cahusac!” The quiet call has him turn and regard the man that gently closes the door to the office Cahusac has been given. In truth it is barely more than a closet with a window.

It contains a desk and overlooks the street behind the Inquisitions complex, the headquarters, depot and temporary holding cells, while the awkward position, bordering a firewall, and the leaded window make it impossible to look inside, but that is where its good points end.

The walls are thin wood and plaster and he’d wager his bed, Beaumont’s men can hear him breathe as they play cards in the room down the hall.

It makes it all a bit delicate.

His visitor is a clerk with the Inquisitor, a Beta sympathizer, bland of appearance and voice, married with three children and a sister who was spontaneously born an Omega.

He’s utterly forgettable. Which makes him valuable beyond measure to the Underground in Lyon. He’s also not the bravest man in France.

In the oppressive darkness of Cahusac’s room his hands tremble as he hands the Alpha a hastily scribbled note. His eyes, Cahusac notices, are wide with terror.

Or shock, he thinks, as he reads the jittery words.
A family of three. The Inquisitorial party had already had left by the time Cahusac had arrived.

There is no way he could have prevented it.

Still, it feels like failure.

“The Cardinal will want to hear a first hand account of this success. I will go, congratulate the Inquisitor and witness the captured. Thank you.”

He crumples the piece of paper and shoves it into his mouth, responding to the clerk’s stare with a grin while chewing heartily.

People as scared as he sometimes need a reminder as to why they believe those like Cahusac more than mere humans, why he trusts people like that to protect his secrets on top of their own.

Chewing up the note usually does the trick nicely.

It also gives him a moment to cover up the pain.

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The Omega lying prone and broken in the straw of the icy inquisition cell is finally beyond the realm of man and Cahusac pulls back his hand to let her head fall back and land with an audible thud.

A smear of blood on his palm is the only proof that she ever caught his scent, the only worldly sign of the plea in her eyes and his silent promise.

They are alone in the cell, but the door, just like his office, is more likely to give up his secrets than keep them; metal bars forged into the wood might keep an enraged Alpha at bay, sadly they don’t stop treacherous words from reaching the wrong ears.

“I will protect him.” whispered between her pained moans was all he dared give to ease her way into God’s hands.

The shadow of a smile the only absolution he gets.

Cahusac closes the Omega’s eyes and whispers a prayer over her body.

A Red Guard, extended arm of Cardinal Richelieu, who publicly exposed and executed his own brother, walks out of the cell.

“I put a claim on the undamaged throwback in the name of Cardinal Armand-Jean du Plessis, duc de Richelieu.” He lets a bit of Alpha bleed through, just enough to bolster his authority and the Inquisitor’s secretary, a young priest barely out of seminary, who waited outside the cell, pales visibly.

It is a formal request by a higher authority than the Archbishop’s.

It is a request still, though. Cahusac doesn’t want to make an enemy of anybody and absolutely not the Inquisition in Lyon.

He leans towards the secretary for a whisper between conspirators, intimate in its very nature.
"You see, it is rare to catch a subject that is young and without injury."

BB tease him mercilessly with the fact that he was born with a face so pretty that most who know he’s no Beta usually believe him an Omega at first.

They keep promising him he will fill out and then remind him that ‘nothing though, could ever spoil those crystal blue eyes, framed with lashes dark and long enough to make a married man want to commit heresy.’

He pondered killing them for it at first, then he planned on telling Jussac, believing he, knowing where Cahusac had come from, would put an end to it. It had taken him the better part of a season to understand what was going on and how deeply Jussac was actually in on it. When he had, he had fluttered those long and pretty eye lashes at Boisrenard and then beaten the shit out of the flustered Alpha.

Then he went and with the help of Tréville learned to use it not like a contradiction to his natural charisma, but as a boost.

They still tease him, but he long since gave up on being annoyed. There are only so many ways to tell someone he’s an idiot and with two brutes in his pack whose idea of subtlety consists of letting someone live when they beat them up, it comes in handy.

“I happen know for a fact that the Cardinal has planned to invite the Inquisitor to his estates for a while now.”

The Inquisitor’s little secretary probably hasn’t seen a woman in her underwear yet, not to speak of a woman out of her underwear, if the faint scent of confused arousal is anything to go by. It’s exactly the reaction one would expect from a blushing virgin and it’s exactly what Cahusac needs.

“But for that to happen, I need you to hold onto the throwback and not damage him for a few days. I need to send note to his eminence and inform him, before those who would want to thwart the Inquisitor’s chances get wind of it. Do you think that can be arranged?”

The solution is messy, but it’s also the only one if he wants to keep them from doing to the pup what they did to the carrier. Being invited to a hunt at the Richelieu estates is an honor not lightly bestowed.

Beaumont who, unbeknownst to him, is being set up in a rivalry to the Archbishop, is important enough to warrant such an invitation.

Also, Richelieu does want the man on his side. So, he will have to organize a hunt.

Jussac will throw a tantrum and sentence Cahusac to five months of guard duty at the Palais Cardinal, but that’s just Jussac. He will forgive eventually.

Cahusac needs to buy two days time to safely get his three charges across the border and convince Beaumont that he indeed wants to give up his catch to be slaughtered by Richelieu without Marquemont catching wind of it.

It's a seven days travel from Paris. Adele is in Gascony, having set up her base on Tréville's lands, but even she needs four days to cross to the other side of France.
It can't be helped. Bad improvisation is a sad fact of the Resistance and Cahusac has worked with less. He can make do.

A cough outside the “prison’s” door shakes the secretary out of his stupor.

“I ah… the Inquisitor will need to hear…” he stammers, a blush coloring his cheeks. Cahusac smiles.

“Ah yes, of course.” Cahusac inclines his head and stirs the boy toward the exit “I would be honored to plead the Cardinal’s case to the Inquisitor in person tomorrow, if his excellence would receive me.”

All the cell doors are made of wood, strengthened by iron. The entrance is through a side passage of the inner courtyard and can be accessed by stealth. The single guard posted in the prison itself is no match for a determined person. Even less for an angry alpha or an omega who has learned to utilize their gifts.

Getting the boy out should the Inquisitor contrary to expectations not hand him over to Richelieu is easy. Cahusac only needs to keep him alive until then.

He sends Beaumont’s shaken secretary off to get a hold of the Inquisitor and walks out of the compound.

There are people, he needs to talk to.

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Lyon by sundown is just as beautiful as Cahusac remembers.

Dernier is just as much of a stubborn old mule, too.

Cahusac wanted them to move faster, get the little Alphas and Dernier off to the border before sunrise. The merchant they´ll be traveling with could easily be persuaded by additional money and they´d be out of trouble by the time he dealt with the imprisoned Omega.

Dernier had disagreed and argued with the weight of forty years with the underground that his charges were in a lot less danger than the other pup and changing plans would only call attention to them.

It ends with them growling at each other across the table, at which point Dernier gets the armagnac and they start over.

“They are far from their hometown and anybody that could identify them.” The older alpha stares into his glass, voice rough and worn by too many years of bare survival, always on the road under the guise of a mediocre merchant. “It’s like they never were exposed; boys traveling with their grandfather to see something of the world and to learn the ropes of his trade.”

Cahusac drinks the the alcohol and, with his eyes firmly on the homely fireplace, ends up agreeing.

“They’re yours already, aren’t they?”

“Hell, if they aren’t. The older one admonished me this morning because I didn’t charge enough.” Dernier’s voice rumbles with overdone exasperation that does not cover the fondness. “Couldn’t well
tell the kid I charge our own people only half in the middle of the market, now could I?” They laugh until they fall silent, gazes caught in the golden liquid in their glasses.

Dernier, when he speaks again, is deep in thoughts.

“You think that sometimes all you see is loss. There are times when all you know is how much it hurts and all you feel is hatred…” His gaze wanders up to the wooden ceiling with the faded floral paint. Before this house has been turned into an inn, it was a wealthy man’s home. Maybe even a throwback’s, dispossessed as the first wave of hatred had washed through France. “I am too old to run on anger and righteousness alone anymore.” He drains his glass and fills it anew.

“Way back when my mate and pup died… long before you were born, all I wanted was justice.” Cahusac watches him, the darkness of his wrinkle framed eyes ripe with shadows, the pain in the lines of his face softened by warm fire light and the distance of decades. “I settled for vengeance just fine. Each of their dead a sacrifice at the shrine of my murdered family.” He smiles gently and raises his glass to Cahusac. “But that’s a mantle I gladly pass onto you young ones.”

Cahusac doesn’t know what to say, so he keeps silent, waiting for man to finish his tale, all too familiar to all of them.

“I am gladly looking forward to my second chance. I can raise two little ones without knowing I’ll lose them to violence before they even had a chance to learn what it is like to live without. That´s my reward and anything I ever hoped for.” He empties the second glass and leans back to prop his feet up on the table, the bottle balanced on his knee.

“I didn’t know you were with the resistance.” Cahusac takes a sip of his alcohol, much more restraint than he would usually be.

“Oh, don’t be daft, pup. There is no resistance. That´s just a tale alphas who just popped their knot tell each other to justify causing trouble. It’s a dead throwback’s tale…” Dernier’s eyes sparkle as he carefully doesn’t look at Cahusac. “Man, the stuff we pulled with old Francois…” The dark mood lifts as he laughs. “See, it’s the privilege of the old to reminisce about the dead.” He raises the bottle. “What are you living for, Cahusac? What is your hope?”

The question throws him.

Nobody ever asks for hopes and dreams. The people around him, Richelieu, Treville, Adele, they measure each other by their sacrifices. The only ones who seem deeply content and blessed with everything they ever wanted seem to be his pack and Jussac, but then BB are to each other everything they ever wanted and Jussac doesn’t seem to want anything from life but to run herd on Richelieu.

And Cahusac? Maybe he was broken a little too well, a little too young to truly dare hope anymore. He enjoys life, he enjoys every minute of it, but there is no real sense of the future, no real dream to be found for him, only a good end to the here and now he’s living. “Saving as many of the living as I can. And easy death.”

Dernier shakes his head. “A soldiers prayer, not a person’s.” He raises the bottle nonetheless. “To the living, then. May their hope carry us. Santé”

Cahusac downs the Armagnac in one draught and gets up. “Et à vous, grandpère!”

As he leaves, Dernier holds him back with a gentle hand to his arm. “Start searching, Cahusac. Find something!”
He looks over his shoulder toward the bedroom.

“And if you need help, kid. Ask!”
"traboule" - is a passageway between houses and stairways in the old town of Lyon, though many medieval cities have something similar. In Lyon you were said to be able to cross through the old town to the river without having to step out into the open. The balconies I have described here are a fixture of medieval and early modern architecture. The one I described is a one on one copy of a house near the cathedral in Bamberg, Upper Franconia. (probably the only good thing Baroque ever has done for anybody)

On a different note: yes, that was quite the long introduction. But they’ll meet now, promise. And yell at each other.

I have a whole file titled "Shit the babies say" that is nothing but snippets of yelling and beautiful snark that come to my mind at completely random times at work, on the bus or while shopping.

I already toned down Michel's dialect, I took that one from the old farmer from across my grandmother's. He always said that someone who didn't make the effort to try and understand him wasn't worth his time anyways. I have a feeling I should apologize nonetheless.

There is a warm weight in his belly as he strolls back through the night towards the inquisition’s premises. He is by no means drunk, he’s practically stone cold sober, clear of head and with hands as steady as they ever are, so that fails as explanation for what he sees as he turns the corner to the by-street that runs by his “office”.

It’s not late enough for the evening traffic around la Primatiale to have died down. The Saône is gently lapping at its banks, the cold october air dipping quickly towards freezing. It’s a quiet evening, by all means, not yet winter but Cahusac already feels its icy touch on his skin.

It is a beautiful evening, the ones when you just walk and follow the idle stream of your thoughts to no less idle conclusions, one of the ones where there is no hurry no danger and nothing urgent to do, so why there is a female figure, rough worker’s skirts gathered up and tucked into her belt, face and hair hidden under a scarf, lighting a firebomb on a lantern right outside the inquisitorial depot, eludes him.

He stops dead, mind reeling. Nobody is around as far as he can see, the alley deserted, the side passageway to the Inquisition’s courtyard closed for the night.

They’re alone.

Instinct tells him to stop her, his feet already moving over the cobblestones before his mind has consciously caught on.
That is when she lifts her head and her eyes envelope him in a sea of anger.

She is too far away to scent, though not clouded in perfume either, which makes her either the descendant of a very pure line or no throwback at all, anything else is pretty much impossible to conceal with an emotional storm as violent as he sees in her eyes alone.

Any sane person would start running now with an armed stranger catching them in flagrante delicto.

She holds his gaze and lights the cloth.

Glass crashes as she lobs the bottle through one of the ground windows, the fluid splashing on every surface in a two meter radius. Wood, wool, linen, gunpowder.

Cahusac slithers to a halt five meters away and finds her eyes again. They’re clear, bright orbs in the darkness, the skin at the corners crinkling with a smile or a grin that crackles off the anger in her posture like sparks off flint; then she dashes away.

He ponders following, thinks gunpowder and runs in the opposite direction, towards the side entrance that leads to the prison.

Whoever she is, she did what she came here to do.

He can find her later.

Whatever her reason is, he has only one chance to get the Omega out of his cell before this side of the building experiences a Jericho moment and comes crashing down.

There is a close call when three inquisition soldiers wander outside, suspicion on their faces, following the smell of smoke.

Cahusac mustn’t be connected to this. If there is the slightest inkling that he had anything to do with the fire or the disappearance of the boy, Richelieu will have to have his hide and he can very much forego being alphonsed.

An overhanging balcony saves him. It runs along the whole building and overshadows the entrance to the courtyard, casting deep shadows in the light of the lanterns in the alley.

It’s a perfect setup for unnoticed entrance and although it carries sound well, with the noise of panicking soldiers and the fire in the background, even an untrained person could get through the passageway unnoticed when they pick the right moment.

Cahusac isn’t untrained by any means and he slips inside before the guards have even raise the alarm.

Sometimes he wonders about the inquisition. Jussac would have had that whole building cleared and remodeled at once.

Maybe, after Pignerol, Cahusac had thought Beaumont would have cleared up his operation, but despite being one of the most dangerous chapters in France when it came to finding throwbacks, they still seriously lack in dealing with them.

The head of the French Inquisition would have something to say about that.
Cahusac should really tell Richelieu how badly the conduct of his men in Lyon is. On the other hand, he is known to forget stuff like that. One too many hits in the head, probably.

Inside he turns sharp left, walking towards the prison entrance as if he has no care in the world.

Here, too, a balcony runs along the side of the house, not unlike the one that makes it so easy to reach Tréville’s office.

Ever since the other Gascon had doubted his abilities in Troisville they have a little friendly rivalry running on the side that consists of Cahusac trying to sneak into the garrison to deliver messages for Tréville that are not strictly speaking material for official dispatches. And should he ever be caught, ah well, the Red Guards have been known to play pranks on the Musketeers.

The guard inside the prison is going to be a problem.

Knocking him out without being seen might prove impossible.

Even if it works and he remains behind while the pup is gone, they will know right away they're dealing with a prison break and look for the outside influence.

It’s a bad day for the guard, but he needs to die.

Which in turn creates the additional problem of getting rid of the body.

If the gunpowder blows, that will be taken care of, the destruction probably enough to explain a man’s death.

Though Cahusac neither knows the amount of gunpowder they store in the depot, nor its location and likelihood to be touched by the flames.

There are exactly two ways to go about this: either get the pup out and blow the gunpowder himself, leaving the guard, dead or alive, to be destroyed in the explosion or take them both and make it appear like the guard absconded with the throwback.

The improvised plan he had pulled together this very afternoon now proves a blessing in disguise.

Intrigue within the church and the inquisition is much more prevalent than prison breaks by the Resistance and the reasoning given by Cahusac to keep the throwback under wraps for the time being had been a good one. There are many who would try anything to keep their rival’s out of the cardinal’s favor and stealing the throwback the Cardinal has already requested, if only by proxy?

The loss of face is unimaginable.

So, the guard will have to be sacrificed on the alter of righteousness.

Always leave someone guilt can be blamed on.

The best advice Cahusac has ever gotten in his whole life. And though it sounds just like him, it wasn’t even Richelieu who gave it.

Either way, going out of his way to keep the guard alive is not feasible.
It’s going to be difficult enough to get the pup out of there without anybody noticing. Unless, of course, the guard kindly contributes his then redundant armor to hide the kid he wanted to help torture to death.

Dernier had talked about justice earlier and Cahusac finds this solution incredibly just.

He might still have to store a body in his office at some point, but if he does and the depot blows, the perfect solution will come to pass either way.

Cahusac lets the grin tug on his lips and pulls up the scarf to protect his face, tying up his hair to hide it.

This is going to be good. His body pumps out battle signals like crazy and his instincts scream at him to fight. Pistol, rapier and main gauche sit easy on his body, knife and lockpicks in the belt pouch both in easy reach.

He is not going to get more ready.

A group of four runs past him and out on the street while two already man the well in the opposite corner of the courtyard. Panic is spreading.

Cahusac draws his pistol, switches grip to the barrel and opens the door.

BB have at one point or another marveled as his ability to just walk without being noticed, he tried to teach them and succeeded up to a certain point, but they never quite achieved the point of skill where people just stopped questioning their presence.

Moving silently is one point, one Cahusac is very very good at, the other is something that makes a great thief great and the best spy extraordinary but eludes many alphas with their strong personalities and the “look at me” attitude.

The members of the Court the Miracles in Paris would throw a fit if they knew that Dirty Yves who smuggles omega drugs is actually a member of the Red Guard.

That, too, is a learned skill born of necessity.

Behind the door silence reigns. When the door clicks shut the outside sounds fade and leave nothing but cold humid air and the soft sound of feet scratching around behind the bend in the passageway.

It’s barely more than a cellar, former storage alcoves closed off with reinforced doors, the prisoners not supposed to stay here for longer periods of time.

Either they die right away or are dragged off to torture or transferred to one of the larger prisons.

It is no Pignerol, its defensive value solely resting on the fact that it’s situated smack in the middle of Lyon.

Acrid smoke is already pushing through a sunken window to his left and for a moment he wishes, he
had taken the time to wet his scarf. Too late now.

His steps sound strong and secure on the ground. No sense in trying to sneak around, the door makes noise for three and even the attempt to mak his presence will draw attention to him like nothing else. He doesn’t need to, though; he belongs here.

It is well within his right as a high ranking member of the inquisition to walk this floor and approach the guard… and kill him.

Cahusac does not expect to almost stumble over said guard’s body, nor does he expect the disguised female figure three meters away that breaks open the lock on a cell door with nothing but a dagger and physical strength.

Which in itself has him reassert his assessment of “female” and place her firmly in alpha territory and thus potential ally.

It doesn’t explain how they got in here.

It explains the fire, though.

Somehow he didn’t taken the possibility of a break out by someone else into account.

Stupid.

A gentle click next to his ear has him stiffen and raise his hands, pistol safely pointing at the ceiling. If those are throwbacks he needs to tread carefully. Killing the guard is one thing, but he will not take out his own people.

His only choice is to convince them that they’re on the same side.

“No matter how distracted the guards are. They will hear the shot.” Cahusac forces himself to keep his breath even.

The alpha opens the cell door with barely a glance in the direction of him and the person holding a gun to the back of his head.

There is nothing but calm surety in her eyes, so he assumes the one behind him and her are familiar enough with each other to communicate without words. Pack.

Two throwbacks rescuing an omega pup from an inquisition prison in the middle of Lyon. And neither of them are part of the resistance, Cahusac is sure. He’d know them if they were. Cahusac can’t smell the one behind him over the acridity of the smoke, the impression he gets is of someone slender and agile, though.

“It keeps ya quiet, ‘til the knife does the trick a’right.” a male voice whispers close to his ear.

“I don’t think I’m fond of the idea that throwbacks are killing each other, friend.” The voice scoffs and something sharp slowly presses against Cahusac’s lower back right above his kidney. A knife thrust there is a killing blow.
“Yeah, right. Can’t smell ya, friend, but ‘e only reason for a throwback bein’ with the Inquisition is a blood traitor. Ne’er killed one of those yet. Should be fun.”

Screw this. The Alpha is out of sight for the moment and he needs to be quick.

Cahusac twists just enough to dislodge the knife towards his side and in the same motion slams his left elbow back to catch the slighter person in the stomach. Unarmored stomach.

An Alpha at full strength can kill an omega with a move like that, especially if he’s as primed to kill as one of Richelieu’s commandos.

It’s luck or skill that the slighter throwback moves out of the way the same instant and Cahusac catches his ribs instead of the solar plexus. Pain flares over his left hip but he manages to finish the move and lope his right arm around the Omega's neck, the barrel of his own pistol still firmly in hand.

The Omega sags against him with a pained wheeze and Cahusac has to reach around his middle to prop him up and clamp his left over the pistol hand.

"Don't. Shoot." Cahusac growls.

The Omega's hacking cough echoes under the vaulted ceiling, but he doesn't move. His fingers stay curled around the pistol, the other still holds the knife, arm loose at his side.

"Can you breathe?"

There is a beat of silence, an awkward moment as both measure each other, then the Omega nods, turning his head to muster Cahusac from behind the rags that disguise most of his face.

“Hey.” Cahusac says as a way of greeting and grins.

If the omega expects Cahusac to let him go though, there will be disappointment.

The only reason, he could overpower him like this was because the other underestimated him.

Add the alpha to the mix….

Cahusac needs the leverage.

It’s only seconds until she steps out of the cell. Seconds that are unreasonably long as Cahusac feels his blood run down his leg and tries to gauge how long and deep the wound is.

He can stand, he can walk, he could probably fight like this if need be, but fast movements and fast changes in pace are out of question.

The alpha steps into the middle of the corridor between the cells, daggers in both hands, and faces Cahusac and his heavily breathing hostage.

She’s as tall as the omega, slim, but each movement speaks of contained power.

“What do you want?” Her voice is clear and strong, with an underlying air of ruthlessness. It reminds him of Adele.

“The boy. You?” Cahusac loosens the hold around the omega’s neck enough for him to speak.

“The boy.” Then her gaze flickers to the omega and Cahusac feels a faint movement of his head as
they convey a message that he will have to stay oblivious of.

“Ye can have him.” She speaks and steps closer.

“Tsk. Don’t.” Cahusac changes the grip on his pistol with a flick of his wrist and without removing the arm from the Omega’s throat.

“Are ye insane?!” The Omega hisses at his alpha, pushing back against Cahusac without making a move to use either of his weapons. “Ye can’t do this to ‘er? We promised!”

“She’ll understand.” The alpha takes one step closer still and then stops, her arms held aloft from her body.

Her eyes find Cahusac’s. “Ye can have the boy.” And that answers that.

Cahusac takes a deep breath. “I don’t want to hurt your mate. I will not hurt him.”

Words that are answered with an annoyed groan by the Omega and a hissed “Because ye had to give it away….”

Cahusac ignores him. “We are on the same side. All three of us want to free the boy and our chances rise exponentially if we work together, so….”

“Are we?” The Alpha crosses her arms, daggers flashing in the torch light. “Because ye seem awfully familiar with ’is place in ye pretty clothes. Ye fit right in with the church men. So tell me, before I accuse ye of being a blood traitor, church boy… Why? Why do you want to free a down on his luck Omega who is still years from his first heat?”

Cahusac ponders lying, some outrageous tale about truly being a blood traitor, working for the cardinal, wanting to sell the boy. He ponders muddling his track and decides against it.

What bad can they do to him in this position? They have come to get the boy for someone else and not for some nefarious purpose. Cahusac guesses the woman outside.

They obviously had a way in that was not through the inner courtyard and he likes that better as an escape route than the crude plan he had pulled out of his ass.

“Why?” He snorts. “Because it’s what I do. I was nearby.”

“But you’re with them…” The Omega barely more than whispers with a faint undertone of awe.

“That’s what I do.” He drops his arms and sets the omega free. “I passed through Lyon only after they had gone for the family, when I heard of the pup I… immersed myself with them.” It’s close enough. It’s not exactly believable but much less dangerous than the truth. Which is also is even more unbelievable.

“Ye…immersed yourself with …them…” The alpha reaches for her stumbling Omega and steps in front of him, her voice dripping with disbelief.

“If I asked you about a red line, what would you say?”

“Might answer th’t we perhaps ’ave heard about it?” The Omega stares. “Seriously? That’s what ye do?!” the pair share a glance and the alpha shakes her head. Her mate continues speaking anyways, to her obvious chargrin.

“We’re not talkin’ bout red lines ’ere, though, are we?” There is a hidden mirth in his voice, a deep
pool that seems close to flowing over, the corners of his dark eye crinkle and Cahusac finds himself responding with a smile, despite the blood slowly congealing on the leather of his doublet and pants.

“Lines sometimes blur….”

There is a moment when they’re all silent, then the alpha shakes her head.

“Can’t believe it. That’s just our luck. Someone who thinks he’s the fucking resistance, fucking God why.” And that seems to decide it for her. “Alright, let’s go.” She looks her mate over, who nods and murmurs a gentle “I’m alright. Bruised ribs.” then she turns back to Cahusac.

“Ye got a name?”

Cahusac wants to prop himself against the wall, take some strain of his leg, just sink into the feeling of relief that courses through him at her acceptance. He does none of that.

Instead he puts his pistol away and reaches for a clean cloth to shove under the doublet and cover the wound. “Alex.”

It’s the Omega that responds to that. “That’s what ye friends call ya?”

“No, but close enough.”

“Very well, ’m Michel and tha’s ma beloved, Anne. Don´ cross her, she bites.”

Both alphas groan, but neither comments. It’s the oldest joke in the world at this point, though no throwback is usually comfortable enough in their company to make it anymore.

Cahusac makes his way over to the cell the omega already steps into but is halted by the other alpha.

“Show me.. Michel may believe ya, simply because ‘e wishes it fot it so deeply. I don’t.” Cahusac measures her up with his gaze, the hand on his arm that slowly presses into the leather of his doublet, letting him feel just a fraction of her strength, her distrustful, washed out greyish eyes, the rundown clothes and fishes for the chit he carries with his lockpicks.

It seems enough for her, as she eyes it and then looks at him with new appreciation.

“However we do this, we should do it fast. There is gunpowder in the depot and we don’t want to be here when it explodes.” Cahusac says after they have put the distrust on hold for the moment.

Anne nods. “We’re half a floor down. Depot was added later an’ the wall is carrying. ‘t should give us some protection, but yeah.” Her gaze lands on the entrance door. “How did ye plan to escape.”

Cahusac tells her and her eyes widen with disbelief. “You are insane, aren’t ye?”

“I had to come up with something at short notice.”

“Yeah… no…” She murmurs lowly then turns towards the guard. “Though taking ‘im with ‘s is a good idea. Better always have someone ye can blame, right?” She grins.

Michel pokes his head out of the cell door and nods to both of them.

“We’re ready. ‘e’s shaken, bit roughened up, but ‘e’s a tough one.”
They emerge from the sewage tunnel that collects the dumps of the Inquisitorial outhouse three streets over, the smell of latrine clinging to their every pore. Cahusac sniffs his doublet and already dreads the attempts to get rid of that odor. On the other hand, it drastically reduces the need for perfume.

He had forgotten how little he missed that smell.

He wants a bath, he needs new boots, a chance to sit down and treat the cut to his side.

To think that only this afternoon a lack of sleep was his only worry….

The pup is a fey like creature that barely reaches to Cahusac’s breastbone, a waif with huge bright eyes and almost translucent, freckle covered skin, framed by dark hair.

How someone could hurt something precious like that will never seize to amaze him, but then… he has long since accepted that evil is far from a theoretical concept and the sin in man, every man, is very real.

The little omega clings to Anne as if his life depends on it with Michel and Cahusac taking the role of armed escort.

The yells from direction of the inquisitorial site carry through the alleys, warm fireglow coloring the night sky.

“Guess she missed ‘e gunpowder.” Michels says into the silence between them and Anne snorts.

“Ye say that like it’s a bad thing.” The pup has curled under her arm, his face buried into her shoulder, slim shoulders expanding with every deep breath he takes. Scenting. Breathing safety.

Nobody is around to see them, their forms hidden in the darkness of a traboule in a silk trader’s house.

Even if someone were out on the streets, they, like the vultures humans just are when someone else suffers, would be drawn towards the fire.

Cahusac doesn’t ask how the two throwbacks are so intimately familiar with the hidden passageways in the old town, their accents give them away. But he needs to commend the woman who hired them.

“We should get out of the area before they find him missing” Cahusac glances towards the firelight in the sky.

A hand on his arm stops him. The Alpha shakes her head. Michel frowns. The pup watches him with an intense gaze from under the protective arch of Anne’s arm.

“I’m coming with you.” Chusac locks eyes with her, issuing the challenge alpha to alpha loud and clear.

“No need to. We got ‘is.” She pushes back, but be it her bloodline or her upbringing, she lacks the punch of dominance to challenge his.
“Believe me, you need me to get the pup out of the city and to safety.” He smiles.

“And a Betan woman who casually firebombs the main depot of the inquisition in Lyon is someone I absolutely need to make the acquaintance of.” His smile turned a notch sharper. “You don’t wanna fight me on this, my friend. You truly don’t.”

The alpha exchanges a quick glance with Michel.

“I trust ‘im.” Is the omega’s answer. “‘e knows more th’n enough to condemn ‘s all to hell, anyways. An’ ‘e’s good. There’s no reason for t’ inquisition to put som’one with that much skill in a place like ‘is te catch small fish like ‘s. If this’s a trap ´s one ye would spring at ‘e Bastille, not ‘ere.”

“She’ll have our hides, ya know that, right?”

Michel just shrugs. “Jeanne wants what’s best for ‘e little ones. If’t were ‘bout me ‘n if he was able to save one o’ mine, I’d invite ‘im in even if he were green ‘n had horns.”

Anne stares first at her mate then at Cahusac and finally relents with a sigh.

“From ye lips to God’s ears, love.” her gaze warms for a moment as she looks at Michel and then settles on Cahusac. “If you betray us, I will end ya. An’ if I gotta come back as ghost, ya hear?”

“I’m on your side. On my honor.” For a moment he wonders if they’re actually on his or if the trap wasn’t set for the pair, but for him, but he dismisses it as irrelevant.

Too much left to chance. Too many uncertainties. And even if, the chance that he might get in trouble has never stopped him so far.

Michel leads them through the traboules, maneuvering the maze as if he lived here, switching streets through passages most citizens wouldn’t even know.

He also seems to have a very keen sense of hearing, pushing them back into dark entrance ways, passages or courtyards more than once, getting them out of the way of concerned citizens and the occasional guard.

Those two were very well chosen indeed and he needs to talk to Jussac to keep the contact.

Richelieu’s connections to the nobles, both in state and church, are invaluable, but all too often the invisible people are not taken into account in their plans.

Granted, the Resistance usually doesn’t need local thieves; they have enough of those in their midst already, but spreading and gathering information or navigating a city below the surface is the work of people like Michel and Anne.

And in turn, they’d profit from a high profile connection that could get them medicine, a warning or an emergency extraction.

Crossing the bridge toward the Presque’île is nerve wrecking, the way much too exposed, though the weather explains their faces shaded by hoods and a bottle of incredibly bad alcohol - Christ the saviour, who drinks something like that? - provides a cover for the smell of sewage and their run down appearance.

God holds his hand over them that night.

They cross the bridge without a hitch and vanish into the streets of the peninsula and temporary
safety.
They cling to each other as if their lives depend on it.

The pup is mute, not even sobs, not one sound crosses his lips, but with the way his finger dig into his sister's tunic, Cahusac isn't sure he could let go, even if he wanted to.

And she must be his sister.

Far too young to be his mother, their coloring and faces are spitting images of each other. Pale skin with freckles spreading over their nose and cheeks and black hair that frames their fey features like pictures.

Earlier Cahusac had though their eyes were blue or grey, now though he sees a pale greenish brown color, like a lake in the woods when the light hits it just right.

He thinks of woodland feys and it makes him smile.

She is also a lot smaller than previously thought.

Almost diminutive had it not been for curves that put some of the dancers in Paris' more expensive establishments to shame.

Now, in the hallway of a very basic apartment on the top floor of a run down hotel, she looks incredibly human.

Her lips move softly with words whispered into the shocked pup's hair and suddenly she is not a dangerous, possibly deadly adversary anymore. Just a woman, hurt and in pain and overcome with emotion.

And then he tries to move past her and finds himself with a pistol to his head.

Her lips draw into a smile as she cocks it with a gentle "click" and her eyes blaze with the promise of death.

"Who are you, little rabbit?"

Cahusac smiles. He can't help it. He couldn't not smile if this was the last moment of his life.

"Is a rabbit not an animal that runs from something instead of into it?"

"You were awfully swift on your feet for that." The pistol pointed at him doesn't waver, but neither does she let go of the little omega pressed against her, his eyes trained wearily but without fear on Cahusac. It says a lot about the trust the pup has in her.

"I was in a bit of a hurry, since someone set fire to the depot containing gunpowder." His eyes shift to the pup and back to her, raising an eyebrow in question. "Risky."

"WHen the options are freedom or long slow torture until your body gives out, by men who regard you as an animal and thus not worthy of any decency, no matter if you're just a child... or death… Which one would you choose?"
"That is a very violent point of view." Cahusac says with the smile still pulling at his lips and grudging respect in his voice.

"I trusted God to do right by us for once. We never hurt anybody. Nevertheless they murdered my parents and wanted to torture and kill my odem. We have moved past the point of non-violence rather violently, don't you think." Her eyes speak of murder, the twist of her lips of pain, but she holds her odem with infinite gentleness, though she has none for Cahusac if the way the pistol twitches a notch is any indication. "So, who are you, little rabbit?"

"They call me Alex." His gaze indicates the two throwbacks standing in the background that follow their exchange with tense silence. "I am... You could say I am with the parts of our people that think that sometimes violence is a necessity."

"There are any?" Anger flares as her voice drips with derision and in the background Anne and Michel flinch.

"There are." Cahusac reaches out very slowly, as if waiting for her permission, and sets his fingertips against the muzzle of the gun to direct it aside, just the fraction he needs to not have his head shattered by a bullet.

"Allow me to help you and your odem get to safety, please." Anne in the periphery of his vision nods slightly as the woman in front of him checks for confirmation, then the pistol is lowered.

"Prove it." She says and Cahusac reaches for the token in his belt pouch, but the brutal edge has left her face, leaving a weary woman in its wake, too young for so much pain.

Jeanne Lemaire has a tight reign on her kitchen and everybody in it. Even Anne defers to her, moving about as ordered, heating water, preparing tea and herbs for a poultice, while Michel watches the entrance through a window.

Simon, her odem, remains silent, following her every step with his eyes while not leaving anybody out of his peripheral vision.

She checks him over with deft fingers and has him drink tea that is heavy with the smell of herbs. Anne carries him to bed, when his eyes fall shut, putting him with a little boy, a little alpha, with copper hair who reaches out to the omega without ever truly waking.

She tends to Michel’s ribs with unhappy grumbling, lecturing him in no uncertain terms that he is not to pick up his pups for a week at least. And the throwback complies with an affectionate smile before he slowly pulls her into his arms whispering “It will be alright.” into her hair.

Only Cahusac sees her flinch.

As they go, he asks the throwbacks one last favor, a message passed on to set a plan in motion. He needs to speak to Dernier and he needs to find temporary safe shelter for the two little Alphas in his care and if there is one thing none of them have, it's time.

The Beta turns to him finally, as her friend walk into the night, the omega with two bags in his pockets, since Jeanne, as she herself says “Had to harvest her flower beds before she leaves.”

The pistol sits comfortably on the belt that wraps around her beautiful hips. She hasn't changed since
earlier and the faint smell of fire and burning alcohol clings to her, covering up the natural one of earth and herbs that weaves around her.

Cahusac looks her over, this woman that barely reaches his shoulders. He sees her, right outside the gates of the Inquisition setting fire to a bottle, war in her eyes and pain in her posture.

She was shadow then. A stranger, intriguing but without consequence.

Now, she is a slender Betan woman who obviously grows throwback medicine in her garden in the middle of Lyon and has no qualms to firebomb the Inquisition headquarters of south-eastern France all by herself to provide the sole diversion for a prison break.

A madwoman by all evidence.

An angry woman that stares at him now, jaw set, eyes blazing.

"Sit. You are bleeding on my kitchen floor."

"It has long stopped."

"I don't care. It will be looked at."

"I will take care of it."

"...Now! Do not alpha in my kitchen, whatever your name really is."

There is a beat of silence where they just stare at each other.

She looks up, lips bracketed by white lines. He looks down and wants to map every curve and every groove of those lips.

“What exactly were you thinking, woman?” He doesn’t yell, but the growl in his voice is unmistakable.

“I was rescuing my bro… my odem from the Inquisition! Why do you think am I burning them to the ground?” She doesn’t yell either, but the hiss in her voice is the sound of steam escaping from a pot long past boiling point.

“That’s what the resistance is there for and the underground, dammit.” They stand toe to toe, her head tilted back to look at his face, her own speaking murder. It makes their height difference a lot less funny.

“Really?! Where was the great underground when my father was killed and my mother was tortured to death and a child of thirteen years incarcerated and set for torture, for execution?”

Cahusac can see tears in her eyes, a different note to her fury, not a sign that it breaks, yet.

Her hands ball into fists, as do his own. He wants to reach out and wipe the wetness away, take her pain, but there is nothing he can really do. It will hurt as much and as long as it will hurt.

“WHERE WERE YOU?!” She screams as the tears spill over and he recoils.

I arrived yesterday or I did my best to ease you mother's pain or I had a plan to save your odem, nothing seems enough.

It doesn’t matter how little he could have done, the taste of failure never changes.
“I’m sorry” he says in the end and with a step closer reaches for her fists to wrap them with his own hands.

They’re small and surprisingly soft.

The hands of a woman who bathes in blood to bring new life, stark contrast his battle hardened paws that have more calluses and scars than unmarked skin.

“Forgive me.” There is no appropriate way to say ‘I apologize for failing you so thoroughly’.

“I ask you for a chance to keep your little ones safe. The resources of the Underground and the Resistance are at your disposal.” He does not include her in the offer of safety. She probably would have his hide, if he did.

“And in return?” Her voice sounds tired, the tears running down her face uninhibited. She is not ashamed of them. That woman is likely not ashamed of anything she does.

“Refrain from attacking the Inquisition.”

“And let them get away with what they did? What they still do?” She cries, jerking her hands back. He closes his around them and lifts them to his lips, locking eyes with her.

“This is about saving the lives of as many people as possible. It hurts to not get back at them, I know that, believe me, I do, but if your revenge costs a throwback his life, what will you do?”

The freckles stand in stark contrast to her pale, almost translucent skin. She looks so fragile as she stand there before him.

She is so physically fragile.

Her face draws in pain, fights off the sadness, the fear, the anger and the hatred, all in the span of a few heartbeats.

In the end, she closes her eyes and gives a clipped nod and when they open again, the tears are gone and there is nothing but cold, hard strength left.

“Alright, what are you planning to do?”

He lets her clean and stitch up his side, lets her tell him to breathe through the pain as if he were an Omega whelping. He lets her wrap the poultice around his middle and acts as if he doesn’t notice her eyes mapping the scars on his body.

While she is working, she lays out the plan she came up with. A plan that is actually very thoughtful, if not completely drawn out into a future that doesn't include what's left of her family being on the run.

She gives him tea - for the pain and to replace the lost blood, ‘I don't care how it tastes! Drink that!’ -and asks about the Resistance, about the Underground and tells him about her family.

She has worked for the Underground in a way ever since she settled in Lyon, it's obvious. She knows it too, knows the token, but never asked. When he implores, she just smiles and puts another cup of tea in front of him and says "What I don't know, I can't give away. I am Beta. I am safe. I don't need it"
"Until you did."
"I managed just fine, didn't I?"

When he leaves in the deep of the night to go talk to people and move all the pieces in position, he stops at the door and turns back one more time.

"It's Cahusac; my name. People haven't called me Alex in over a decade."
"Jeanne Durand. I never was married."

Their mutual amused snort is a strange sound among the pain and the danger, but it has both of them smile.

"Then, Cahusac of the Resistance, til we meet again."

"Au Revoir, Jeanne-Marie Durand, try not to murder anyone in the meantime."

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She doesn't know he watches her leave Lyon the next morning. Watches her laugh with the older guard at the gate that hands the little red haired boy next to her an apple and searches the back of her pony cart.

From Cahusac’s vantage point it's obvious how he avoids the blanket covered pile that hides Simon, but none of his fellow guardsmen seem to notice. And if they do, they look a different direction.

It’s a relief to know, she was right. That the guard is genuine and didn't sell her out to protect himself.

Cahusac knows his distrust is not always rational, but there are few he thinks above betrayal. Himself included.

What would she do if she knew he carries a letter gifting the omega, so he was able to catch him, to Cardinal Richelieu with great respect and deep admiration.

He wonders how violently she'd hate him if she knew that he got the Inquisitor’s personal permission to hunt down her little odem.

Well, since it's her, probably very violently, but would she at some point believe him and forgive him?

Her plan had been surprisingly simple and concise with on point use of available resources.

That it would have faltered in its later stages was through no fault of her own.

She didn't have the necessary knowledge about the workings of church and inquisition or the areas outside Lyon.
As he provided her with that, she caught on quickly, finding a position in that plan that made the most of it and, as she has told him with clipped words, did not leave Cahusac alone to get them killed or die.

She is pragmatic. She might understand.

He gives her an hour before he follows. They haven't connected Simon to her just yet.

Even if someone in her village told the inquisition, which is likely since someone already ratted out her family, changing her name and place of origin was clever.

If anyone wants to get their hands on them, they’ll have to either search wildly or follow the one who is obviously hunting the fugitive. Both means they have to get past Cahusac one way or another.

***

An old man wrapped in a heavy woolen coat waits next to the road to Mâcon, three hours out of Lyon.

It is a cold morning, mist heavy in the air this close to the river. Autumn is everywhere, the leaves colored deeply in yellows and reds in the grove that provides him with some shelter from the unpleasant wind. A pale sun filters through the clouded sky, wrapping everything in unreal white light.

Deer graze in the fields, putting on some more fat before winter comes. They also were about the only living creatures Cahusac has encountered in the last hour.

It seems, for all the world, as if the old man is the only one out and about, enjoying his simple breakfast while his pony enjoys a rest.

Nobody could have known that this same pony left Lyon hours earlier hitched to a different cart, or that the old man has a pistol under his coat, a dagger on his belt and a rapier tucked safely behind the seat.

Or that he isn’t a man.

Dernier looks up as Cahusac pulls up next to the cart and carefully sets the knife aside with which he was just cutting up an apple.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in.” His stretch is accompanied by a painful pop of a joint as he raises his arms above his head. “Made it just in time, didn’t we, pup?”

He grins and a row of yellowing teeth show, white lines around his eyes vanishing in wrinkles.

“Ya ok, m’boy?”

Cahusac dismounts with careful movements, holding tightly onto the saddle until his left leg settles to carry his weight. Only then does he nod at Dernier. “Stressful night.”

“Ye, I hear you almost blew up the Inquisition. A bit drastic, don’t you think?”
Cahusac laughs.

“No no, that wasn’t me.” He limps around his horse and with a nod takes the half of the apple Dernier is offering. “That was her.”

He takes a hearty bite and looks around. He doesn’t panic, yet. Dernier is way too calm for anything to have gone wrong, protective instincts roar to life anyways.

“Where are they? They’re here, right? That’s her pony.”

Dernier points over his shoulder to the grove behind him. “Mushrooms.”

“Mushrooms….”

“It’s the day for it. Soon it’ll be too cold.” Dernier says matter of factly polishing off his half of the apple. “And you need to keep the pups busy. The Omega is too traumatized to sit still and the little one…. “ He breathes deeply.

“Yo!” Dernier hollers into the woods, without care for who might hear him. Cahusac has to remind himself that they have absolutely legitimate reasons to be here, perfectly sanctioned by the letter in his pocket.

“Etienne!” It echoes from between the trees, sharp, clipped, brooking absolutely no disobedience. Instincts settle inside Cahusac as he recognizes it, only to flare right back up as for a moment he wants to sit straighter and Dernier snorts and then dissolves in a fit of laughter.

“Boy, she has you good, doesn’t she?” The older alpha slaps Cahusac’s shoulder and climbs off the cart. “But then, she needs that voice if she wants to raise that pup.”

Said pup comes running from the trees, two steps ahead of Jeanne, Simon at her side.

The little one stops dead as he sees Cahusac, wobbling on his feet until he finds his balance again. Then he stomps closer, wooden sword in hand, eyes narrowed in a way that might be dangerous were he twenty years older.

Cahusac looks down as the little alpha steps in front of him.

They stare at each other for several heartbeats, then the little one growls.

“I dread what he is growing into with this aggressiveness and your stubbornness, Mademoiselle Durand.” Cahusac turns to her, already collecting the little one into his arms, now all pliant and soft toddler after his caretaker gave her nod of approval.

“Excuse me, Cahusac. My stubbornness may be the only thing that keeps him from growing into a barbaric little monstrosity that tries to solve everything with his fists.” Her voice is as cutting as it is half the time and he needs a moment to hear the underlying fondness that turns it from insult to poking fun of the only alpha present and within the right age bracket to be the recipient. Then he needs another few heartbeats to keep himself from gloating.
“How I have never heard that one before….” He throws back his head and laughs, even harder as he sees her mock offense.

“How you met yourself?”

“I have you know I use all my god given gifts to their full potential. I am an educated man. Intelligent. Good looking. Definitely good looking.”

Dernier is the one that speaks from the front of his cart.

“Pretty is the word you’re looking for Cahusac, now stop wooing the beautiful woman and hand me the demon pup.”

Jeanne looks at Cahusac, corners of her mouth twitching hard enough that she bites down on her lower lip to keep the appearance of a straight face.

“See, and that is the thanks a man gets for putting his life on the line.” He shifts the little redhead around until he hangs under his arm like a wet bag, shrieking with laughter, to hand him off to Dernier, who lifts the toddler onto the cart, wrapping a blanket around his shoulders.

Jeanne in the meantime steps up to Simon, pulling the slighter omega into her arms.

Cahusac watches them hold each other, watches her press a blessing kiss to her odem’s forehead with softly whispered words and the pup nod.

It’s only when Simon is seated and they have wrapped him in a thick woolen coat that Dernier steps up to Cahusac who whispers a few last words to the little omega, trying to ease his mind.

“I mean it, Cahusac. Take care of yourself. Don’t think I can’t smell the blood. I know you young ones think you’re invincible, but take it from someone who went through all the stages of almost dying...you’re not.” He reaches out, places a hand on Cahusac’s shoulder. “I will take the pups through Orléans. It’s longer, but no one will look for them there. And should something go wrong…”

Cahusac nods. It’s the direction someone heading to the Richelieu estates would take.

Should Cahusac and Jeanne fail and the Archbishop’s men come after the pups, Dernier can claim protection of goods delivered to Richelieu from the Inquisition.

It’s a seriously flawed fallback plan, but then, Cahusac doesn’t intend to fail.

The older Alpha squeezes his shoulder as a goodbye and climbs into the cart.

“And Cahusac?” Dernier calls.

“Yeah?”

“Find something.”

Cahusac chuckles and lets his gaze drop to his feet.

“Oui, grandpère. I’ll do my best.” He calls back with a smile and steps back towards his new traveling companion as the cart rumbles down the road.
Simon stares back over his slim shoulders while the little one, his red hair a spot of color in the pale morning, waves wildly, clearly excited over the adventure.

“They’ll be alright. Dernier has more experience at that sort of thing than probably anyone I know.”

She nods. “I just worry. They’re mine to protect, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” He looks to the grove, then to her. “So let’s bring the cart on the road and leave a broad trail to follow.”

“Did you know how ugly Dernier’s horse is, before you set this up?” She falls into step beside to him and he has to laugh.

“Yes, but it also is the most reliable, peaceful and sturdy creature I know.”

A dun horse with a broad trunk but shockingly thin legs stands between the trees tethered to Jeanne’s cart behind some bushes.

He actually had almost forgotten how disgustingly looking that nag is, as he forgets every time and as every time a shock jolts through him when he sees it. But it’s true, the horse, as ugly as it is, is of an extraordinarily even disposition. And since Jeanne admitted to not actually knowing how to ride, Rosinante is perfect.

“Did he really name him Rosinante?”

“Yes.” Cahusac gives a long suffering sigh and sets out to push the cart back on the road. “His sense of humor is rather original.”

The plan is simple. Jeanne had wanted to go north, trying to avoid Inquisition and the Archbishop’s guard alike to get to Paris.

For a young woman with two children, one of whom was wanted by the Inquisition, that might have worked until Mâcon at most.

She might perhaps have come through with a lot of luck and good timing, but it was way too risky.

Now, with the Inquisitor of Lyon believing he can somehow get out of this with his relation to Richelieu improved and with Cahusac as his hunter on the heels of the throwback, the only ones they need to worry about are the Archbishop’s men.

Who may or may not come after them, depending on how much the Archbishop wants to sour that relationship.

If they do, they will need to avoid attacking Cahusac and Jeanne in populated areas or crowded places.

Nobody wants public fighting between the Cardinal’s men and the Archbishop of Lyon.

Those coming after them will know who Cahusac is, he made sure of it, and he’s not a lieutenant in the Cardinal’s elite regiment because he looks good in uniform. They need him alive, too, since he already sent away the throwback.
A shame, really.

Jeanne laid a good trail up to this point, stopping at an inn half the way here to buy bread with Simon in open sight. They only need to keep it up with her as the bait while Dernier whisks the pups away.

In silent moments when nobody is looking Cahusac may be praying that the Archbishop just lets it go and they can travel to Paris unpursued and without trouble.

The more pragmatic parts of himself prepare to make a stand at Morvan where he can fight with all the strength he possesses and nobody there to witness it.
On the road

Chapter Notes

Man, that chapter was a beast!
I think I started three times, but co-operation wasn't really happening.
I finally tackled it, albeit a day late.
But who am I to complain.

As a heads up, FYI: I self edit.
I have no beta reader and I'm a non native speaker.
So, if you find things that sound weird or are plain wrong, don't hesitate to tell me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first night they stop at an inn in Mâcon that is frequented by travelers from Lyon.

They take a room as M. and Mdme Lemaire and Cahusac leaves a message with the innkeeper to be delivered to the Inquisition in Lyon. An account of how someone had smelled an Omega on a cart headed north.

Jeanne protests it is too risky, Cahusac assures her it will work. They need the Inquisition to follow them.

He asks her to trust him.
She does.

They share a room, because that's what married people do.

He wants to sleep on the floor. She calls him an idiot and forces him to take the bed and let her take half of the watch.
In the dark she remembers that someone murdered her father and tortured her soft, gentle mother, who loved her garden and all the living things, just because she had been born.

She cries silently, back leaned against the bed frame, loaded pistol next to her on the ground.
She knows he's sleeping, injured and exhausted, still, a warm hand is placed against her neck and she doesn't move away.
The scent of dark firs and something sweet surrounds her that she first thinks is like woodsmoke, but not quite.
As she turns towards it she finds warmth to bury her pain in when the knowledge that she will never hug her mother again, that she will never again smell her father, wood dust and warm red wine and the sweets he loved to eat, breaks her.

They leave before dawn and as she puts together bread and cheese and dried meat and hands it up to him on his big and, frankly scary, warhorse, he relates the story of how Renard almost had Philippe killed by a woman with a bedpan because of applesauce.
She doesn't believe for one second that their names are Philippe and Renard, but she chuckles nonetheless.

Cahusac pushes the cart into the Sâone before they turn towards Autun and tells the man at an inn right outside Chalon in a seemingly drunken stupor where they are going.

Neither of them sleeps that night.

They ride.

***

Rosinante looks at her with trusting and slightly bored eyes as Cahusac lifts her into the saddle. There is a leather strip she can hold onto. A handle she can wrap her fingers around so she doesn’t fall off.

Jeanne doesn’t like horses.

Rosinante, he assures her, has a very even gait, this will be easy, just go with the movement.

“If we need to gallop, just close your knees as tightly as possible and you should be fine.”

Only as he closes mouth with an audible click and shakes his head with a self-deprecatory “That sounded a lot less ambiguous in my head” does she laugh.

Cahusac snorts, head lowered and goes to adjust the stirrups, his shoulders under the leather doublet shaking.

He doesn’t see how she falters.

It’s nothing abrupt. It’s just that her laughter dies gradually, a sound at a time, one piece of happiness that breaks after another, until she is silent, weighed down by the memory of laughter like this that will never sound again.

Cahusac’s hand rests on her knee, for how long before she becomes aware of it she doesn’t know, his eyes on her face with far too much knowledge in his beautiful eyes.

“You know,” he says after the silence settles. “We always think that mourning allows no joy, no light moments.” His thumb paints slow circles on her leg that unconsciously draw her away from the edge she’s tethering on.

“You know,” he says after the silence settles. “We always think that mourning allows no joy, no light moments.” His thumb paints slow circles on her leg that unconsciously draw her away from the edge she’s tethering on.

“Truth is, they are there. It’s that the pain casts a shadow over everything so that in hindsight there was no light, only varying degrees of darkness.” He steps back, but not without gently poking her leg. Which is inappropriate in any possible way but she can’t bring herself to care about propriety or whatever society would think when she is on the run with a Resistance fighter, who is also an alpha, after defying the Inquisition itself.

“It feels like betraying them when you laugh, but Jeanne, if this is what they saw as betrayal they aren’t worth your grief to begin with. And from what I know about your family they weren’t that kind of people.” He tilts his head back, for once smaller than her, and smiles gently.

Jeanne watches him watch her until finally her shoulders sink down and the painful knot unravels a
fraction. She nods slowly and pries her fingers off the leather strap they have clenched around, one at a time.

“Alright, so, I keep my knees closed and I’ll be fine.” Her lips twitch faintly, a valiant effort, but not more than an effort yet. “I think I can do that.”

Relief flashes in his eyes, before they soften and he nods.

“I think you can, too. Stay in the saddle, I mean.” The smile on his lips changes subtly, less gentleness, more pride and more spirit as he holds back less.

***

They reach Autun in late afternoon. They’re both tired, dangerously so.

An hour earlier, she caught herself dozing off on the horse.

It had been just a few seconds, she only had wanted to close her eyes and rest for a moment.

Rosinante followed Cahusac’s horse blindly, he is such a docile creature, and the way he moves so incredibly calming.

The alpha’s yell had shocked her back to consciousness and his hand had kept her from falling off.

Now she is wide awake and still pondering throwing an apple at Cahusac, who had dared laugh at her.

But that meant he might stop talking and the story of how Philipe and Renard had acquired a cat completely by accident was too funny to miss. His voice was too nice to not listen to, the warmth and affection that bled into it when he talked about the two men obvious and she wondered what they were to him.

“...well and he stood there, soaking wet, mind you, looking absolutely murderous! And from under his coat sounded this this completely miserable and pathetic: MEOOOOW!”

Jeanne has to press her face into the coat to muffle her laughter, imagining a throwback with a kitten under his coat standing watch at a minor noble’s house, guarding a celebration and his friend staring off into the distance.

Is that a kitten?

No.

Why is there a kitten mewling?

I have no idea what you are talking about.

Are you insane?

Half of Cahusac’s friend’s conversations seemed to close with that sentence.

“Cahusac?” He looks up and over to her, a grin flitting over his lips.
“They can’t really be like this, can they?” she asks, doubt bleeding into her voice.

This makes him laugh.

“Oh they are! Not always but sometimes they just are… idiots. They’re idiots.”

“But you are close.” He nods slowly and smiles at her, a mindful expression crossing his face.

“Very close.”

There are questions she wants to ask.

If they are a mated pair, because they sure sound like it, and if they are his pack. Who the noble man
is they are working for, if he is a throwback, too.

But those are questions for a world where he is not in permanent danger of being tortured, mutilated
and killed for being born the way he was and she for not denouncing him.

So, instead she smiles at him and sees him smile back with the laughter of memories in his eyes.

“Maybe I’ll introduce you, when we arrive. They’ll adore you. Yours is just the kind of madness
they appreciate, trust me.”

He says when we arrive, not if and that’s how they ride into Autun.

She hopes for a chance to rest.

She isn’t used to traveling on horseback and there are parts of her that hurt in way they just
shouldn’t.

Instead though, Cahusac pulls up to the back of a small convent. Two buildings and a small church,
the back closed off by what looks like farm buildings.

Compared to anything she knows from Lyon, it’s the epitome of modesty

There is a friar in the robes of the Franciscans walking towards them as they stop at the end of a path
that leads between the stables and the henhouse and he has a bag in his hands and a worried
expression on his face.

Behind him the garden she sees lavender, barely alive this time of year, apple trees, root vegetables,
herbs; there is a stone bench and a little pond.

By all means, it’s idyllic, hidden from view of the world if not for the small passage between the two
low buildings where she is standing.

Cahusac dismounts with a smile and walks towards the monk as if they were on private property or
safe in public and not literally on the land of the church.

The man is not young anymore, crow’s feet bright in a suntanned face. His hair is thinned out and
graying at the temples and the weight of years seems to sit on his shoulders, but as he sees the young
alpha he returns the smile and holds out his hand in greeting.

“Are you planning a war, my friend?” he asks.
Cahusac shrugs and takes the bag from his hands.

“Man does what man must.” He says with a sheepish look on his face.

“And we do, what we must.” The monk retorts and in turn takes a cloth wrapped package from Cahusac with a doubtful look that borders on unhappiness. The package is the size of a batch of letters and he turns it between his fingers, too knowledgeable to not have done this before. “You are planning a war.”

“We need a distraction.” Cahusac shrug and hefts the bag onto his shoulders. “Can you arrange it?”

The monk looks past Cahusac’s shoulder, catching Jeanne’s gaze with doubtful eyes, but in the end nods.

“Who am I addressing it to?”

“Just send it to Beaumont in Lyon or something. I don’t expect it to reach anyone, I just need the men pursuing us to intercept it.” He laughs and pats the monk’s shoulder. “Church soldiers sometimes need some additional hints where to go.”

That has the monk laugh and shake his head as he slaps Cahusac’s hand away. “Call, if you need help, my friend. And be safe.”

“Pray for us that God turns his gaze benevolently on his children, frère.”

Cahusac actually bows his head and the brother makes the sign of the cross over him.

“Go with God my child, may he provide guidance on the paths you travel.” he states and nods to Jeanne bevor he retreats with slow, measured steps.

He vanishes through a door and the garden is once more undisturbed and peaceful and she longs to sit here for a while, watch the plants grow, listen to the wind ripple the water in the pond. Be safe.

Grounded

“Who is he?” She asks Cahusac as the alpha ties the bag to his saddle and mounts.

He hesitates, then nods towards the buildings.

“Where we are going there was a convent. One of the ones where they sent throwbacks to have them out of the way.” He turns his horse around and flicks his tongue for Rosinante to follow. Rosinante does.

It’s perhaps the most fitting metaphor for Jeanne’s life and how it has slipped out of her hands, the reins given to someone else. Though if she wanted to, she could surely take them up and pull and see what happens.

From mad violence to nothing, anything is possible.

Though she’d think Cahusac rather less unpredictable than the horse.

The object of her considerations doesn’t notice, he just continues with a low voice.

“It got burned down almost a hundred years ago in one of the uprisings and everybody just assumed the throwbacks died and the order was given a new convent here as redress for their losses.”

“They didn’t, did they?”
“No, they didn’t. The Guardian was a staunch believer that God helped those who helped themselves and had had hidden chambers built where his brethren were safe from the mob. Afterwards when everybody thought the vile creatures were dead…” he makes a face and looks down. “they rebuilt and kept going.”

“Doesn’t the church… I don’t know…” She looks at the garden as they trot back along the concealed path.

“Control them?” Cahusac shrugs. “The orders are not all the same. Cordeliers are a whole different world to Dominicans. But then San Francesco did teach to love all of God’s creatures and respect them. So…” He smiles at her.

“I… “She hesitates at the way he pronounces the name, but then just shrugs it off. It’s just another piece of the puzzle. “They won’t fight though, do they?”

“Brother Bernard believes in non-violence and wishes only to lead a private life in contemplation. But he will never turn away a child of God in need and he’s an exceptional healer.”

“Experience?”

“Knife thrust on my lower right torso. Highwaymen. That was nasty.”

“Highwaymen?” She laughs. “Seriously?”

“What? Yes. Believe it or not, things like that happen to people like me, too.”

They don’t cross through town, instead they ride through barren fields in south western direction until they meet the road again, nestled between forested hills that rise ominously in the fading daylight.

“Do you think we can sleep tonight? At least a little?” She doesn’t want to sound quite as pleading, but now, with the daylight quickly fading and darkness approaching her body seems to remember that she hasn’t had decent rest in almost a week, ever since the day they took her family. She is tired, body and soul tired and heroic or not, she needs just a few hours of rest. And when he had dismounted earlier, she had seen Cahusac limp.

“I think we can. They won’t dare come up at night.” He says and lifts his face in the wind, smelling the air with eyes closed, nostrils flaring, lips parted like a sensual, primal creature from the legend and smiles. “We’ll get rain, so they might rather hunker down in an inn along the road and since we didn’t sleep last night we have half a day advance at least. More like a whole day, but they don’t know that.”

He turns his smile to her, open and beautiful and in the sinking sun’s firelight he looks younger, somehow softer, lines of stress smoothed out she hadn’t even noticed were there.

Jeanne smiles and nods and whispers a “Thank god” into the trees and gently, very gently and with greatest care spurs Rosinante forward into something like a light trot. As much as she dares to anyways.

***
“The mountain” as he calls it, is an ominous shadow that lurks over the surrounding landscape like a giant toad.

They ride up an overgrowth covered pathway that once was wide enough for carts to pass through easily.

Now thick grass dampens the sound of the horse's hooves. Nightbirds call around them, the crowns of the trees a closed canopy above them; but most pervasive, despite the birds, despite the rustling of little animals in the dark, the horse’s jingeling bridles, her own breathing… is the silence.

It’s been a long time since she experienced silence like that and it’s making her nervous.

Cahusac though seems to feel right at home. Something changes as they enter the woods, he sits taller, he scents, he listens and fills his skin more easily.

The pistol under her coat is practically useless in the dark, but something in her knows that Cahusac is not helpless and it reacts with calm and the sense of security.

Somewhere to the right of the path water gurgles and Cahusac pulls to the left, guiding his horse around one last bent and through the undergrowth, plowing a way for Jeanne until they step out onto a meadow.

It is a gentle slope upwards that leads to a tree surrounded plateau. Mist wafts in fine tendrils over the grass, caressing like a soft blanket around walls of a small chapel in the middle; bright grey stone, narrow, dark windows and an old stone cross reaching towards the pale grey clouds above them.

“Why here?” She asks after he has dismounted and comes to stand next to Rosinante to help her down. She might argue about that, but since there is no way she will actually make it off that horse without help tonight, she doesn’t

“It’s extremely defensible. All along that mountainside behind the chapel there is a cliff. There is a well a few meters to the north east.

The plateau is difficult to access when you don’t know it. And they are from the city and I am Gascon. I grew up on…” She looks down and reaches out for him and he grabs her waist and just lifts her off the horse like she weighed nothing. Alphas usually are more guarded with their strength, but here he doesn’t need to be.

Nobody is around to notice. No one can give him away.

“You grew up on...?”

“A country estate…” He sets her down and sighs, too heavy for just a small slip up, but then, which throwback doesn’t have a subject, something that will just open a box of bad memories.

He waits until her wobbly knees have steadied. She places her hands over his on her waist, raising her face to look at him. Face drawn in the diffuse moonlight or what little of it filters through the clouds.

She could let him go like this, leave him alone with his thoughts, but why should she? Why should she let someone drown in his sorrow if she can catch some light and bring it to him. Especially someone who did the same for her all day.
“So, you are a Gascon country boy who actually grew up in the country?”

He starts, then chuckles, before he nods. “Yes.”

“I must admit, I know nothing about Gascon country boys. Except that they smell of manure.”

His gaze sweeps over her head once, takes in the woods, then he looks back to her.

“I don’t”

“No, you don’t you smell of…” She gives him a sniff, from a polite distance, nothing but a playful gesture.

She doesn’t need to, anyways. She knows his scent, it has bled into her life in a surprisingly intimate way. It’s just there.

It clings to the coat she wears, probably because he used it as pillow when he slept that first night. It’s around him when he helps her on the horse, or off.

“Firs … you smell of firs and something I have not yet identified, but I will. Trust, me, I will.”

He gives an amused snort and pulls back his hands with a smile that’s bordering on greatful.

“Let me know, when you do.” He reaches past her and takes the saddlebags off Rosinante to carry them towards the chapel, leaving her to follow with slow stalking steps.

“Do you know what it is?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Will you tell me?” She hasn’t quite reached the chapel yet when he walks past her and back to the horses again.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It spoils the fun.” He’s limping, she notices, much better than two days age but the time in the saddle has clearly taken it’s toll on his injury. She’ll look at it later. When she can move again. She hates horses. She debates hating him. Decides, it’s not worth the effort.

She turns around and grabs the bag the monk had given him from the saddle of his horse.

The chapel itself is small, it’s basic, without the adornments and delicate frills that cover each, but the oldest churches in Lyon. The stone is rough hewn and inside there is nothing but the altar and a tall wooden cross behind it. It could maybe seat 30 people when they move closely together.

The narrow windows are more like crenels and the inside, swathed in the light of a single candle Cahusac lit, looks intimate and warm, though in truth, it is freezing cold in the late September air.

He walks to the back and it’s obvious that he has been here more than once when he reaches around the cross without searching and instantly finds a lever that has a heavy stone floor panel lift with a
scraping sound and he moves it aside to reveal a short stairway.

He laughs at her expression and with a mocking bow points downwards.

“Mademoiselle. The sleeping arrangements.”

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“Would you tell me about it?” She’s curled up in a blanket nest in the dark, surrounded by stone so old, it had been here before France.

“Tell you about what?” Cahusac an arms length away hisses and she hears his blankets rustle, a soft clang of his dagger as he repositions it to the other side of his head. Cahusac always sleeps with the large hunting dagger he uses as off hand weapon next to his head and always the right side. So, when he turns, he takes the dagger with him.

Though usually, once he sleeps, he doesn’t move anymore. Which is not something she has paid attention to that first night, of course.

Now he curses under his breath before he settles down again and she has to smile.

He cursed a blue streak earlier when she had insisted on washing the wound with wine and make another poultice, trying to convince her, he was fine. It was so predictable.

The cut was indeed healing very nicely, but it still was a hand long (his hands, not hers) cut right above his hip bone where muscles and skin got a lot of movement and mending or not, the area was black and blue and tender.

The time for infection was over, but the tenderness would persist for another few weeks.

All useful things she had had to learn because Michel had a tendency to get himself in trouble and then shrug off the consequences.

"Your family, the estate, why it makes you hurt." She pauses. "If you like. I won't needle, if you don't.

He doesn’t answer at first and the silence hangs in the darkness between them like a shroud.

"It's not a happy story." He says cautiously when he finally speaks, resignation heavy in his voice.

"Which of our stories are." She retorts into the darkness. "We're throwbacks...well, you are. I'm a beta, I'm just a tag along, but... This are our lives, no?"

“You could have a completely ordinary life, you know that, right? Children, husband, the lot.” He asks it casually and Jeanne wonders if he’s trying to provoke her.

“I have Etienne, I have Simon.”

“The church will have your hide as a blood traitor.”

She doesn’t know what he’s playing at and she doesn’t care.
“They are my blood. I’m their sister, I’m the oldest. They’re mine to protect.” She hisses. If her throat were built to do that, she’d growl. “So, whatever you’re trying to say, Cahusac, here’s a hint: Don’t!”

He is silent in the dark and his blankets rustle once, as he adjusts his position.

Jeanne waits.

She wants to sleep, she really wants, but somehow her body had left bone deep tired behind and meandered into a manically awake state; so she hears when Cahusac takes a deep breath, then other, then a third.

When he speaks it’s so low, she is sure she would have missed it any other time.

“My family was very traditional. My parents marriage was arranged between two old families who lived in hiding, like they had done for generations.”

“You’re nobility?” It’s not the first thing that comes to her mind, but the most innocuous.

“Yeah…” He snorts. “Not important nobility, not even close, but from two very pure lines. More pride than substance.

My fathers family had arranged the downfall of their old name and then posed as wealthy merchants with ties to Spain to buy out the estates. It was all very cleverly done and should have protected us. Well…” His voice trails off and he falls silent.

“It didn’t?” She almost feels bad for prompting him. Had he refused to speak of it, she would have let it rest.

He hadn’t, though, and she wants to know more about this man that had shouldered his way into their life and helped her protect the most important things in it, without question or doubt and without being invited to. Nobility at least explains the last part.

“My sire died when I was 11, fell of a horse and broke his neck, if one believes in such things.” He clearly doesn’t. “My Carrier’s brother moved in with us to handle things and help her.” There probably is no more than an arms length between them and she wants to reach out to comfort him and ease the pain in his voice at the mention of his uncle and mother.

"My Carrier...she wasn’t a strong person. I don’t doubt that she loved me, but she was so used to people taking care of everything that she just went along with it.

Whenever someone suggested something with enough conviction, she’d say yes.”

He falls silent again and she hears the dagger being shifted in the dark, before he moves his body to face her, his voice suddenly a lot clearer between them and a lot more intimate.

“My uncle suggested to her it was safer to let the estates go into a beta branch of the family. Incidentally he was the only Beta any side of the families had produced in years…”

He told her a tale about moving me somewhere safe and fitting me with a stipend to ensure a comfortable life or some such.” He pauses with a resigned sigh.

“And she went along with it. The official story was that I had an accident and she wrote her inheritance over to her brother.”
Jeanne pushes off her blankets and gets up.

“Get your dagger out of the way, Cahusac.” She says, more an order than a request. His answers is a confused sound, but he picks it up nonetheless while she sets out to pull her bedroll closer to his.

There is no comment when she wriggles back under her blankets, pushing her freezing feet decisively back into the warmth before she reaches over and fumbles around in the dark until she finds his hand.

Cahusac’s fingers are ice-cold as they close over hers, wrap around her much smaller hand with a gentle touch.

He says nothing, but she thinks she can hear him breathe a little easier.

“My uncle took me towards the coast. He abandoned me three days south of Bordeaux in some god forsaken woods with the clothes on my back and my sire’s dagger in hand.

Told me, he was being merciful, that he was no murderer, only doing what was best for the family. Throwbacks were on the wane and someone needed to look out for their own.”

His fingers clench around hers as the hateful sound she hadn’t wanted to voice fades between them.

“That’s…” Jeanne grapples for words. “You were a child! How were you supposed to survive?” She knows the answer, but she flinches anyways, as it comes.

“I wasn’t.” His fingers thread between hers, moving closer until their bodies, or rather their respective mountain of blankets, are touching.

This time it’s her who paints circles with her thumb on his icy skin. Calming, gentle circles, voiceless promises that he isn’t alone. Human contact in the darkness.

“How did you?”

“I’m a stubborn bastard?” She laughs at that and he raises their still intertwined hands and brushes his lips over the back of her fingers.

His voice is lighter as he continues, heartpain bleeding away, when no judgement is forthcoming from her

”It was early summer. I collected berries and slept in barns and stole food until a farmer took me with him to Bordeaux. He gave me a bit of money and wished me God’s luck and I kept surviving.”

“On the streets…” she adds what he doesn’t state and sneaks closer, a handspan maybe, seeking to give warmth.

Cahusac lets go of her hand then and curls his arm around her waist, a move that feels surprisingly natural.

The way her heart speeds up is not due to fear and the way it settles a moment later is not due to indifference. She wonders if he can smell that spark of excitement, if so, he thankfully doesn’t comment on it.

“On the streets.” He agrees without shame in his voice.

“And how did you end up here? I mean... whatever you are, but a street urchin from Bordeaux is not
“It’s surprising, what we can survive, isn’t it?” She has to believe it and she does.

“If God be for us, who can be against us?” His voice is gentle as he says it, full of a conviction she wants to breathe in and fill her heart with, though it blends with a pain that resonates with her own.

“My uncle didn’t try to get rid of me because he believed I was an abomination, he wanted what was mine. Cheap greed is what is behind all of this. Not God. And I will stop believing that the day someone convincingly argues to me that the people Jesus dined with were nothing but Pharisees in disguise.”

“That is optimistic.” She says with doubt in her voice. Maybe the pain is still too raw, maybe optimism, as opposed to action, is not in her nature.

“I just happen to know that you and your siblings will end up in a safe place where no one will hurt you for what you are. So, enjoy my optimism.”

Jeanne snorts and snuggles into him and into his scent which, in the small room, is a lot stronger than outside. It’s warm and inviting and by now she connects that with safety. Hopefully her brain will too and finally let her sleep.

“If everybody goes, who will be left to fight?”

“You are a midwife, not a fighter, Jeanne Durand.” It sounds an awful lot like a dismissal. It feels an awful lot like a painful stab in her heart.

“You haven’t seen me shoot, have you, Cahusac? Papa Durand didn’t raise a helpless damsel. And excuse me, but who of us staged a successful raid on the Inquisition headquarters in Lyon?” She pushes back, because it’s what she does.

“That would be me.” He provokes her, because he seems unable not to and by the time her acerbic answer has left her mouth, his subdued laughter shakes his frame and he pulls her into his arms and buries his face in her hair with barely disguised delight.
“No, you half-assed something that included disguising a boy who barely reaches your breastbone as an inquisitorial guard. You just hopped along with my people who did an impeccable job”

“Tomorrow. You can convince me tomorrow.” He laughs “If you don’t topple over from fatigue… again.”

She makes him tell her a story as apology for that.

His voice surrounds her in the darkness, along with his scent and she never finds out what his friend Jean does with the bottle of wine he snuck into the man's office, but she dreams of laughter and someone telling her, it’s going to be alright.

Chapter End Notes

The mountain they are on is Mont Beuvray in Burgundy.
Magical place.
I you have never seen the morning mist rise out of the woods and curl around thousand year old ruins on Mont Beuvray, you have missed out in life.
Incidentally it's also great for hiking and you can collect roman pottery sherds off the ways.

There is nothing left of the Cordeliers convent that got burned down in the Hugenot wars in 1556 but at least I can say I have had my hands in their sewers and dug around in holy shit.
Under that convent is the site of the craftsmen's quarters of the celtic oppidum of Bribracte and it's Roman settlement where Caesar finished his De Bello Gallico
Why am I even telling you this: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bibracte
Morning greets her with a cold wet touch to her face and washed out light that falls through the open entrance.

Cahusac’s bundle of blankets is empty and the only reminder that he is around somewhere is a fresh bucket of water in a corner of the stone enclosed room.

Wonderful pleasures of life on the road.

She washes, dresses in something practical and presentable, which amounts to long pants and a knee length tunic over her blouse, her work clothes sans the apron, and goes to find him outside. He sits on the steps of the chapel, at first glance a simply dressed man without anything special about him, dark hair swept back in a bun on the back of his head, leather pants and a linen shirt, cleaning mushrooms to roast them over a small fire.

It’s in equal parts wild and primal and oddly domestic.

He looks up as she steps outside and without comment pushes his woolen coat aside as an invitation to sit on it. In the same motion he pokes a raw piece of a penny bun mushroom on his knife and pulls it off with his teeth, cheeks creasing with a deep smile and a sparkle in his eyes that shines the brighter for their fog dimmed reality.

Jeanne guesses the shapes of the trees in the milky morning light and the death shroud of mist that has enclosed them, but in all truth, they’re alone here on the plateau, muted, cut off and deceptively safe.

He plucks a blueberry from a shallow wooden bowl and plops it into his mouth, only to lick the dark juice of his fingers right after.

She is hungry.

His eyes stay on her and his grin grows until it is an invitation.
Both things she should want to slap him for. She finds she does, but she also wants to know what it tastes like.

“Stop that and behave.” Is what she says instead, laughing inwardly at his absolutely inappropriate behaviour and his put upon indignation at her words.

It’s how he sets the tone for the day. Within the fog, on their clearing, it’s feels like a different world and he is a different man, for this moment relieved of the war’s burden.

Attentive, as he hands her a bowl with mushroom stew. No meat, because “you said, you could shoot, so you bring the rabbit.” and before she can scoff at his provocation, he has already settled a blanket around her shoulders with a murmured “It’s cold up here.”

“Eat, “ he says. “I´m gonna take care of the horses, then show you around and you can procure that rabbit for midday meal.”

For a moment Jeanne ponders pelting him with the bowl, but the stew, warm and hearty, is too good to waste on him. She settles for a glower and the silent promise to just make him shut up with her shooting skills.

It must show on her face because he laughs as he walks off and the sound stays long after the white wall that circles the plateau has swallowed his form.

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He makes her prove him she can load a pistol first and the urge to slap him triples. But he doesn’t do it to jerk her around, he’s dead serious. “Do you know how many people have tried to convince me they can shoot and know how to do this?”

“One too many?” she retorts as her fingers load first gunpowder, then ball, then stuff it until it is nicely set.

“More like three or four.” He follows her movements with his eyes and a corner of his lips pulls up a fraction.

“It’s your lucky day, then. Papa…” Jeanne’s voice breaks under an avalanche of pain, so unexpected it crashes through the defenses behind which she stored the knowledge of their deaths. She has to clear her throat and set out again. And again.

The third time she manages to push her voice through the words with sheer grit and determination and the anchor of his eyes to hold on to. “My father shot two inquisition soldiers straight out of bed and in his night clothes.” The tears threaten to fall and she shores them up with anger.

“For eighteen years, he was father to a girl and an omega and he didn’t let us go out there without the means to defend ourselves, however much that’s worth.”

Cahusac stands then and reaches out a hand to help her up.

“It’s worth lunch at least.” He smiles. “And if we eat… it might be worth my backup, because believe me, though I might claim otherwise, I am not too fond of taking on a squad of inquisition soldiers alone.”
She finds a rabbit, a big one, sitting content and oblivious between carrots and herb beds on the meadow that once was the convents gardens. She would love to plunder those for medicine, but that's not what she came for.

Around them blackened walls rise like ghostly fingers between tendrils of fog. The skeleton of a half burned cross is visible through the empty shell of a window where the altar would have stood, Jesus’ charred figure still apparent.

Jeanne sidles up to her prey over the solid ground of old pavement and new grass until she is close enough to get a clear shot.

Cahusac, ten feet away, is a silent menace propped with easy confidence against a wall. She turns, before she shoots, making sure, he still is where she expects him.

The man couldn’t be more silent if he were absent.

Her pistol rests on her left arm, fingertips balancing against blackened stone. She draws one slow breath and lets it go in a gentle flow, lets her body come to rest and caresses the trigger.

Jeanne’s pistol is in perfect condition, oiled and clean.

*The moment you need to pull the trigger, you already missed,* Papa had always said. He had given it to her the day she left with Mdme Dubois and she knows every groove, every quirk of that weapon.

And she doesn’t miss with it.

Behind her Cahusac whistle softly through his teeth as the rabbit falls and she turns with a satisfied smile. “I don’t need to brag, Monsieur.”

Cahusac bows to her "Roasted or cooked, mademoiselle?"

They collect the rabbit and string it up on a wall to bleed out.

She says cooked because then they can make it into stew, he says roasted, because it tastes better and they still can make it into stew. They negotiate. He wins with a laugh that echoes between the old walls and wins her smile too.

Besides the church only the former living quarters still rise above the ground, partly one story up, crumbling on the front to what once was the courtyard, but more stable the farther away they get to the back.

“There are rooms in the former cellars and the less destroyed parts of the buildings.” He tells her. “We sometimes hide people here. They even have beds.

Oh, the luxury.” Cahusac comments as he pushes open a sturdy oaken door hidden behind a mess of wild vines.

“Nobody comes here anymore. Only the brothers to take care of the chapel. There is nothing for
anyone to find and no village for several valleys over and the people in the villages, they say there are ghosts here. Vengeful ghosts of the unholy beasts they burned.”

“Which none of you had anything to do with.” She deadpans in direction of his back and she hears his grin as he answers.

“Who?” His eyes sparkle as he casts a look over his shoulder and beckons her in.

It’s nestled in a passage between what once was the church and living quarters, protected from prying eyes from all sides. The posterior walls of the building shield it from view from the hilltop rising behind it, a formless shape through the mist.

“You can bar the door from the inside.” Cahusac turns.

"Should something go wrong, I want you to do this. I want you to get here and hide until they’re gone. Someone will come and get you soon.” He says intently, checking her face to make sure, she really listens. What Jeanne listens to, is something else though.

“Are you expecting this to go wrong, Cahusac?” She lifts a warning finger before he even speaks. “Truth. No Alpha-ing.”

His face twists with a sad mix of a helpless smile and a painful case of congestion, then he shrugs.

“I’m good. I’m really good.” He says without false bravado “But I am not infallible. Things happen in a fight, especially one that is riddled with insecurities like this one.

It’s possible nobody will show up. Or they were so angry, they send two dozen.” He ponders that thought, then nods and lets her pass into the low room, surprisingly clean with a wobbly table, pot and basin on top, and a narrow bed in the corner behind the door.

“Two dozen would be too many.” His voice is thoughtful, infused with fine thread of humor that informs every second thing he says and Jeanne finds herself anticipating it and smiling as it happens, despite her concern.

“And you’d expect me to leave you to them in that case and run away?”

“No, Jeanne-Marie Durand.” He reaches for her hand and bows, bringing his lips down, until she feels the warmth of his breath on her skin, but doesn’t touch. “I ask you to.”

A lady would never initiate a touch in this situation, to keep the distance between his lips and her skin paramount.

Jeanne turns her fingers and lets the tips brush over his cheek, cupping the warm skin to lift his head until their eyes meet. “My life is not worth yours, Cahusac.”

He rises and opens his lips to speak, only to be halted by her fingers brushing over them. “My life is not worth more than yours.” She smiles, her fingertips taping his lips as he tries to speak again.

“This is going one of two ways, Cahusac. Either we survive or we don’t: No matter what, we do it together. Because I will not have it that someone is lost, when I should have been guarding their back.” He tilts his head, his lips gently moving against her fingers, but no sound is forthcoming.

“And my chances of survival are much better with you still alive. See it that way, if it helps.” She adds casually, trying to ease his warring instincts, a fight finding a vivid expression in his clear eyes.
Finally Cahusac mouth pulls into a smile as his lashes lower over his eyes. His hand raises and closes around hers and he gently lifts her fingers away.

“My mind is still scrambling to come up with something to dissipate your resolve.” His gaze catches on her lips. “My heart tells me, I know better already than to try.” He adds with a dry tone.

“You are literally the first person to reject my protection claiming I wouldn’t be sufficiently protected in return. And...” He huffs and his fingers clench gently just once.

“...while the novelty intrigues me, I want to keep you out of the thick of it. War is my occupation, not yours.” His gaze flickers away from hers and back with a laden smile and she truly feels her resolve waver for a moment. Then she imagines him alone against a squad of Inquisition soldiers and squashes the thought.

“You already tried that in Lyon, Cahusac.” Jeanne stills his wandering thumb with one of her fingers and locks their gazes. “How did that work out for you?”

He laughs.

“Splendidly! One of the more exciting losses of my life.”

Amusement rises inside her. It doesn’t matter she had done it for different reasons back then, unwilling to leave such a crucial detail of her siblings safety out of her hands, she still remembers clearly how they sat at her kitchen table, gazes locked as they are now, willing the other to just give in.

His laughter rings between them before those impossibly long lashes that she just wished she possessed herself lower over his eyes and his head drops slowly, leaving Jeanne all the world’s time to protest, before his lips meet hers, already lifted in welcome.

She expects a clumsy mush of yet unfitting desires, like the village boys behind barns, too absorbed in their own importance to meet her fumbling attempts in something that worked out.

She does not expect the heavy hand that lands on her nape to gently tilt her head, or the firm, warm lips that coax hers apart to find entrance.

She doesn’t expect to yield quite as willingly to the experience of the alpha who gentles her mouth and teases her tongue with his, murmuring soft encouragement into their mingling breaths. She expects though, the wish to nip at his full, glorious lips that ask to be explored, to be nibbled on and adored in all the proper ways. So she does.

His soft chuckle is the only warning she gets before he bends his knees and picks her up with effortless ease. She curls her legs around his hips and looks down into that beautiful face, sharp cheekbones softened by full lips, now moist and inviting, and piercing blue eyes, adorned by night black lashes, befitting his equally dark hair that, pulled back and tied severely, pushes all those delicious angles into sharp relief.

“I like you, Jeanne-Marie Durand. I really, really like you.” he states.

There once had been a boy, tall and lean, with ash blond hair and gentle brown eyes, whose family had had a farm in Mdme Dubois’s village. He had been kind and she had liked him. She had kissed him, too and maybe she would have said yes, as he invited her to walk the meadows with him, a bouquet of wildflowers in his hand.

The night before she and her teacher had spend hours bringing two little Omegas into the world, their
Carrier having hid in a barn on his sire’s fields for months to keep his condition from the world’s eyes.

Jeanne had wished she could have told the boy about it, about the injustice of it all. But she couldn’t. She couldn’t trust him.

She could trust nobody with her family, her siblings, the lives of the pups and the carriers, so she had broken his heart instead and stayed alone with a faked marriage to mitigate rumours and keep her baby aleph hidden under layers of deception.

Now an alpha looks at her, someone who walks the same fine line as she.

And he knows.

In that moment, in a low room with traces of oily soot coloring the walls near the door, the reminders of hatred and fear and godless, graceless monstrosity, she feels blessedly alive for the first time in years. Almost free.

So she laughs and searches his mouth again.

Cahusac takes a measured few steps until she feels the wall in her back. There is only one arm holding her to him now, the other caresses up her sides with slow movements.

Jeanne feels warmth rising throughout her body, a tingling between her thighs that has her shift her hips against his and him groan with a deep rumble in his chest that reverberates within her.

“I want so bad to undress you and love you as you deserve.” His words, whispered against her lips, have an urgency that has her reach out and nip at his mouth, trying to catch his full lower lip between her teeth before he pulls away. He is faster, turning his head away with a desperate groan and closes his eyes.

“But we can’t.” She responds breathless and annoyed.

She understands. It’s too dangerous here, too exposed in their situation.

Her skin pushes against the restraints of her clothing, too hot, too tight, too alive inside her body to just quietly accept defeat. But they have to.

Jeanne tightens her arms around his neck and drops her head against his shoulder, sucking in all the delicious heat of his scent, the sharp bite of firs and that warm sweetness that she wants to roll around in as if it were catnip. Her fingers caress what little skin she can reach above the scruff of his leather doublet and for a moment the temptation to send all caution to hell and just push it down his shoulders is staggering.

His disappointed grumble doesn’t help.

Cahusac’s hand caressing her side lowers slowly to reach around her body again and pull her snuggly against the expanse of his body. Her breasts find themselves pressed against his chest and through the layers of their clothing, Jeanne can feel his heartbeat and the staggering amount of heat he radiates.

A rumble, more felt than heard rolls through him, a long drawn “Hrmmmmmmh…” that contains such an amount of disgruntled male, that she can’t help but snort a laugh into his shoulder. Laughter that dies, as she hears the words whispered into her hair, so filthy that the heat flares right up and her resolve to let him go and be responsible and risk averse almost dies a fiery death.
It’s her wish to see the men pursuing them dead that has her extricate herself, though not without a smile for him and the fervent hope her face is not as hot glowing red as it feels. “Not here” is what she manages to say and the way he looks at her has her heart jump.

“Later.” he says. "When they're dead." His lips brush hers one last time before he turns away and stalks to the back wall where a second door is built into the stone. She pretends she doesn’t notice how he subtly adjusts his pants.

It doesn’t help her face flaming.

Again.

The second door hides a small storage room. It’s not much that she finds, dried meat, pickled vegetables and winter’s apples as well as a small sack of grain and filled waterskins and three bottles of wine. There is a simple oven in the corner that opens to the outside and coal in a basket.

But it’s enough to survive, especially with the woods surrounding the site. Many throwbacks learn basic survival at some point, a need that goes hand in hand with the habit to sit out heats in the woods, far from civilization.

“Cahusac?” she calls out softly.

He turns, eyebrows raised questioningly.

“Won’t we be giving this place away?”

“We might… if one of them ever returned to Lyon.” He shrugs. “It’s up to us to prevent that.”

“What if we fail?”

“Then our people will keep away for a while.”

Jeanne wants to ask how, wants to understand how it all works, at times so intrinsically connected, but she doesn’t ask.

Because she understands, too, that she can’t give away what she doesn’t know. She knows too much already, having seen Brother Bernard.

She knows about Cahusac.

She knows a great many things about Cahusac by now.

That he has a wealth of stories about his pack mates, one more improbable than the other. When he sleeps, he sleeps like a stone dropped.

He loves pork but for some absolutely unfathomable reason, hates mutton. He has two daggers in his boots in addition to his main gauche at his belt and third up his left sleeve.

He’s a very good hunter. He likes people. He doesn’t flinch when someone pushes a needle through his flesh, but dislikes strong smelling tea. He likes to touch and loves to smile. He can cook. He doesn’t like the smell of lavender at all and he prefers his rabbit roasted.

He’s also a member of the throwback resistance and that knowledge is where the things end that the Inquisition might want to know from her.
They won’t care about his smile, or the way his eyes light up when he laughs. Or his magnificent ability to kiss.

Every blame she can point will always circle back to Cahusac, making him more valuable to them with everything she doesn’t know. More likely to be tortured, each scrap of information she doesn’t have and has to point to Cahusac for, additional hours of torment.

It’s a sobering thought. It genuinely scares her.

Then she remembers that he’s an alpha who dared defy them and no matter what she does or doesn’t pin on him, they will tear into him and destroy everything that is so endearing about him.

“Does that truly work?” her question sounds doubtful and he scoffs.

“What are they going to do? Install a permanent guard in one of the most remote spots in France? Let them then! They’ll need to feed them, they’ll need to use up resources to keep it manned! Less money they can use on hunting us, less men, too.” He smiles. “However this ends, Jeanne. We win.”

“I adore your optimism.” she sighs and expects a laugh. Instead he looks at her, smile faded to a soft curl at the corners of his lips and his voice dimmed to a low tone that wraps around her with the intensity of a vow.

“All I ask of you, Jeanne, is to trust me. Can you do that?”

“That depends.” She says and steps closer. “With my life? Yes, I can do that. With my family’s? That depends if you prove trustworthy. With yours? Eh... “ she reaches out and absentmindedly touches a button on his doublet, looking at his serious face with a smile. “I think I rather keep that responsibility with myself, alright?”

“So... I will have to trust you with my life?” he strokes a strand of her hair behind the shell of her ear and the right corner of his lips quirks up. “Alright.”

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The sun breaks through the mist as he shows her Saint Pierre's Fountain. It filters through the trees to catch on tiny drops of water scattered on multicolored leaves as he shows her the small clearing where the horses are grazing, one slope below the hilltop plateau.

They’re greeted by warmth and steam rising from the meadows as they reach the chapel again. The land below the cliff is still shrouded in mist, but beyond that on the horizon, framed by a pale blue sky, she can see the faded shape of the mountains.

She doesn’t hear him as he steps behind her, is alerted only by his scent before an arm curls around her front and gently pulls her back against his chest.

“This is when I know...” his voice says lowly next to her ear. “...God hasn’t forsaken us entirely. He can’t have, if he still bothers to gift us with moments like this.”

She takes a deep breathe of the sweet autumn air and smiles.

“And gave us the means to defend ourselves.”
Cahusac laughs and plants a resounding kiss on her cheek. “Yes, my bloodthirsty fey, that too.”

She slaps his arm and he laughs and stirs her back to the chapel, talking about plans to defend the plateau.

It’s a discussion that goes well through the morning while he takes care of the rabbit and she cleans both of his pistols, then hers and his musket and sorts charges into three neat piles, one each for each of the weapons she will be using.

It flows into talk of their families, of Simon getting drunk on the fruit wine Mama had set up in the attic, of Cahusac’s cousins, the pups of his father’s odem, painting him with berry sauce while he slept - he loves raspberries -, of Etienne trying to help her do the laundry and ending up in the tub instead, while he feeds her roasted rabbit that is surprisingly good.

Jeanne marvels at the fact that he travels with salt and pepper in his pack, because frankly, that’s the last thing she thought of taking as they fled Lyon.

They circle back neatly to the fight for their survival, while she places the charges in lines below the narrow windows, and end in the same discussion as before, that she is not to leave the protection of the chapel while he’ll take them out hand to hand, preferably before they notice there is only one person shooting at them.

They talk. They sit in companionable silence.

They wait, patiently at first, but as the shadows grow longer and dusk’s twilight settles around them, it becomes obvious that the attack they’re expecting is unlikely to come.

They sit, shoulder to shoulder, sharing warmth and Cahusac’s book of dramatic stories that is worn, dog eared, pages yellowed by tea and stained with blotches of dried blood.

His woolen coat has been spread over both their backs and at some point Cahusac’s arm has followed suit.

Jeanne likes the warmth of his embrace, a fitting representation of the warmth she sees again and again in his character. She thinks of the very telling way he dealt with Etienne and her thoughts circle back to the little one that calls her mama. She had been present when he drew his first breath, she’d been there through the terrible nights when his teeth had come out. She had consoled him after scrapes and bruises and felt so incredibly blessed at his first smile. Etienne’s scent clings to her clothes, woven into everything she touches and does and no matter how much she loves Simon, how many cities she’d raze to the ground for her odem, Etienne was for all intents and purposes her son. Her beautiful, rambunctious little Alpha.

Cahusac’s warmth fills some of the hollow emptiness inside her, but not even he can always halt the fear.

"What if they don't come?" She asks.

"Then we won't die." he answers.

"What if they didn't follow us?" She inquires.

"They did." he responds and raises his hand to caress her shoulder. “If they left Lyon at all, it will have been on our trail.”
“What if Simon and Etienne…”

“They are safe!” He cuts her off sharply. “Trust me, Jeanne.”

She wants to believe the sincerity in his voice, the gentleness in his touch. She wants to hope they get off easy. Maybe she will, once they are in Paris.

Ants are crawling under her skin, the urge to do something, anything, an overwhelming drive that has her fingers drum on his thigh, so conveniently close.

“What will we hear them, when…”

His long fingers close around her jaw and she finds her head turned, lips sealed by his, warm and sweet in the chilly air of the approaching evening.

Her lips part with a gentle moan that sounds nothing like her usual dutiful self, the one that always puts work above her wishes and dreams. This sounds like a person that wants, a person that would twist on a man’s lap to place a knee on each side and frame his face with her hands to get to his lips and tangle her tongue with his.

He answers hungrily, an arm snuck around her waist, the other hand stroking up her side to caress her breast with a lovers touch.

She wants to eat him whole, if that were possible.

It isn’t, the rational part of her mind, the one that looks at all the angles and strings to bring them together in a desired outcome, supplies.

And she knows. She knows.

She doesn’t care.

“Did you mean what you said earlier?” she whispers the words into his mouth, her teeth closing around his lower lip, a soft bite, barely contained aggression that has him swallow heavily, but he nods with a grin.

“Every word.”

Heat creeps into Jeanne’s cheeks, but she keeps her eyes on him with a decisive nod.

“I would wish that, if you would have me.” As soon as the words leave her mouth, she knows it’s the most irresponsible, but also one of the truest sentences, she has ever spoken.

Cahusac’s head drops back against the wall with a desperate groan as his eyes close.

The hand resting on her breast rises until it’s firmly nestled against the back of her head, pushing it forward until their lips connect again.

“You’ll be the death of me, woman.” He laughs into her mouth, the way his hips press against her core making her “Likewise” a bit sharper than intentioned.

When they part they both are panting, their bodies molding into each other, hands roaming freely. She can feel him straining against the leather of his pants, his frantic pulse under her fingertips where they snuck under his doublet to finally touch skin.

“If I asked you…” He asks, while brushing featherlight kisses onto her neck. “…if you had ever
invited a man’s touch.” His teeth catch a thin fold of skin between them, for the tip of his tongue to mischievously caress, and she almost ignores the meaning of his remark. She would have, had he not added: “What would your answer be?”

Her head twists around, reclaiming her neck with a snap of her teeth and a glare. “What, Cahusac, you wish to judge me?”

He sighs and snorts a laugh in equal measures. “Beyond the obvious Jeanne answer, of course.” He reaches up and presses his lips against her jaw. “I only wish to do right by you and not inadvertently hurt you, mon cœur.” He softly admits, his arms tightening around her waist.

She opens her mouth to speak, but whatever she wants to say is aborted as a shot rings out and a horse’s pained cry echoes through the fading light.

“Oh, of course! Merde!” Cahusac curses and rolls both of them around until his body covers hers, two steps away from the door.

Jeanne looks up at him and hisses a frantic “Go!” under her breath, already struggling to get out from under him and run into the church. He moves into a crouch, right hand reaching for his sword belt as he goes and Jeanne crawls over the doorstep of the chapel, hearing the heavy oaken door being slammed shut behind her.

She stumbles one step, but nonetheless reaches out and pushes the heavy bolt into the notch.

She wants to call out after him, tell him to be careful, to not get injured. She wishes she could roll her eyes at yet another reminder to not leave the chapel, but that reminder doesn’t come.

By the time she reaches the musket placed under the crenel overlooking the path onto the plateau, he has already vanished between the trees.

***

“CAHUSAC!”

They ride onto the plateau, seven shadows in the deepening twilight, and suddenly Jeanne understands how cunning this is. The mountain may be too dangerous to be traveled in the dark by someone who doesn’t know his way around, but if they conquered most of it in twilight, with a bit of good fortune and the patience to bide their time, it was doable. And they would arrive at the hour when the twilight was quickly fading, limiting her ability to shoot drastically.

Her head thuds against the cold stonewall as she allows herself to wallow in her own stupidity for just a moment.

Cahusac had relied on the safety of the site too much and she didn’t know enough about warfare to have thought of it. If they survive, that’s one of the first things to rectify, learn battle tactics. If only to beat stubborn men over the head with it.

Peeking through the window she sees them dismount and raises the musket.

The darkness works to her advantage, too. If they are to believe that everybody on this mountain has entrenched themselves in the chapel, their inability to see what’s going on inside is crucial. The fact
that it’s pitch dark within the walls preserves her ability to aim for just a little while longer and she thanks the Holy Mother for small mercies.

“LIEUTENANT CAHUSAC! This is Martin de la Barre of the Archbishop’s guard; we seek no quarrel with you!” It’s a tall, blond man in a dark coat with lighter trims that calls out, his voice roaring over the stillness of the clearing.

Jeanne doesn’t know what Cahusac is Lieutenant of or what the church soldiers know about it, but she knows with certainty that it’s not good.

In her head she counts the moments. She watches them step closer, more into the open.

Shoot the ones on the front, is the plan.

The moment, a man in the back falls, the others will turn and inevitably discover anybody behind them, namely Cahusac.

A deep breath, her eyes fix on the leader, her finger stretching for the trigger, as she counts to five.

Then she lets go of the air and shoots.

The bullet flies true, it is just bad luck that one of his men turns at that moment and steps in front of him.

Jeanne curses sotto voce, retreating the musket and dropping it against the wall to run to the other front facing window, already releasing the pistol from her belt.

Aiming is guesswork at best at this point and she prays that she doesn’t accidentally shoot Cahusac, who should be in the trees behind them somewhere. If he even is there yet.

If he isn’t, she is the distraction.

The pistol jumps in her hand and another soldier drops, both hands pressed to his stomach, his cries of pain fill the hilltop.

Shots ring out, the flashes of firelight flaming in the twilight. Bullets crash into the wall next to the window. Stone shards fly, but nothing but a fine showering of dust reaches her, as the soldier’s horses shy in terror.

Jeanne grabs Cahusac’s pistol, the last shot before she needs to reload.

They are faceless to her, not more than a rabbit in the woods, the future roast on her family’s table.

Whatever might have felt mercy for them once has gone cold, knowing these are the men who tortured her mother, who shot her father and had her little brother so terrified he went mute.

“CAHUSAC! LET’S TALK ABOUT THIS!” Their leader cries and she pulls the trigger again. The shot goes wide as they are retreating back towards the additional cover the bodies of the horses provide, showering the men in grass and earth as it pierces the ground in front of them.

Jeanne drops then, getting her body down under the window to reload, leaving her safety, as planned, to Casuhac.

“His excellence has no quarrel with you or Richelieu! Hand over the omega that is by right his and we’ll forget about this!”
Jeanne frowns.

“I know, you’re a loyal soldier! The Cardinal can’t want this, Cahusac.” Gunpower trickles over her fingers, a silent ripple in the dead air inside the chapel, the only other sounds her chopped breathing. “I’ve seen the Omega, not even through his first heat that one. Too small to be any fun in a hunt, too small to fuck without breaking right away… so, why are we shooting each other?”

Cahusac’s pistol falls from her numb fingers, crashing on the stone floor with a dark, meaningless sound.

Her eyes seek for a target in the dark of the chapel but there is nothing, only the stone cross an accusing counterpoint. No solace. No answers.

Outside, over the pained screams, the horses neighing, someone calls out and abruptly falls silent. Curses follow, accompanying the realization that they are not alone out there.

Jeanne crouches under the window, shaking fingers grasping emptiness where the pistol should have been.

“Damn it! Lieutenant! Do you really think a letter by the Inquisitor gives you rights to kill the Archbishops men?” A note of desperation creeps into the his voice. “Are you insane, Cahusac? What is so special about this one throwback that Richelieu would resort to this?”

Outside someone yells a warning, and suddenly metal clangs in the night, bodies crash into each other an Jeanne finds herself forgotten and alone in the relative safety of the chapel.

Alone with herself. With her thoughts. All those shattered hopes.

She reaches out, pushing Cahusac’s pistol aside and loads her own.

The one Papa had given her. The one thing he had given her she knows is still with her.

She doesn’t know where her siblings are, if they still are of this world even, but Jeanne-Marie Durand still knows how to load and shoot a pistol.

“Hail Mary, full of grace.”

And if this knowledge is the last thing left to her, it will be the last thing she uses, if not to save them, then to take revenge.

“The Lord is with you.” The words fall from her lips as the lead ball drops into the barrel with a gentle sound and calm settles around her.

“Blessed are you among women.” As Jeanne looks down, she sees Cahusac’s pistol and with a smile loads this one as well.

Better have more shots, because if she has to kill every man on this mountain, she will.

“And blessed be the fruit of your womb, Jesus.” The words evaporate unheard by anyone but her as the sound of fighting, the clang of swords gets louder.

Her eyes find the cross again and for a moment she has to close her eyes, the knowledge that her beautiful little boys might be dead too much to bear.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God.” Who, too, has known the loss of a beloved child.
Jeanne casts a glance out of the window, automatically searching Cahusac’s tall form in the dark.

“Pray for us,” she whispers under her breath as her eyes sweep over the chaotic scene outside.

As much she can see, there are only three soldiers and him standing anymore. Even as she counts, Cahusac wraps an arm around the neck of one of them and twists his upper body.

The crunch of breaking bones echoes loud enough for her to hear. The body drops limply and slides to the ground and Jeanne gets up and steps to the door to pull back the bolt.

“Now and at the hour of our death.”

The horses have long since bolted, it’s only the three men out on the meadow now.

“Amen.”

The officer turns his head in her direction, only for a second but it’s enough for Cahusac to run the remaining soldier standing through with his sword.

Cahusac’s face is a mask of barely contained rage, de la Barre only raises a well groomed eyebrow in mild surprise.

“Well, Cahusac. That is decidedly not the Omega.” He steps aside, out of the reach of Cahusac’s weapons and pulls his pistol, a movement aborted as Jeanne turns hers towards his head.

“What exactly have you been up to, my man?” There is laughter in his voice, sleazy and far too intimate, too knowing.

Jeanne wishes, Cahusac would look at her, but his eyes never waver from the officer.

“This is the the sister, isn’t it? Pretty enough. She an Omega, too?”

Cahusac circles him, his back slowly turning towards Jeanne. Pushing himself between her and the other man, shielding her from de la Barre’s still lowered pistol.

Jeanne wants to yell at him, curse him for being a blood traitor, wants to hear him say, it’s all wrong, that de la Barre is lying.

None of them are prepared for the crack of a gunshot.

It’s not hers, her arm is steady, still raised without wavering toward both men.

Neither is it the officer’s, still pointed at the ground.

Cahusac’s main pistol is still on his belt.

For a heartbeat everything seems to still and Jeanne wonders if there is someone in the woods she hasn’t seen. An unknown player belonging to an unknown side.

Then Cahusac’s knees buckle and his heavy body drops like a sack of grain.

Behind him the man he ran through lowers his pistol, a thin trail of blood dribbling down his chin. He grins like a maniac.

Jeanne is too slow to react before de la Barre’s hand comes up and slams into Cahusac’s face. The alpha sways like a leaf in a storm but by some miracle stays upright.
It’s probably only the fact that the Archbishop’s men do not expect him to be one that keeps the throwback’s secret safe.

Any normal man would have toppled over, Cahusac remains on his knees, albeit wobbly.

“Well, that explains a lot.” de la Barre slowly takes several steps back, eyes on her, rough hewn face a hateful grimace.

"What did you do think, whore? That he was leaving his evil ways and saved you and your slut of an omega brother?” He chortles.

“Or did you perhaps not know that dear Cahusac here is a lieutenant in the Cardinal’s Red Guard? One of Richelieu’s highest ranking men?

Tough luck, the only thing that can save the boy from the Cardinal now is me."

De la Barre raises his weapon and aims at her. "So you better decide quickly."

“Jeanne…” Cahusac's voice is strained. She can see how his shoulders curl in to recenter his weight and keep him on his knees.

The back of his leather doublet is blood red and the color is quickly spreading.

The color of the Bloody Cardinal and his Red Guards.

If it's true...

"The truth, Cahusac!"

His head sags forward, weakly resting against his chest.

She would have loved to see his face, regard the expression that makes de la Barre grin like that.

There can be only two outcomes. Either Cahusac had lied to her or to them.

And if he had lied to her...

But then, what did he have to gain?

She hadn’t known anything useful about the Underground nor had she known anything about the Resistance.

What about Michel and Anne? Their pups? Where they dead already?

But he is an Alpha, she is sure of it. More importantly, Anne had been sure of it.

And what about Dernier?

Cahusac struggles to stay upright, the uninjured left hand digging into the rich soil, now wet and black with the spilled blood of the Archbishop’s soldiers.

"Trust...me..." it's almost inaudible.

"Is it true, Cahusac? Are you one of the Cardinal’s men?” Her voice cuts through the night.

From her vantage point, protected by the chapel’s pillars, she sees the bodies of the men they both
felled, can hear the struggling breath of the one he ran through and the weakening whimper of the soldier she shot in the stomach.

No guilt is forthcoming. And if it were it would be burned out by rage, a hot agonizing flame inside her.

He tries to lift his head again, only to have it fall back right away.

"Yes"

"See, it’s as I told you, woman. You shouldn't have spread your legs..."

She pulls the trigger.
In medio umbrae mortis

Chapter Notes

Additional warning: Nightmares, hallucinations, references to torture.

Or in short: that's a hard one, grab chocolate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shoot him first, Cahusac wills her as a last prayer, a mute plea, don't waste your bullet on me.

The shot tore through his right shoulder, right under the collarbone, rendering the arm useless.
It broke the bone, it broke his shoulder blade too, before it exited and took a good chunk of flesh out of his back.
Cahusac won’t die of sudden blood loss.
Neither will he suffocate on his own blood.
He was lucky. He will just silently bleed out.
And if he doesn’t, if by some miracle two holes are not enough to finish him, he will die of fever.
Jeanne won’t have to shoot him. All she has to do, is wait.
And not, in her desperation, in her fear, fall for de la Barre’s lies.

When de la Barre's body drops in front of him, eyes wide with shock starring sightless into the night, he smiles.
There is no need to see the back of his head, the neat hole on his forehead says it all.
Blood still runs over Cahusac’s fingers where he futilely tries to apply pressure to the wound, but he smiles.
Jeanne will survive.

She will believe he was a traitor.
She will raze Paris to the ground.
She will confront Richelieu and Richelieu will be annoyed beyond imagination, but they will take care of her and she will survive.
And maybe she will think of him fondly.
It's rather possible, she will want to exhume his body to slap him, but he smiles about that thought, too.

Her feet crush blades of grass under them as she walks closer.

Cahusac listens, despite the waterfall roar in his ears, to every whisper of cloth, every gentle ring of metal, so much more subtle than his own movements. Her belts are not made to carry weapons, her clothes not to be armor.

But nonetheless, her mind is made for war, however she decides to fight it.

He will be lucky if she shoots him in the back of the head and he doesn't have to stare down the barrel, but he is ready to step into the dark unknown and find God's arms.

He has been for a long time, despite the small flame of hope that deep down wills him to still hold onto it.

As her touch brushes his body he expects it all to end, instead she takes the pistol from his belt and steps around him, both of his weapons securely in hand.

Cahusac had wanted to smile at her prickly attitude as she shot that rabbit, it had been so her. Now he shivers at the icy calm with which she enters the battlefield, tiny feet in worn out shoes and the rim of her skirt sweeping up blood.

There is no hesitation as she shoots the soldier that shot him.

It's the safer route, but it's a brutal thing to do, especially for a healer.

Cahusac flinches as a second shot rings out and the pained moans of the man with the stomach wound are cut off.

He is too weak to look up and regard her face.

He would like to speak and explain.

He wants to raise his hand and touch her again, anchor her with her trusted permission.

Instead he sees her feet stop in front of him, feels his head pulled back by the hair and finds the visage of an old goddess of war staring down.

Boisrenard, when they’re out in the woods, sitting around the fire and only when Bernajoux sits behind him to guard him from the vengeful spirits of the long dead heathen past, tells stories about an old dark goddess he claims his grandmother told him about.

She is at the same time maiden, mother of war and old wise crone, who walks the battlefields, pale as death, hair night shadows, followed by ravens to collect the souls of the fallen.

When he talks, Bernajoux always hums softly, lips at his mate’s ear, a song that is too low for the
others to hear, before he laughs and claims that they are the ravens that scour the battlefields for those God wishes to see dead.

Jussac has long since given up on correcting them, only ever crosses himself in the face of such superstition. But he nevertheless joins the toast to war and victory.

Cahusac’s mind slips as she stares down at him, pondering his fate. He doesn’t care.

He watches his last picture of beauty God is gracious enough to gift him with, breathes in a last whiff of earth and herbs, just a faint trace below all the blood around them, and regrets that he only just almost had a chance to have her.

Then she cuts open the front of his doublet with a snarl and yanks it down over his shoulder and his consciousness burns out in white hot pain.

***

“Are you going to kill me too?” The pup in the worn out peasant’s clothes asks.

The dark man stares at him with scary beetle eyes.

“You must understand, Matthieu-Alexandre,” He crows, coming closer with each word until the alpha can’t retreat any further, the moving wall in his back an insurmountable obstacle, “people like you, they are outdated, on the wane.

Soon you all will be wiped from this earth and those who are on your side will be, too.” He reaches out, the smell of earth and herbs too strong, too obnoxiously clinging to every fiber of his clothing.

His hands strokes back the Alphas hair with an outwardly loving gesture until he puts his hand on Matthieu’s right shoulder.

“Someone has to look out for our family.” He smiles. “But I am no murderer. Taking a life is only God’s right and he will cast the decision over you, Matthieu-Alexandre.”

“I will come back!” Spits the pup, with the conviction of an eleven year old, squirming under the hand that holds him in place. “I will get you.”

He’s an alpha, he can’t be subdued like this. He’s strong. He’s brave. He won’t cry.

“Ah, ah, little Alpha. See and this is why you are but an animal.” The heavy hand, so much larger than the pup’s, pats his shoulder and from within pain blooms.

“Do this… tell anybody who you are or where you come from and I will out your mother. And none of us would want my dear odem hurt, n’est pas, Matthieu?”

His hand gives an encouraging squeeze, older relative to younger, and his thumb digs deep into the soft flesh under Matthieu’s collarbone.

And it digs.

And it digs.
And it digs deeper. And deeper.

Cahusac screams, his mind flashing to ice cold, night dark burning air and a pair of blazingly angry eyes that stare at him.

Matthieu cries.

There is a path before him.

He runs. The tears that stream down his face are cold on warm skin and it’s the voice of his Sire that haunts him.

“Where are they? What did you do with them? What did you do to them?!”

“You were born to nobility, Matthieu-Alexandre. You were born an Alpha. That is a God given duty to protect your people.”

Wolves are howling behind him, that night-wild, mad barking of their hunting dogs as he falls.

His sire’s knife falls from his hands, his right arm limp and listless on the ground, gnarled roots tangled in his feet.

Matthieu wants to stay down.

He can’t run anymore. If he lies very still, maybe they won’t find him.

“Get UP, Matthieu!” It’s the voice of an Alpha, the commanding voice of someone born to lead. Sirrah.

Sirrah never yells. Sirrah didn’t yell when he died. He just laid very still, his head all strange and at a weird angle. He didn’t look dead. But he was so silent.

“Get up, Matthieu, you need to go. They are looking for them and you mustn’t be found.”

“Who.” little Mathieu asks.

“Where are they?”

The smell of earth and herbs envelopes him like a suffocating blanket.

“What did you do with them?”

His fingers close around the dagger and he pushes to his knees, crying mutely in the dark.

Matthieu crawls up under a root, shivering in the cold, praying without voice and with chattering teeth that the dogs don’t find him.

“Where are they.” They snarl. “What kind of monster are you?”

Matthieu curls into a tight ball, pleading his sire to stay dead.

The dagger drives through his right shoulder as he shifts, but he is too weak to scream as the tree closes around him, caging him in with roots smelling of earth and herbs and icy water and darkness.
Cahusac opens his eyes as something foul smelling and worse tasting assaults his senses.

He tries to turn his head away, but he is too weak to fend off the slender hand, earth and herbs and something faintly scary, that holds his chin in place.

“Drink that, Cahusac!” she hisses and he manages to open his eyes for a fleeting moment to see her, pale and worn with shadows under eyes that blaze thunder.

She hates him and he wants to weep.

“You will not die on my watch, Cahusac, not before you tell me where my brothers are.” She pours the tea down his throat, bitter enough to make him gag, and doesn’t stop until he swallows the whole cup.

Matthieu-Alexandre de Cahusac wants to reach out, wants to wipe the pain off her face.

He wants to tell her, they are safe. He wants to beg forgiveness.

She bends over him, her cold, oh so cold fingers probing his shoulder were his uncle broke the flesh and wounded him with betrayal. The scent of earth and herbs swamps over him, before ice cold water catches on his skin.

The muscles lock in his shoulder and he remembers how they hunt him, he remembers the rain pelting his skin.

Alex needs to run, he needs to get away from the hands that hold him down, expecting easy prey.

There is a man standing at the mouth of an alley in Bordeaux.

Alex sees him red on red behind his blood matted hair and the rain that washes it down over his face.

He is tall, body shielded from the wet by a leather coat; probably a hallucination.

Alex’ torn clothes provide no protection, nothing ever does when you are a throwback, looking like an omega. Nothing but your own strength and what you carry on you.

The dagger rests comfortably against his calf inside the threadbare boots.

His body is wracked with shivers, the overhang of the house behind him providing little in terms of protection against the rain.

He wished he could go underground and hide out on the outskirts of the court where they tolerate his presence, but he just broke a man’s neck and let the body drop where he stood.

The man had thought him helpless, but an Alpha is never helpless, not even with a gaping wound to
his forehead. And an Alpha will never feign helplessness in the face of those who hunt and hurt Omegas.

Is was just their bad luck that the pretty face hid the wrong kind of throwback.

Alex’ teeth chatter, maybe it’s the pain in his right shoulder.

He’s so cold in the rain.

The man at the mouth of the alley is still there, watching him.

Alex wonders if he’ll have to kill him too, with his red coat and his serious eyes.

“I will leave food for you and a cloak.” the stranger raises both and then places it in a window niche, protected from the weather.

Late autumn in Bordeaux is a test of man’s will to survive, old Yves in the court always says when the wind and the moisture come in from the sea and his joints are stiff and crooked.

“My name is Jussac.” the stranger continues, eyes never leaving Alex’ huddled form. “I know what you are and I can help you.”

Alex will need to kill him, if he knows, will need to leave, to run again.

“There is a hotel at the Rue de la Havre, the one with the cock on the door sign. The stables are safe. They have a back door and you will be able to come and go at will.”

He takes a step forward and Alex draws his father’s weapon, the motion instinctive after years on the streets.

It’s only as the stranger raises both hands in a placating gesture and takes a step back, that Alex curls deeper into the wall at his back.

The weapon quivers in his hand, his left, because his right is hanging useless at his side and this is wrong, he has a head wound from when they knocked him out and dragged him away to present him to a well paying merchant.

He knew that. He knew how they were picking off the Omegas hiding in the poorer quarters.

He shouldn’t have been there, but sometimes he still can hear his sire’s voice, or what he believes he sounded like, telling him of duty and responsibility.

“Go there, pup.” The stranger casts a look about, making sure nobody is out this time of night and in this weather.

Of course nobody is.

Nobody is insane enough, or desperate enough. Except for the two of them.

“If you can. If you can’t, I will come by here later and make sure, you are all right.” He crouches, makes himself smaller to get to Alex’ eyelevel, curled up on the ground. “You are one of us, pup. You are safe.”

He walks away then without a backwards glance and Alex wonders why he’s being mocked before his death.
But there is food and a cloak and they are warm and he might just stop shivering quite as bad.

If only he could get up.

It’s as if his arms are tied to the ground, as if his legs won’t work.

And the icy cold rain just doesn’t stop falling.

He will never make it there. Will never make it to the harbour.

A voice at the back of his mind tells him this is his way out of here, the only chance to crawl out of the dirt he will ever get.

If only he could get up, if only he deserved it, a scent of earth and herbs tells him. If only he could tell the voice where he send the children.

“To the estates,” he whispers, because this is the only chance and Alex doesn’t deserve to die before he even had a chance to become an adult and the estates ruse is safe, it’s expected, it’s where the Inquisition is and they will be treated as they deserve.

He’s a member of the Inquisition, he’s a member of the Inquisition, whatever he is, he is only ever a member of the Inquisition.

“This is your safe line.” Bernajoux says, as they sprawl, one on either side, on his bed at night, because Alex woke up, screaming his throat raw in the dark.

Boisrenard has an arm thrown over the young alphas stomach, wrapping him in scent that is so close to Bernajoux’s it’s virtually impossible to tell them apart and that whispers safe, safe, safe in gentle tendrils around Alex senses.

“This is the line you mustn’t ever cross if someone asks you, no matter what. Find something to say, find a prayer and cling to it, for the sake of all our lives.”

He is safe.

He smiles into the nothingness around him, he is warm and cared for and they will guard him, if he lets go.

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Cahusac screams.

He doesn’t know who, they’re faceless in the dark, it’s only their scent, earth and herbs, and their voice, yelling at him, cursing him, asking question upon question, digging fire burning pokers into his shoulder, into the pain that is all encompassing, burning and eating him up.

_He mustn’t die. Where are the estates? Where are the children? Why did he betray them?_

He musn’t answer.

He is a member of the Inquisition.
“Dominus pascit me...” his teeth chafe over cracked lips as he whispers.

Never talk about the estates.

"...nihil mihi deerit” His throat burns.

Jussac had sat with him, teaching him Latin, improving on what little he had remembered from childhood tutoring.

“In pascuis herbarum adclinavit me...”

Jussac had taught him that prayer.

“...super aquas refectionis enutrivit me” What wouldn't the feverish man give for a drop of water.

Jussac had taken the vow from him, to never, under no circumstances give the resistance away.

Jussac had let him swear on all the lives he would forfeit if he did and in the face of God and a priest, which was a shifty move, because of course he did not tell Cahusac beforehand that he was ordained.

“Animam meam refecit”

He can recite these words in his sleep. Has done so. BB made sure of it.

“duxit me per semitas iustitiae propter nomen suum”

Cahusac tries to push them away, but his hands won’t heed the order. Pain flashes into his fingers, more pain.

It is his uncle that leans over him, scent of the grave, moist earth and the herbs to staunch the scent of rotting decay, as it had clung to his Sire.

It’s the severed head on the table talking to him, asking him over and over again where they are and he can’t tell, he mustn’t, not ever, but he’s so scared and the dogs are barking in the distance.

“Where are they! What did you do? Where is the estate? And don’t you dare die, Cahusac, you have not deserved that right. You won’t get off so easily.”

The woods close around him and he wants to go home, tears icy on his cheeks.

He wants to go home to Cara, even though she killed him, and to Bernajoux and Boisrenard and Felix who curls up under his blanket when BB kick him out of their bedroom.

“You will never again need to fear those closest to you” Bernajoux says.

“Sadly there has been a hunting accident…” Jussac adds and places his uncle’s head in front of him.

And he laughs through his tears at Jussac’s incredibly unbelievable sad face.

Matthieu-Alexandre de Cahusac is eleven years old and the dogs are barking in the dark of the woods.

His body is shaking with fever, his hands without sensation, but that of running blood and the pain of
raw meat in his shoulder, but he knows, he needs to protect the brothers he hasn’t yet met; won’t for years.

He needs to protect Jussac and Jussac wants him to give his life to protect the Cardinal.

He’s just a member of the Inquisition.

“Sed et si ambulavero in medio umbrae mortis.”

He sent them to the estates.

“Non timebo malum quoniam tu mecum es.”

Because it’s what he does.

“virga tua et baculus tuus ipsa me consolata sunt”

Cool hands brush his forehead, before the cold comes back and locks his muscles in painful spasms.

“Pones coram me mensam ex adverso hostium meorum.”

Foul smelling liquid drips past his lips, the vile scent is all he can smell, like the streets of Bordeaux where those rot that have no hope left for them.

“inpinguasti oleo caput meum calix meus inebrians“


I am no murderer is what Matthieu hears, through the assault of grave’s earth and embalming herbs they use to hide death.

“Et misericordia tua subsequitur me omnibus diebus vitae meae”

He is so cold, body wrecked in shivers as he is slowly sinking into the icy waters of the Atlantic in winter and he just wishes to be home one more time, stray through the woods and not be the prey.

But Matthieu is dead.

“et ut inhabitem in domo Domini in longitudinem dierum”

Cahusac prays.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:  
he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:  
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:  
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparst a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:  
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.
additional warnings: internalized racism, references to torture.

Special thank to Eridani and Kyele who never once complained about yet another email saying: "I added something, would you read again?"

She hears them long before the door opens.

Two men that don’t care to hide their presence, used to being the most dangerous wherever they go.

“How is Braise?” A voice asks.

“She’ll live. She’s one tough horse.”

“Great. Cahusac’d hate to lose her. Now her rider only needs to be just as tough…”

"I swear to God, if the idiot dies because he had to go and do something stupid again, without waiting for backup....."

Jeanne can hear their steps crunch on the rubble of the burned monastery

"He's still alive for now. Let’s stick to that.” The second male voice advises. “We'll need to reaffirm the thought that a letter along the lines of 'I may have done stupid, come and get the leftovers' is not what he's supposed to be sending."

"Sometimes... "

"Yeah... "

The door opens slowly, effectively hiding her behind it until it’s too late for whoever steps in and they are at her mercy.

Never in her life has she solved anything with a pistol, now she can’t seem to stop.

What steps in, is a man she is not truly prepared to face though.

In the dim room, he is just dark and he moves like a dangerous creature, a fighter of long-honed skill, not unlike Cahusac.

It matters nothing.

“Move and the remains of your head will be a prayer for God’s mercy on the wall behind you.”

Jeanne Durand has no patience left. Jeanne Durand hears a faint humming noise in her ears, whenever she stops speaking, that is if the thrumming of her own heart doesn’t drown out everything.
Her eyes are gritty and dry, the lids sticking together in a futile effort to find rest.

She hasn’t slept in three days, her clothes are covered in blood; it coats her fingernails and, she is sure of it, her hair.

She doesn’t even smell it anymore.

Everything in the low room smells of blood and fever and death she is fighting off with sheer stubbornness.

Jeanne Durand will forever have nightmares of Latin prayers whispered in broken gravel voices. The woman who sits on a stool behind a hidden door in the burned out convent, because she can’t stand unsupported anymore, will forever regret the things she is capable of if pushed.

Her hand holding the pistol shakes weakly, her sight swimming, but it doesn’t matter.

She can’t miss from this distance. Not even with the devil himself standing in front of her.

He’s tall enough to tower over her, dark brown skin valleys of shadows and darker shadows in the faint candlelight, the lining of his coat, that shines through where he wrapped it around his shoulder, shimmering blood red.

His right is holding a sword, his left a gun, both for now pointed at the ground as he slowly turns to look at her. His forehead is drawn in deep lines, eyes narrowed in a promise of pain.

He is dangerous and he is so close to jumping her, consequences be damned, that she already stems her left foot into the ground to push out of the way.

“My name…” He says, one eye never leaving the bed on which Cahusac’s feverish form lies. “...is Bernajoux. I am…”

“A Red Guard,” Jeanne interjects. “Aren’t you?”

Bernajoux inclines his head with a humorless smirk.

“Please lower your pistol. We are here to help.” He slowly raises his hands in a placatory gesture, though Jeanne is sure he could turn and shoot her in the fraction of a heartbeat.

“If you want to help…” She is almost too tired to care, the almost a last shred of duty tethering on the sliver of doubt that says Cahusac might, in an incredible ploy, really be with the Resistance.

It hinges on the faint understanding that, as incredulous as the idea is...everything else is much more so.

Not just Cahusac, but also Dernier defying the Archbishop of Lyon for two children and instead of simply killing them, putting together an elaborate plot to spirit them away alive.

Why?

There was no reason for Cahusac to keep Jeanne alive.

Even if he wanted to bed her, he hadn't had the slightest need to be nice to her, to care for her consent.
And all that aside, he’s also the only one who really knows what happened to Simon and Etienne.

“Go ahead. But the pistol stays, I do not extend preemptive trust anymore.” She says “I did that once and look how that ended for all involved.”

The tip of her pistol twitches to the side as she indicates Cahusac, a beginner’s mistake, one that doesn’t escape Bernajoux if the way his lips twitch is any indication.

“What happened?”

“I found out, the man I had entrusted with my sibling’s lives is a high ranking member of the Inquisition.”

“So you shot him?”

“Actually not, the Archbishop’s men did.” She states matter of fact and withholds how close she came herself.

That’s not something he needs to know, just one more thing between her and the half-dead man on the bed, one thing not laden with guilt because, thank God, she didn’t.

Bernajoux’s gaze sways between her and the bed and, in the end, he steps half a step closer to the bed, only to be stopped by Jeanne’s low “tsk”.

A lesser man might be swayed by a loaded pistol pointed at him, the Red Guard only raises an eyebrow in mild mockery and no, Jeanne is not prepared to face that now, her body and mind on the verge of shutting down.

“Nah, nah. Slow.” She hisses. “And if you think I would not shoot you, there are four of the Archbishop’s soldiers who’d definitely advise you differently.” At this, his other eyebrow climbs, too, and someone right outside the door growls in response.

Bernajoux shakes his head and flicks his gaze towards the entrance.

"Boisrenard, go to Autun and get a cart." He says, coolly and controlled.

Jeanne hears the angry response, but she can’t make out words over the sudden rush in her ears.

"Now!" The man bellows. No, not man... Alpha, she finally corrects herself as she catches a note of warmth and sweetness and sunshine and a faint note of salt in the close quarters. It’s a scent she wants to wrap herself in, summer and hope and dreams of places she has never seen, foreign and exotic and familiar at the same time.

Something in Jeanne’s mind clicks.

"Who of you has the cat?" She asks, she dares.

And is rewarded.

The dark man in front of her freezes and for a long moment just looks at her, first with incredulity, then with a smile, before he points to the outside. “He is his.”

“He is ours!”

“His,” deadpans Bernajoux. “He stole him from a noble the… our employer was a guest at.” His dark eyes soften, as hers spill over with tears and she nods.
"He was sodding wet and miserable and barely weaned!" The deep voice calls into the room and Jeanne doesn’t know if to laugh or cry at the outrage in it if she even needed it as final confirmation.

She lowers the pistol with shaking hands and lets her head drop forward.

It’s over.

For better or for worse, life or death, it doesn’t matter, it’s over and she doesn’t have to fight anymore

“Boisrenard…” Bernajoux walks to the door and looks outside. “Get that cart and tell Bernard to expect us.” There is affirmative murmur from the other side and a short pause, before he turns back inside and to her on her sad little stool in this stinking, oppressive room, hidden by the heavy door and guilty as hell for the state the Alpha on the bed is in.

She barely dares hope again, but please, please God, let it be true.

Bernajoux sits on the bed, his eyes on her and shrugs out of his doublet with slow and careful motions. “Scent.” He says. “Yours is overwhelming and it’s distressing him.”

Jeanne doesn’t stop him as he gathers Cahusac with effortless ease in his arms and positions him, mindful of his bandaged shoulder and bound arm, until his face rests at the crook of Bernajoux’s neck.

The way Etienne so often lies curled up against her, a little bundle, warm and content.

“C’est bien, chiot. I got you.” Puppy…

Jeanne breaks. Maybe she should hold out longer, maybe there is a nefarious explanation here and she is sentencing a hundred, a thousand people to death, but if there is, she can’t find it, she can only hear how Bernajoux calls the injured Alpha puppy with so much affection it hurts and she wants her siblings back.

“My Odem… “ the sob precedes the tears “He has my siblings… both… and de la Barre said…” She wraps into herself, arms curled around her middle, fighting for words that elude her.

“He said… “ her hands points to the letter she pinned to one of the ceiling beams with Cahusac’s dagger.

“I’m sorry… I needed to know… I need to get them if he’s a blood traitor.” Her hands hide her face as she chokes, “I need to go after them and he just…” She rips her hands away and points to Cahusac with a frustrated scream.

“…is a bloody idiot.”

Bernajoux regards her with concern and a certain kind of understanding, as his heavy hand pats Cahusac's sweaty hair with a gentleness that seems foreign on either of them.

“I need to know… please… I.. don’t tell me anything, just.. are they still alive?”

He closes his eyes with a pained “God!” and nods.

“Yes. I didn’t see them, we left as soon as we got his note, but he… “He indicates Cahusac. “…is no blood traitor.”

“I'm sorry.” Jeanne bends over, forehead resting on her knees.
“What did you do to him?” His voice drops drastically and dangerously close to a growl that raises every hair on Jeanne’s body.

She doesn’t look up, but before she can speak again, he does. “No! Don’t tell me. Tell me, when he survives.”

When, not if and it’s another painful layer of hope entwined with too much pain, Jeanne already believed behind them before de la Barre and his men had shown up.

Jeanne nods, crying mute tears into her bloodstained skirt, pistol hanging loosely from her hand, barrel resting on the ground.

“Tell me the rest.” He says. “Tell me what happened, from the beginning and do me a favor and let me tell Boisrenard. You don’t want him to hear it from you.”

Jeanne forces herself to sit up, to lean back against the wall and look at him and with great surprise notices that Cahusac has fallen silent, face slack and turned into Bernajoux’s neck, as peaceful as a man in his situation can possibly get.

“My name is Jeanne Durand. I am a… it doesn’t matter.” Jeanne breaks off.

She takes her time to swallow the pain and search for the right words, words that already threaten to be drowned out in heart splitting sorrow.

“They killed my parents…” She wipes her hands over her cheeks as if she could gather up her tears with her bare hands.

Bernajoux gives her an encouraging nod and she talks.

She puts up another pot of tea while she lays out the events and Cahusac may hate willow bark as the next man, even more so, but he will drink it because that and the cold compresses are the only thing keeping him alive for now.

As he flinches away from her hands, Bernajoux takes the cup from her with a reprimanding look and points to the stool, as far away from the bed as possible.

She sits, hands folded in her lap and keeps talking.

***

He has stopped crying, but the traces are still visible on the dust pale skin of his cheeks, like a mural chiseled of her shame, a broken picture of a proud man.

His lips had moved long after the words themselves had abated and in her mind, they’re still swirling, mingling with guilt and pain.

For him, for Simon and Etienne, who had so absolutely trusted her and who she had failed just as absolutely.

If she accepts the reality of their deaths, the moment she gives in to its finality, she will have to see how senseless the pain is she puts Cahusac through. She will have to recognize revenge and bid goodbye to the illusion of justified attempts to save their lives.

Red rivers of blood gush over her hands, his screams echoing through the night as she digs deep
into the jagged holes where no holes should be.

Mercy, he cries, or maybe it is nothing but her imagination. Mercy…

But who had ever shown mercy to her people?

traitor.

She drags buckets of ice cold water from the fountain, praying to St. Pierre that the Judas will not die.

She closes her heart to his begging and wraps him in cold cloth. In the dark all she hears is his teeth chattering, his lips praying for a mercy that won’t come.

“Please don’t” She sits in the corner and stares at the Alpha and she wants to hear his pain.

Blood dries on her hands, trickles to the ground in dust fine flakes.

Dust, like the color of his skin. Dust, like her parent’s bodies, her mother’s displayed publicly and naked in front of the Primatiale. Dust, like the memories of Simon dancing around her last May, laughter in his eyes, their hands inseparably linked.

“C’mom, Jeanne, c’mon” he cries. “Let’s dance, as only the dead dance. He is a virtuoso piper.”

Etienne screams, he has a fever, the measles, she fears. Small chubby hands reach for her, never quite passing the distance and from the pustules on his skin flow blood to dry and trickle down in soft red flakes.

***

It’s soft voices that wake her.

“We need to cut your hair again.”

“Oh yes, it’s getting completely out of control.” a man says it in a wonderfully self-deprecating tone followed by a deep chuckle.

A woolen blanket twists around her legs and a thin pillow rest under her head.

There is still the smell of blood permeating everything on her, but it’s overlaid by cool stone, by sage and incense.

They are not on the mountain anymore.

As she sits and swings her feet off the narrow bed, she jerks them back. There is no rug to soften the ice cold of stone.

Only then does she note she is wearing a man’s tunic. It reaches to her thighs, with fine lace at the collar and absolutely not hers.

There is a moment of panic, a moment of deep anger and finally a shrug.
In the grand scheme of things…

Cahusac!

Jeanne pushes up, standing wobbly for a second as her sore body tries to find its equilibrium, and goes to search for something to dress in.

She finds a basic skirt and a leather vest, none of which are hers either, but her shoes are and they have been cleaned and it will suffice.

A bowl of water, soap and a towel sit on a washing stand in the corner under a wooden cross. She scrubs her skin clean, even going so far as to wash her hair, because it’s disgusting and feels so much better wet and tightly braided, but clean, along her back.

As she works, she tries to remember how she got here, but for the love of God, she can’t.

She remembers telling the Alpha, Bernajoux, about how she threw the church soldiers down the steep decline at the back of the plateau after looting them from all their valuables and information, something that had made him chuckle and say something appreciative and she remembers maybe the first three sentences and that’s it.

Had she handed him the documents? It hadn’t been much, but…

Jeanne turns and walks to the door, open just a crack. Someone hung her coat next to it and she already reaches for it, before she finds the crack is wide enough to see what lies behind.

It’s a simple corridor with deep windows beyond which stands a large tree, leaves colored deep red this late in autumn.

Bernajoux, armed, sits on the windowsill, gaze turned outward, head tilted back against the wall behind him and beside him stands a man who is about his size, with sun-tanned skin, face half obscured by a well-groomed beard and a shock of black hair, who she guesses is the ominous Boisrenard.

His right forearm rests on Bernajoux’s shoulder, the back of his fingers slowly caressing the Alpha’s neck, whose half-smile is so intimate that Jeanne takes an instinctive step back from the intrusion.

She should not be seeing this.

The coat stays in her hand, but her pistol, hung on the hook under it, does not and clatters to the floor with enough noise to have her jump back half a step.

By the time she has picked it up and secured first the belt, then the weapon, and steps outside, Boisrenard is gone and only Bernajoux sits comfortably in his niche, a dark spot surrounded by whitewashed walls.

“Cahusac?” is her first word as she wraps the coat around her shoulders. The corridor is chilly, no matter how comfortable Bernajoux looks in nothing but his shirt.

“Good morning to you too, Mademoiselle Dur…” He hasn’t even finished saying her name before she stops him. She doesn’t expect it to sound quite as sharp, but anybody calling her that right now
would just cut her right through.

“Don’t!” She says and after a short pause adds “Please.”

“Of course. Jeanne?” His face softens into the approximation of a smile as he slides off the windowsill and she nods.

“Did he wake up?” She pauses. “Is he alive? He is! He must be because I am, right?”

Bernajoux rightens her coat and points down the corridor. “He is, yes. Brother Bernard said the fever is going down, but he’s still cautious. It has before and risen back up.”

“He’s done that for days now… I just didn’t know what to do anymore. I got water from St. Pierre’s fountain to wash him and gave him tea and the fever would drop and an hour or two later it was the same all over again.” Her voice breaks and she shakes her head. “Had I not…” A curse accentuates her words before she is aware of it and Bernajoux snorts.

His hands, as she doesn’t react to his pointing, gently turn her in direction of the corridor. “Brother Bernard said you should walk when you wake up. You slept for almost a day.”

“But Cahusac...” She protests and he shakes his head.

“It’s better if you don’t see him yet. He reacts badly to your presence.” His hands close the front of the coat for her and he deliberately doesn’t look at her face, for which she is grateful.

“Wait til he’s awake. Cahusac, when injured, does one thing only: sleep. For days. And that means he dreams and he can’t control them or the things that only wait to be dreamed about.”

“I’m sorry.” She says and it feels inadequate. It also feels like a lie.

“Keep to the gardens.” is his answer.

Jeanne already has her lips parted to ask about him and the other man. She closes it with an audible click and leaves without a word.

***

Around her, the last apples hang on trees that are losing leaves by the hour.

The ground, a brownish-green when she and Cahusac had stopped here on their way up, is covered by a deep, golden layer.

She smells sage and lavender, wilting but still far from dead around her. She hears the pond rippling gently to her left as she sits on the stone bench.

Jeanne had wished for this, for a moment of peace in this garden, and now couldn’t be more apprehensive.

It’s not even guilt.

Guilt assumes that what she did was wrong.
In hindsight… it sure felt like it, but it still had been the only possible thing to do.

Answers hadn’t really been forthcoming, not unsurprising, but she had needed them and somewhere along the way she had lost control and that is something Jeanne can’t help but regret with all her heart.

She had lost control and had hurt him in such a way that he even now, in safety and surrounded by his people, instinctively fears her.

That is all there is to know about it.

But worse… she lost him.

She had been so furious and it had felt so desperately right and now, with all that she knows, she misses him and she wants to make it better, all the while knowing, she would do the exact same thing again.

The beads of her rosary slip through her fingers one by one.

Jeanne rarely uses it, but when something bad happens she comes back to it without fail. The priests would have things to say about that. Jeanne doesn’t care. She has stopped caring for a lot of things lately.

Etienne and Simon should be safe by now, wherever they are.

The estates, Cahusac had whimpered. With the Inquisition.

No “where”, no names, only ever that, but it has lost its painful burn.

Because if this is real… she doesn’t truly dare think about it.

She does it anyway.

It’s enormous.

Boisrenard plonks down on the bench next to her, the dark red lining of his coat unmistakable.

The gaze of his dark eyes sits just as heavily on her face as he pushes a bowl in her direction.

“You need to eat. It’s fresh.” Jeanne reaches out without thought, following the smell of hearty stew and the sudden feel of gnawing hunger it wakes.

“So…” he says, deep voice low between them, “You killed four of Marquemont’s soldiers?”

Jeanne pauses, spoon halfway to her mouth and glances at him, hesitating before she slowly nods.

“Are you angry?” She carefully asks and it has him chuckle.

“No. Why would I be?” His dark eyes seem friendly enough, but Bernajoux’s warning to not mention that thing between her and Cahusac still rings loud and clear, which is why she only indicates his Red Guard’s coat with the spoon, bowl forgotten in her knees.

He laughs.
“Listen, Squirrel…” he murmurs. Jeanne wants to protest that pet name, then thinks the alternative might be Mademoiselle Durand and lets it slide.

It’s only after he has resumed speaking that she remembers how well it usually works to let anything slide with an Alpha, but it’s too late.

“My grandma used to tell me stories when I was little…” His gaze drops to his fingers that slowly entwine and fold only to unfold right away. “You know too much already, things that should never have made it to anyone… I don’t know how much Cahusac told you…”

“Nothing,” Jeanne interjects. “Not one word, I swear.”

Boisrenard’s lips twitch and he regards her with something almost fond. “Is that so?”

Worry spreads within her, as she nods, though nothing in him indicates an unstable temper or violence.

“I’m sorry.” She wonders how many people there can possibly be, she will have to apologize to. Maybe the cat. She is lucky if it only will be the cat.

Instead of violence though, he just points to the bowl and as she doesn’t react gently dips her spoon back in.

“What would you call what you did with my little Aleph, woman?” No violence, no, but a sharp and dangerous undertone, a warning.

Jeanne lets the spoon drop into the bowl and takes a deep breath as nausea threatens to overwhelm her.

“I… “ she swallows. She tries to get the words past her lips, tries to find a description that sounds less damning. Bile rises in her throat and she has to swallow again, gaze strictly averted, before she can answer. “Torture…?”

He stills.

So does she.

It’s not guilt, but it surely is regret and as his hand reaches out to righten her coat and pull up the scruff to cover her neck, she flinches.

“I know what torture looks like, Jeanne Durand.” There is something in his tone that has her look up, but his face is clear of darkness, too much so.

It’s almost blank.

“Why was Bernajoux worried about me telling you?” She asks before she can think better of it and it makes him laugh.

“I got a bit of a temper and sometimes I react before I think. It’s nothing. He just wanted to make sure to tell me himself. He is like that.” His eyes catch on a lavender bush, a smile on his lips, Jeanne isn’t sure he is even aware of, before he bumps her shoulder with his and points to her bowl again.

"Eat. Cahusac won't like it if you starve. You are way too gaunt already."
"I don't think he will." She says but lifts a spoonful of soup to her lips anyways.

"Yes, he will absolutely blame you for overreacting when your loved ones were threatened, because that hasn't happened to any Alpha... ever."

Jeanne snorts into her soup, almost spitting out the mouthful she is eating.

She would say something about it if only she could talk past the bits that are stuck in her throat fighting for space with laughter that doesn’t quite make it to the surface.

Boisrenard watches her, lips in a wry smirk, content to wait his time.

"I'm no Alpha...." she finally croaks between one cough and the next and his smile falters.

"You are not as much ruled by animal instincts?" it sounds like an insult from his lips and Jeanne wants to refute it outright.

Instead, she thinks on it, feeling his eyes on her the whole time, then she shakes her head.

"No, it's not that, it's more like... I don’t have that freedom. I am not supposed to be like that, you know?" She looks at him, brows drawn, and sighs as he shakes his head.

“Women are not supposed to have a temper, to have passionate opinions. As a midwife, I already defy most expectations and the way I can get... I am no wilting flower and usually men... Society... People... use that against me. Well, they'd use anything against a woman, so... I am not like you and that’s the truth and don’t tell me, you don’t ascribe a certain behavior to Beta women..."

She smiles and it's bitter, knowing the irony of saying that to a throwback

"Is it really that bad, being a woman?" He asks silently.

"Being a woman isn't. Being treated as one is."

“Oh…” he says, lips curled in deep thought.

Their eyes meet, then he shrugs.

“He will come around, if not I'll just slap him until he sees reason. You needed to know, he couldn’t tell you… spilled milk.”

His sincerity makes her smile. “It’s that easy?”

“I am not a complicated man, Squirrel.” He dips her spoon into the stew again. “Now eat.”

He sits next to her, watching her eat, like a nanny, like she does with Etienne and it takes only a few minutes until that becomes weird.

Around them the garden lies silent, the only sounds the wind rustling dry leaves, the pond and a few chickens that cackle without care in the coop next to the stables.

She doesn’t know him and what she does know about him, what she witnessed earlier, it doesn’t make for good talking, least of all in public.

“You were going to tell me something...” She inquires and his head slowly turns, fingers scratching
his beard, as he ponders her.

Finally, he speaks lowly, head bent in her direction, creating an intimate space where sound stays between them. “You know what we are?”

“Alphas? You are an Alpha, aren’t you?” He nods, a corner of his mouth lifting.

Jeanne thinks.

“You are Red Guards. Richelieu’s personal Guard.” Saying it out loud makes it sound so much more unbelievable, but he nods again, so she takes the dare. “Lieutenants.” He nods. “With the Resistance, too?” She adds and is rewarded with another nod, albeit an uneasy one this time.

“You know a lot, Squirrel.”

“De la Barre talked a lot, piecing together the rest wasn’t hard.” She sighs. “Believing it is the hard part.”

“You believed Cahusac.”

“No… not anymore, not once…” She looks away and cuts off her train of thought with a decisive shake of her head.

“One blood traitor, I can see that, but three? And why the charade… if you are not who and what you say you are… why this?” She raises the bowl with stew. “Why keep me alive.” She looks at him and forces a smile.

“I chose to hope when you two showed up. Believing is just another choice. If I am wrong and it’s all charade and … if they are dead, I will break so thoroughly it won’t matter anymore. So I chose to hope.” She pokes a piece of kohlrabi in the bowl and shrugs.

“The only thing I don’t understand is why.” She again uses the spoon to indicate him in his black and red coat, so obviously an Inquisition soldier, so out of place in the slowly dying garden and he laughs, bowing close enough to whisper.

“So... my grandma used to take me to a church when I was little, way back when.” His dark eyes twinkle with mischievous glee and Jeanne, knowing that look all too well from her siblings, frowns. “It was small and very old, but the inside was painted with the most beautiful colors. Nobody ever went there, it was hidden near a fountain on a hill in the woods, a bit like the one on the mountain, but much nicer….

There were pictures on the wall unlike any you’d find in any other church and there was mother Mary with little Baby Jesus on her arms and they both were clothed in bright violet.” He talks with his fingers animatedly painting unseen things in the empty air between them, his gaze never leaving hers.

“And I asked her ‘Grandma,’ I asked. ‘Why is the baby Jesus and Holy Mary in such an odd color dress.’ And grandma, God bless her, she looked at me and said: ‘In the old times, chiot, that was what Betas wore, because they were in the middle, somehow not this and not that.’”

His smile grows into a half grin as he tilts his head, placing a finger to his lips for just a moment to build of to the big secret.

“‘Because the Omegas, little one,’ she said ‘they wore bright sky blue and an Alpha’s color was blood red.’”
In that instant, her fingers lose all strength and the bowl falls between them, hitting the ground with a thud, wholly unsatisfying for the axis correction the world had just taken.

***

Surprisingly, the world doesn’t end that day.

The sky doesn’t fall in a fiery inferno, no church troops storm the convent and the sun just keeps on rising as it had any other day in her life; a thought at the same time calming and very disconcerting, the understanding how small she truly is in the grand scheme of things.

Though somehow she is not as small anymore.

She sits with Boisrenard, listening to him as he recounts Cahusac’s status and tells her of the adventures of Felix the cat, who is red and black - brown and black and looking perpetually plucked, corrects Bernajoux - and loves the sun and being petted.

“Like master like pet,” says Bernajoux from the doorway and Boisrenard grabs an apple off the table where he is cleaning his weapons and throws it with enough force that it explodes on the wall next to Bernajoux’s head. The Alpha ducks with laughter on his face and holds out his hands until Boisrenard throws him another, slower this time, intended to be caught.

Cahusac’s fever has stabilized, according to Boisrenard and they all allow themselves a bit room to breathe.

One of the Alphas is always with him, a duty they only ever neglect when Brother Bernard is in his room. The other is with her.

As if she might abscond…

She says so to Boisrenard and he looks at her, just looks at her, head tilted, lips pursed, completely silent.

Thoughts drip through her mind, fine drops of knowledge that slowly build a pool of understanding as she and the Alpha stare at each other.

She might.

The lives of Cahusac’s pack, probably of the whole Red Guard and whatever stands behind it - “The Cardinal”, her treacherous mind whispers, “France’s most powerful man. He must know, too.” - she could destroy them all with the knowledge she possesses.

Damned be de la Barre and his big mouth, damned be Cahusac for being so incredibly careless.

He had risked either facing the Archbishop’s men alone or her finding out about him... them.

In the end, he had decided to save his life, deemed her trustworthy enough to risk burdening her with the truth.

It’s not even a question.
She reaches for one of Boisrenard’s pistols, answering his bewildered look with a raised brow.

“It needs cleaning, doesn’t it?”

“Yes….but…”

“Good.”

“Do you know how to….”

“We did talk about being treated as a woman, Boisrenard. You might reconsider finishing this sentence.”

Bernajoux’s laugh still echoes from several corridors away half a minute later.

***

She falls asleep with a warm glow in her chest that caresses the worry in her heart to rest.

The silence within the thick walls of the convent seems to breathe, the air is crisp yet pleasant and as simple as everything is, down to the blankets on her bed and her pistol resting on the nightstand, it feels like safety.

Though she is convinced that she won’t be able to sleep again so soon, her body disagrees.

Before her nightly prayer is even finished her eyelids close, mind brooking no dissent on the for rest.

“I like you, Jeanne-Marie Durand”, he says, laughter in his voice and she is almost young and carefree again.

Nobody will come for them for hours, they have time, are safe yet.

She could convince him, oh how she knows she could, and just drag him to the bed in the low room.

Open his shirt, taste skin. Salty and warm and alive. For once be carefree… Be free…

Her tongue licks over his lips, is caught by his, inviting and enticing.

She could know what it is like to have a man and he would be good, she’d swear so many oaths on it.

Fingers tangled in his long hair, as his mouth plunders hers.

He would be so good to her.

“Trust me.” It’s a gentle whisper.

“I do”, she says and pulls the trigger.
She wakes up to the darkness and its human manifestation in her room.

If she were awake…

But she isn’t, her mind is sleep-addled and slow and by the time she understands that the face doesn’t belong to a demon, but a man, she has already lunged for her pistol.

She can’t see Bernajoux’s face as he waits patiently in the dark, both hands raised away from his body, but she can hear his disappointment in the way his voice is so very neutral as he speaks.

“I apologize for the intrusion. Cahusac is awake.” It should be enough to get her out of bed, but he seems to think differently about it and after a short pause continues. “You’ll want to hurry, he won’t stay like this for long.”

He turns and walks out.

There is no time to reflect on his disappointment or her reaction. She throws on the skirt, buttons the vest and runs down the hall on bare feet.

The door to the sick room is open and Jeanne can see Brother Bernard bent over a side table.

Boisrenard sits on her side of the bed, close enough to have his body touch Cahusac’s and he looks up and waves her over, but on his face too, she sees something like disappointment and she likes it even less than the fact that Bernajoux is absent.

“Ey, Chiant, look who we dug up from the shallow grave we hid her in.” He turns to Cahusac who makes a sound that is somewhere between a groan and a chuckle and suspiciously wet.

She wants to run, to grab his hands to scold him for being an idiot and to apologize for her own idiocy.

What she does instead is step around Boisrenard and to the other side of the bed, to his uninjured side.

Cahusac’s eyelashes flutter open, as she closes in, two bright slivers of blue following her every movement.

He looks like hell, face grey and gaunt. He obviously lost weight, his hair is matted and tangled. The right arm, shoulder wrapped in thick bandages and propped up by pillows, lies limply on his stomach, but his lips pull into a faint smile.

“Good shot,” is the first thing he says and Jeanne wants to laugh and cry and all the things in between. She drops to her knees beside the bed and with a slow motion, clearly telegraphing her intentions, reaches for his left hand.

She sees the twitch, Boisrenard sees the twitch, but they also see the effort he makes to uncurl his fingers and reach for her, after the instinctive reaction.

Jeane sneaks hers under his fingers to keep the touch light and him able to pull away at any time.

“The rest not so much,” he murmurs with a heavy breath. “Damn, woman, you can be vile.” The heavy voice, the heavy words, they won’t truly fit the way his mouth curls.
“Well, you could have said something. Warned me,” Jeanne admonishes him gently, only half serious.

He takes another deep breath and his fingers flutter on hers. Cahusac can’t really turn his head, but his eyes rest on her nonetheless.

“No, I couldn’t.” It’s but a whisper, yet unrelenting in its finality.

Jeanne closes her eyes and nods. There are tears that are waiting to be shed, apologies and regret that want to be voiced, but this is not the place nor the time.

Cahusac’s breathing speeds up, grows more shallow by the moment, so either he is so weak that his body is overwhelmed by speaking alone… or it’s a fear reaction. Which is worse, Jeanne doesn’t know, but neither gives her reason to linger.

“No, you couldn’t… “ She raises her thumb to caress over his fingers. “Neither could I.”

On Cahusac’s other side Boisrenard raises his hand to cup the sick Alpha’s cheek and Cahusac’s breathing eases, at least momentarily, with a deep gulp of breath as he latches onto his packmate’s scent.

He turns his face into the hand for a moment, a display of staggering intimacy and trust, all the while his eyes don’t leave her, corners of his mouth curled into a small smile.

“You are a danger to mankind, Mademoiselle Durand,” he whispers and Jeanne’s tears fall, they drip along her cheeks, burning a fiery path all the way to her desperately smiling lips.

“Ah, who gives a damn about men…” It’s intimate words between them, words that make her want to lean in, but Boisrenard’s hand stops her.

“Don’t, Squirrel.” He doesn’t even bother to hide the shake of his head. “We wouldn’t get your scent cleared again.”

This time Cahusac looks away. Boisrenard watches her, dark eyes serious, mouth drawn. He’s unhappy with her.

Jeanne nods quickly and pulls her hand away. The tips of her fingers suddenly feel cold and deprived and she shouldn’t be quite as happy to see Cahusac’s curl into his palm as if seeking contact.

She wonders if advising him to sleep is a good idea.

Cahusac’s eyes watch her again, barely open, but she feels him looking.

There is nothing left to do, with him so fragile and her so unbalanced, but to touch his fingers one last time, and go, silent, unwilling to say something to make this any worse.

The gardens are beautiful this time of night, air crisp and cold, a clear three-quarter moon bathing everything in silvery light.

He doesn’t try to hide his steps as he follows her out the door, placing a coat around her shoulders without pause.
“I love the gardens,” he says. “Bernajoux, he's right at home in the city, but I am a boy of nature.” Boisrenard smiles at her, as they step out onto the garden path, the only one there is. “Care to tell me what happened with Bernajoux?”

Jeanne’s steps falter. She regards the man next to her, his mood and the source of the disappointment she has felt since she stepped into Cahusac’s room and again comes up empty-handed.

"It's nothing..." She murmurs.

"Yeah. Sure. I know that look on Bernajoux’s face. That's the look when he tries to act like it's nothing after someone hurt him." His voice grows quiet in a way that has Jeanne square her shoulders and barely resist the temptation to rise to the tips of her feet in an attempt to keep him from towering over her.

"He startled me, all right? When he woke me. That's all!" Boisrenard narrows his eyes and shakes his head.

"He apologized and all is well.” Jeanne crosses her arms, an unusually defensive gesture for her, so she uncrosses them right away.

She wishes she hadn't when Boisrenard bends down and brings them vis-a-vis.

"You don’t really understand, do you?"

If there is something afoot here she should apologize for, she doesn’t, so she shakes her head.

"Well, Jeanne, let me ask you this...why did you startle? Because someone unexpected was in your room? What was your first thought?"

Jeanne stares and stares at him, before she pushes all the air out of her lungs, only to take a fresh, deep gulp.

She can’t tell him that her first thought had been the presence of a demon, though he is probably right. She hadn’t meant to but had treated him like a threat and somehow she knows she wouldn’t have treated Boisrenard the same way.

The way Cahusac treats her, the only difference: she deserves it.

"It was because he's dark and I couldn't see him."

"Because darkness means danger, right? And dark people are wild animals, best ruled by higher evolved societies, they need to be reign in and controlled and brought to heel, so..."

She reaches out then and touches his shoulder, breaking off his tirade, low and controlled, but ripe with such old anger.

"Boisrenard…” His eyes flick to her, narrowed and furious, the moonlight casting a strange shimmer into the dark depths.

“I have never seen someone like him up close and it's truly an unknown for me. You are right. I'm sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt him..."

She doesn’t understand that thing between him and Bernajoux, however, she sees his love shine through in every gesture, every word.
Had she not witnessed their intimacy earlier in the day, she might have understood it as deep friendship, as brotherhood even.

They don’t touch, when she sees them together, sometimes there is an almost deliberate distance between them where Boisrenard talks to people and Bernajoux works silently in the background, not speaking at all, just a silent presence that doesn’t want to draw attention.

Maybe it’s different out in the world, though she doubts it.

“...but I see how I did. I will apologize.”

He sighs then and shuts his eyes, lips thinning behind the beard into an unhappy line that locks over words he wants to speak and it’s practiced and something he likely had to do way too often already.

"Remember this Jeanne: every bad thing in his life has been done to him by people who look like us, but you will never see him flinch. Not because he is fearless, but because the color of our skin does not define who we are to him, he says, the color of our heart does. For everyone that mistreated him, he can count at least two that are worth four times their value, he says.

It’s a lie, but he stands by it.” His eyes open, a quiet intensity is overtaking the anger, a promise that there will be repercussions if she fails.

“Bernajoux’s heart is the damn best and the brightest of all, so learn it! God made him like this and there is nothing wrong with him!” Now he does growl. "Nothing!"

His eyes blaze, his hand are curled into fists, yet all she sees is the beauty of it. His words are clipped and sharp, anger infusing every syllable, a passion that permeates every cell down to his heart.

"You are very protective of him."

Jeanne only wants to ease his heart, not alienate them more than she already has; not for the sake of her brothers, she is sure they would not keep them apart any minute longer than necessary, not with the way they dote on Cahusac.

No. She likes them.

She likes their presence and she wants to understand these two men that are important to Cahusac, who describes them as “insane” with incredible fondness in his voice.

Jeanne wants maybe to see what he sees in the short time she has.

"And?” Boisrenard takes a step back and now he is the one crossing his arms.

How much do they have to hide? How often do they need to lie in the face of church and people, she wonders?

She doesn't pretend to understand it, but Boisrenard said it: God made them, God doesn't fail and between Omegas and Alphas and the church declaring people unclean because someone who looked like a boy actually could carry children and a woman could possibly be strong enough to hurt a man...
"Nothing…” She follows the defensive step he took back and gently puts a hand on his crossed arms. “It's cute."

"Cute?"

"Very sweet even." Jeanne can’t help seeing something foreign in Bernajoux’s face, the broad lines, the perfect dark brown planes, but she can damn well put in the effort to see the Alpha in it.

She may not understand what the two of them are doing or, God forbid, how they are doing anything, but Jeanne Durand has never in her life judged someone for the way they loved and praised for the way they hated and she is not going to start now.

“I'll try to do better, I promise.” As his face softens just a little at her words she adds as if to prove that she is serious, “Where is he?”

Boisrenard takes a deep breath and wraps his arm around her shoulder, stirring her back to the entrance. “Tending to the horses. Leave him alone for a while, he needs to try and work through it alone.” He bends down and for a moment, he reminds her of her father, exasperated care, and everything.

“Do I need to tell you a good night story, or will you be like Cahusac and just sleep it all off?”

He pulls the door shut behind them and grabs the lantern that sits in a niche beside the door, still with a guiding arm around her shoulder.

Jeanne looks at him and hopes he’ll read her expression as a request. She doesn’t have to ask where Cahusac got his propensity for storytelling from. And she won’t pretend she isn’t completely enamored by it.

Boisrenard takes one look at her and sighs the put-upon sigh of a man burdened with heavy duty and the sparkle in his eyes that frames it all a lie.

“So… little Cahusac… When we got him, and I mean that literally, as he was more or less handed to us with the words ‘Take care of him, he broke a man’s neck with one arm and a head wound, people say, and I wanna know if that’s true.’”

Jeanne interrupts his flow to indicate the way Cahusac had wrapped an arm around the church soldier’s neck and twisted and earns an appreciative nod from Boisrenard and a proudly whispered. “He’s good!”

Then he smiles, as she smiles, for no other reason than that they are both incredibly fond of the subject of their talk, and resumes his story before she can notice that she is grinning like an idiot.

“So... when we got him, he was a half starved, half grown, half mute and half dead sick pup and Bernajoux just looked at me and I looked at him and the only question was:

“What are we doing with a newborn?” His voice is low, though these corridors are empty.

It creates the feel of a secret and Jeanne smiles at the pictures his words conjure.

“Well, it proved rather easy. When Cahusac is sick, he sleeps” A pang of regret lights up in her heart, but she quashes it, there will be a time to deal with it and him and it will be a lot easier if she knows who he really is.
Boisrenard, if he noticed anything, doesn’t react.

“You just let him sleep and drip medicine in his mouth and at some point, he wakes up and is hungry.” She turns as they stop at her door, leaning against the frame to watch him talk.

The way his eyes light up, his expressions seamlessly change with the meaning of his words and how his hands gesture, something that Cahusac does too and that creates the illusion of a true blood relation between them.

“Well, we had this half comatose, half grown, thin as a stick pup of maybe fourteen in our hotel and at some point he wakes up, takes one look at Bernajoux and says ‘Ye, ye’re really dark.’ and goes right back to sleep.”

Jeanne is unsure, if she is supposed to laugh, so she just stares.

“Oh, good, someone reacted worse than I. Yay?”

Boisreand’s has no qualms, he just laughs. “That happened, yes.”

His gaze catches on a spider web above the door, with a faint grin, caught in the memory.

“So… what do you think, why I told you that?”

“To make me feel better?” Jeanne asks. She is not sure if they are still having the same conversation as five minutes before. A feeling that is corroborated as he shakes his head.

“I try not to make people feel better when they made Bernajoux feel bad. Try again.” His eyes find hers again and the grin grows. This time it’s Jeanne who shakes her head.

Whatever ominous message he wants to convey, maybe it’s the fact that her brain is working on too little sleep, but she can’t follow.

“See, he has this habit of just blurting out whatever is on his mind when his mind is sleep-addled. Which is why we have gone to such lengths to break that particular habit.” He pauses, then leans in and the glint in his eyes is mean, not bad mean, not evil, just mean. “As you might have noticed.”

Jeanne doesn’t know what to make of it, it doesn’t feel accusatory or unsafe, but the way he deals with her is wholly foreign. They both know that he holds a lot more power than her in the given situation, yet, while he does dangle it above her head, he hasn’t so far abused it.

As she takes a step back, getting out of his immediate sphere, he retreats at once and it only confuses her more.

“So, as I was saying, when he’s truly sleep-addled and feeling safe, he usually just blurts out the first thing that comes to his mind…” Though he has given her space, his gaze is still expectant and Jeanne jumps on the first thought she has.

“What was the first thing, Cahusac said, when he woke up?”

Boisrenard looks at her with an unrepentant grin and shrugs. “Try?”

Jeanne heaves a deep breath, with a lot more put-on annoyance than she is feeling, and asks.

“What was the first thing, Cahusac said, when he woke up?”
weird formal bow.

Close enough now to bend his head and touch a careful kiss to her forehead, he smiles and says, voice barely above a whisper: “Jeanne.”

***

There is a bare room with two beds on opposing walls. There is a pile of two coats, blankets and pillows in the middle.

“You talked to her, didn’t you?”

Boisrenard chuckles in the dark and runs the back of his fingers through the tightly curled short hair at the back of Bernajoux’s neck.

“Of course,” he murmurs it softly, voice infused with warmth at his mate’s exasperated tone.

Bernajoux turns his head and touches his lips to one of the scars that run over the other Alpha’s shoulder. He always finds them with unerring precision, as if there was a map in his mind. “You don’t need to.”

“She didn’t mean to react like that. Doesn’t mean I’ll let her get away with it.” Turning he nudges Bernajoux’s head up to catch his lips. “And she wouldn’t want me to.”

Two strong arms twine around his body and he giggles, a sound he’d never dare to even utter outside of the privacy between them, as Bernajoux rolls onto his back and takes Boisrenard with him.

His warm voice, in Boisrenard’s mind inexorably intertwined with the scent of sunshine, hums silently. “You want to keep her.”

“Cahusac wants to keep her.” he retorts.

“Cahusac…,” Bernajoux’s voice is dripping with sarcasm. “…can’t even stand to be in a room with her for more than 10 minutes without one of us there to cover her scent.”

Boisrenard places an arm on each side of his mate’s head and slowly paints a line of soft kisses from forehead to jaw. “He’s being dramatic.”

Bernajoux hums in the dark, his fingers caressing over the dips and rises of Boisrenard’s back.

“Of course, that’s why he’s having panic attacks at night.” he says. “This trumps even Richelieu.”

“Nothing trumps Richelieu. If we measure a courtship gone wrong on the scale of Jussac’s annoyance, nothing will ever trump Richelieu and you know it.” Boisrenard buries his face in his mate’s neck and with a deep inhale and a broad smile nips at the sensitive skin. The responding twitch, the way the other Alpha’s hips press upward, have him grin.

Bernajoux’s hands slide down his back until they settle on his hips to hold him in place.

“Stop that, Boisrenard. We’re at a convent.”
“We’re mated…”

“Convent!” Bernajoux snaps.

Boisrenard grumbles and stretches out, pressing along his mate’s body with a distinct murmur of annoyance.

“She’s nice. Fierce. And what she did with Marquemont’s soldiers…” He needs not to voice his approval, his slow whistle says it all.

“She has a good tactical mind,” Bernajoux relents, only to add right away: “And two pups.”

Boisrenard smiles into the bare skin of his chest, having had negotiations like this a hundred times already, knowing every twist, every turn, every hum of Bernajoux’s voice after so many years together.

He knows the tones that say ’No way’ and all the ones that say ’Convince me because I want to, but I can’t say yes, because I think I should be saying no’.

“Her Alpha pup has bright red hair. We have enough empty rooms. Excuse me but we practically own a townhouse. And she’s a healer.”

“Midwife… And the house is Richelieu’s”

“She kept him alive and didn’t sleep for three days, she’s determined and stubborn.”

“She brought him into this situation in the first place.”

“That’s debatable. And if she is living with us, nobody will dare doubt that a pup she brings into the world is Beta.

Excuse me, love, but… Inquisition certified pups. That’s brilliant. We hook her up with Cahusac and she will be able to do whatever. Treville will love it.”

In the dark Bernajoux laughs softly. “You are absolutely incorrigible. Jeanne is not a cat you can take home and feed and appoint a place next to the oven.”

“I’m pretty sure, she’ll find a place that’s warm and comfortable…” Boisrenard knows that tone, the exasperation, and the love he only ever hears when they’re alone.

”I'm not saying it’s going to be easy… She hit him hard and frankly, Cahusac is one of those people who fail spectacularly at doing anything the easy way, but… the way he looks at her...” He turns and lets his wandering lips and the way his hands caress enticingly over the hard planes of the other’s body speak their own language.

The only reward, the only one he’ll ever need, is the change in Bernajoux’s breathing.

“Boisrenard…,” the Alpha growls lowly in the dark.

“Shhh, let me take care of you,” Boisrenard murmurs and rises onto his knees, fingers already hooking into his mate’s small clothes.

“We’ll need to clear it with Jussac…” It’s a breathless whisper, the last thing Bernajoux says as Boisrenard presses his lips to the hot skin right under his navel and follows the movement with the tip of his tongue.
It’s Bernajoux who will talk to Cahusac first, who will spearhead any effort to convince Jussac if necessary.

And he just doesn’t get enough respect for it, Boisrenard finds.

As his tongue trails downward and his mate has to muffle a moan with his arm, he whispers his appreciation into Bernajoux’s skin.

As his lips close around Bernajoux’s cock and he thinks he hears blasphemous words, drawn forth by the way his thumbs rubs over Bernajoux’s knot, he grins, because that is something he can give him.
What we see

Chapter Notes

Guess who is late.
My only excuse is the fact that my baby brother had his coming of age celebration and as soon as I was home, I fell ill.
And I was mabye the world's most perfectionist bitch on that chapter. I had the thing written three days ago, since then I edited. And Edited. And made Eridani pull her hair out.
She's an actual angel :)
I promised her to post today.
So, I am posting today.

The sky of France is beautiful.

France has the most beautiful sky in the world, that’s what he would tell everybody who dared doubt.

There are clouds a fluffy as a newborn lamb or as a massive as the mountains. The blue is the clearest blue of all skies and Cahusac has seen a few by now, from Bordeaux to Paris, Rome to Heidelberg.

Sadly, even the sky of France loses its appeal when it’s the only thing to see for three days.
And blue is a debatable color.
At least the clouds are nice.

A rabbit chases a man with a big nose and a garden hoe over a pasture fence.
A dog eats an apple and a giant frog tries to jump on England.

The cart rumbles slowly over road holes, as his eyes, with more boredom than leisure, scan the sky on the lookout for something, anything, interesting to see.

Sadly, the book he brought with him to Lyon was one he almost knows by heart and he won’t start and read the Decameron to Jeanne…yet.

They had decided on leaving Autun to avoid the public routes. It keeps them out of sight of prying eyes, but it also slows them down to snail's pace.
Braise’s head lurks over the side of the cart in an attempt to elicit more carrots. The rhythm of her hoofbeats is still a little irregular as she trots next to the cart, but nothing in her behaviour speaks of pain anymore. She is lively and curious as always.

Cahusac can’t help but smile at her antics, all Andalusian royalty, woeful dark eyes and attentively pricked ears, as she plucks a carrot from his left hand with her lips.

No matter what he thinks of all that happened on Beuvray, he is glad Jeanne shot Marquemont’s soldiers. If for no other reason that they shot his damn horse!

The bright chestnut mare is smaller than his packmate’s horses, an easy mark for their teasing.

Well, they don’t always take the responding comparison of brute strength and sheer fiery red elegance too well.

Braise had been spoils of war from a mission to Spain and Cahusac won’t let anybody say one bad word about his fierce princess.

She is perfect.

Around him coats and blankets pile up, propping up his shoulders and as much of his body as they dare.

When they left the convent his packmates and Jeanne, in a unified wall of doubt, had allowed him to sit in the front of the cart. It had worked fine, up until the moment, half an hour out of Autun, when he had fainted.

On a different occasion Cahusac could have claimed that he only did it to wake up with his head on Jeanne’s lap and a breathtaking view of her…. face.

He still might have, if only to loosen the mood, had gasping for air and the pain tearing through his body not been the only thing on his mind.

Her fingers though, carding through his hair, with so much softness, so much gentleness, had almost been worth it.

The way she had looked at him as he had come to… a smile on her lips only for him; for one precious moment too worried to be concerned with the things that stood between…

And then he had remembered wishing he could have had that as he lay feverish and dying, clinging to the fraying shreds of his sanity.

Cahusac would had sworn every oath that he didn’t blame her, he did not, he only hurt for what could have been and instead had been lost in a stinking swamp of shame and silence.

The Jeanne that steered the cart was not the Jeanne he had come to care for.

He missed her.

But that was how he found himself in the back of the cart in a blanket nest with a taciturn woman in
the front, convoyed by his pack, too far away to talk and his injured mare for company and absolutely no intention to complain.

It was more than he had expected when he awoke and Boisrenard’s first question had been: “Shall I kill her?”

Even waking up had been a bonus at that point.

“Jeanne?” The figure on the driver’s bench looks down as he looks up and their eyes meet.

She may be reserved, she may hate him just a little and his mind may feel threatened by her presence, but his heart, his treacherous heart, still jumps at the way she immediately turns.

Even with her eyes guarded, tired, two pistols on her belt, in his old threadbare coat and her hair hidden under a peasant’s cowl…. she looks at him and in her eyes there is a spark… almost a hint of familiarity.

“Where do you plan to go, when we got your brothers?” He asks, for no other reason than that he likes torture and wants to know exactly what he can’t have.

Bernajoux in the background falls silent.

Jeanne’s lips turn downward as her gaze flicks away.

“I don’t know,” she says and the spark in her eyes dies. “Wherever a midwife will be needed. I’m sure, we’ll find a place. Though a city might be preferable.”

“No No, I mean, which country… “ He corrects her and smiles, because he wants her back and able to talk to him.

But all it gets him is a confused frown. “What do you mean, which country?”

The cart stops and of no volition of hers. Rosinante probably just decided that now that she has forgotten about the reins, there is no further need for movement.

Jeanne is not a horse person and likely never will be. She is not only scared, she seems unable to grasp the basic principles of horsemanship, a fact Cahusac is in equal measures fascinated and enamored by.

Braise, too, sees her chance and sticks her head under his hand, trying to reach the carrot bag.

He would have stopped the mare, but Jeanne’s words finally filter through.

“What do you mean, which country?” He pushes up on his left arm. “The one you’ll be leaving to… You know, the one where they don’t want to kill you or your siblings.”

Her head shoots up, eyes instinctively scanning their surroundings, as if anything could come past his packmates and close enough to overhear their conversation.

Still, she trusts no one and he can’t help but feel responsible.
Finally her eyes turn back to him and they are looking each other, both with guilt written across their faces, his more faint, hers acute, accentuating perfectly the stubborn lines that bracket her mouth.

“No…” he says with dawning understanding “You can’t be serious!”

Jeanne looks away, her gaze locking on Boisrenard in the background.

Boisrenard himself catches a sudden interest in a non-descript brush on the side of the road instead.

“Cahu… Alex…” She says, carefully insisting on not calling him be the name of the man who lied to her. “We are safe for now.” Her fingers paint a circle, indicating his whole pack. “We could not be any safer.” Her lips thin. “Than with you…”

Her eyes circle back to him after catching on Bernajoux’s watchful gaze.

“You are joking, right?” He curses, but Jeanne shakes her head.

“When I leave, children….” Another careful glance. “Pups will die.”

“If you don’t your own will!” He cries and like a door slammed, her face clouds over and shuts down.

Cahusac considers softening his ill-considered words, taking them back, anything, but it’s too late already.

Jeanne turns without a glance and spurs Rosinante on, each of her words a shallow knife cut across the soft skin of his hopes, leaving bleeding streaks in its wake.

“Come, Rosinante,” she murmurs, “There are windmills waiting.”

“That’s not a compliment!” Somewhere inside Cahusac there is an Alpha that begs himself to just stop talking, see past the danger she wants to willingly step into, and find a tiny shred of reason and shut up.

“I don’t know, Cahusac.” Her voice spreads shivers over his skin; ice so acute it could freeze berries in high summer.

“Going on because you are needed, even if it’s inconvenient, because you damn it all to hell believe in it… Laugh if you will, Cahusac. I don’t care.”

And that is the last thing she says to either of the Alphas for hours.

Bernajoux looks at him and shakes his head, Boisernard doesn’t even look at him and he is again alone with Braise, who at least doesn’t judge him as long as she has carrots.

***

Things, Jeanne-Marie Durand does exceedingly well: Carry a grudge.

She reacts to Bernajoux, she cusses out Rosinante, she talks a little to Boisrenard and accepts his prompts of food and drink without complaint...

Cahusac is ignored.
Whenever she comes close to looking at him, her eyes do a little jump, skipping over his form to resume their wandering on the other side.

Cahusac hoped it would get better once they reached an inn a few hours south of Sens, but her bad mood persists.

That though, might have just as much to do with the innkeeper as it does with him.

Innkeeper and inn are both rundown and far past their best days, if they ever had any.

The house’s window shutters are missing a few boards, the walls are missing a lot of paint and the stairway inside that leads to the rooms is not missing any steps yet, but wood worm dust on the ground below does not bode well.

Neither does the fact that nobody bothered to remove it.

The innkeeper, a man of average size, thinning hair and brown rimmed teeth, begs them in, almost falling over with eagerness to aid the Inquisition. His fingers crease up his ash and dirt stained apron, only to release it with a nervous flicker of his hands that has him reach for it again only moments later.

Not even Bernajoux’s skin color can deter him from his enthusiasm to praise and invite the Cardinal’s men.

His voice booms through the sparsely occupied public room, repeating for anyone within earshot that it is them who protect the people of France from the devil’s creatures out to steal and sacrifice the children of good God fearing men and do nefarious things to them, sexual things he whispers, not at all subtle.

Boisrenard grants him a patronizing smile that barely covers up the adamantine glint in his dark eyes and asks for a table and food brought up to their room.

Navigating the stairway is indeed an adventure, guarded by Bernajoux’s hand that needs to help Cahusac stay upright, without giving away how much of his packmate’s weight he actually carries.

Annoying.

Bernajoux could pick him up without trouble, sparing them anger and Cahusac the pain. As it is, Jeanne walks up behind them, blocking as much of the view as she can. It covers the short slip as Bernajoux has to grab Cahusac to keep him from toppling over.

At least the vegetable stew is edible. No meat, though, none of them is in the mood to be especially brave today.

Their room is surprisingly spacious, with Cahusac propped up on a bed, bowl balanced on his thighs, and Boisrenard and Bernajoux, shoulder to shoulder, sharing their bread and Bernajoux throwing carrots onto his mate’s plate with a disgusted expression.

Jeanne took a seat on the far side of the table without being prompted.

Cahusac had by chance not watched her but BB and the satisfied expression, the knowing look,
exchanged between one blink and the next, had not been lost to him. It's a low warning hum in the
back of his head, a casual reminder that even on the best of days his packmates’ potential for trouble
is undeterred by common sense. Or his opinion.

Jeanne is blissfully oblivious. Too deeply burrowed into the anger in her own head; the smooth
planes of her face are marred by the deep unhappy lines that bracket her mouth, starkly obvious on
her fair skin. Her eyes stay fixed on the table top, shaded from outside scrutiny by long lashes and
prickly attitude.

Until she suddenly sits straighter, leveling the force of her dismay on the three of them.

“How do you do it?” she asks and her voice rings through the room like an accusation.

Boisrenard looks up then, just shoving a piece of carrot into his mouth.

“What?” he asks and hands his cup to Bernajoux to have it filled again with a wine that Cahusac
thinks is less than mediocre. Not that that is something Boisrenard gives a damn about...ever. With a
taste like his he would drink dish water if only someone filled it into a bottle and wrote ‘wine’ on the
label.

Jeanne's eyes blaze with silent fury as she points over her shoulder to the door that leads to the rest of
the inn.

“This. Him and... that hatred... Just that gleeful hatred that people pour at you, because you are the
ones who’d reciprocate it. Though you are actually...:”

“But...” Cahusac finishes with sudden understanding. Jeanne turns to him with fire in her eyes, the
anger not abated but turned on a new and, in his opinion, much more deserving target. She clicks
her tongue with an irritated sound before pulling her brows together and her lips into an unhappy
smile. Not at him, but for him.

Cahusac's heart skips a beat, his mind is prompting him to say something, to keep her attention. It’s
the memory of his earlier blunder that keeps him silent.

“Gritted teeth,” says Boisrenard.

“Wine,” adds Bernajoux.

There is a beat of silence Cahusac uses to carefully and with great interest inspect what he assumes is
parsnips in his bowl.

He might say something witty, something concise and sharp, fulfilling the expectations, but truth is...

“I don’t really care that much, anymore“ He shrugs. “So, they hate us. Good, it makes it easier to...”
‘Not to trust the wrong people’ is what he was going to say. But ‘trust’ sadly is probably the most
difficult word in that room at the moment.

“...know your enemy. It is just part of our work. We are the Inquisition. And men like him are the
best support God’s rightful executive can have.”

He would raise a glass now. A speech like that requires a toast.

Sadly his right is uselessly tied to his chest and his left is holding the spoon.

While Boisrenard and Bernajoux are already lifting their cups, absolutely aware of his predicament
and willfully leaving him alone with it, it’s the Betan woman his hindbrain still jerks away from, who helps him by handing over a cup with a murmured. “Is that alright?” as she comes close.

In the background Boisrenard casts an underhanded grin at his mate and Cahusac wants to slap them and hug her, because she obviously has not yet caught up to the game those two are playing.

Instead he takes the cup and smiles.

“Thank you. At least someone is a good friend, here.” he snarks past her, though it loses a good portion of bite as she smiles.

Bernajoux lifts his cup with an evil cackle and drinks. “To God’s rightful executive!”

“To us,” his packmates answer.

Cahusac keeps his eyes on Jeanne, follows her slow steps back to her place of self chosen exile next to BB.

Her cup contains water. She doesn't raise it, doesn't join in to their toast or the lighter mood.

Her eyes, though, wander, sweep over them, over their faces, cataloguing expressions, postures.

“Is it true?” Cahusac has almost given up on finding out what bothers her when she finally speaks up, her voice a bare whisper that is threatened to be drowned out by the conversation of the Alphas.

Cahusac hears and tilts his head in inquiry.

“What you told me about you, is it true?”

“Every word.” He confirms with sincerity.

In the background Bernajoux looks up after dropping the last piece of carrot on the plate next to his. Surprise colors his features as he regards first Jeanne, then Cahusac.

“What happened to your uncle?” She may sit at far side of the table, but at that moment, she is as close as she was in St. Martin’s chapel.

“Uh, head story,” says Boisrenard, lifting his gaze away from his mate’s profile, as Bernajoux interjects, “We took care of it. Thoroughly.”

“Well, actually, Jussac took care of it. We helped.”

“It was a tragic accident.”

Cahusac watches it play out, his lips drawing into a grin, he just can’t help at their antics and the knowledge that this happens every time. It’s the knowledge that, as soon as someone mentions his family, they close ranks around him, and deflect attention, all the while distracting him with their behaviour.

“Very tragic. But no story for female companionship, I’m afraid.” Bernajoux is polite about telling her, he thinks she is too soft for the story of how they went after first his Sire’s Odem, who was completely clueless and overjoyed Cahusac was still alive, and then after his uncle.
Which was much less polite and ended in Jussac dropping a head on their kitchen table. And damn, he looked in equal parts furious and self-satisfied.

“Tell her, Bernajoux.” He says, because Jeanne, caring, bloody minded Jeanne, who can be so brutal when necessary and so protective, especially of family, would likely have done exactly the same. Except for ripping off his head and how Jussac as a Beta had managed that…

“She’ll love it. Trust me.”

That piques her interest and her smile as she turns to the Alphas with an expectant look and an almost joyful anticipation on her face that dissipates the last remnants of her bad mood. When Bernajoux still doesn’t speak, Jeanne tilts her head and says with an utterly unimpressed tone:

“I am a midwife, Bernajoux. Believe me, I see as much blood and pain and yes, death, in my daily life as you. So…” She says with a smirk as his head snaps up at her chastising words.

“Let’s ease you into it… who is Jussac?”

Cahusac settles deeper into his pillows and closes his eyes. He knows this story, has heard it a dozen times already.

His smile, though, stays.

Jeanne’s bad mood doesn’t return.

When she leaves, she seems outright happy. Boisrenard even managed to convince her of a half cup of wine. Not exactly a service to her, in Cahusac’s opinion, but if nothing else, it shows that she trusts the massive Alpha at least a little.

And she loved the story. She is so predictable in some ways.

When Boisrenard had described the scene with the head. (“Thankfully we let it bleed out first, that table has four working legs and stands straight and it’d be a crying shame to lose it over bloodstains.”) she had actually whooped. And then she had looked at Cahusac, as if she wanted to make sure, he was ok.

He was.

There was a fine thread of earthen tones woven into the summer sea tones of his packmates, a faint touch that grew into something new in the fabric of their scents, no longer threatening but starting to become familiar. And astonishingly, he was feeling absolutely, subconsciously safe, surrounded by pack, cared for without need to hide who he was.

Now as they are alone Boisrenard lifts his arm and curls it around Bernajoux’s shoulder, fingertips caressing over his ear.

“Damn, she got you good, there, love.” His lips brush Bernajoux’s other ear and stay there, despite his mate’s attempts to dislodge him.

Boisrenard snorts a deep laugh into his partner's short cropped hair, a strangely carefree sound,
rooted in nothing but this moment and the loving annoyance that has his mate swat at him like a fly, and Cahusac can’t help but join in.

Idiots.

Outside, Jeanne’s light steps fade away and then stop and every Alpha in the room simultaneously perks in attention.

It isn't something conscious, but they know without having counted, that she hasn't walked far enough yet to be at her door.

As the innkeepers voice sounds, Cahusac already turns his head, assuring himself the hunting knife is safely resting on a stool next to his headboard.

“Ah… Mademoiselle....” He is one of those men who just appear a bit too eager and they are just the kind of persons to be alarmed by that.

“It is good that I meet you. You are not per chance, a healer?”

Cahusac pushes to sit straighter and has to give up on it as his arm buckles with blinding moment of pain.

It’s Bernajoux who gets up instead. He’s not quite as silent as their youngest, but silent enough to open the door a fraction, enough for them to listen in.

“It’s Madame… I am widowed. I am not a doctor, but… I know my way around wounds. It comes with…” Cahusac sinks back into the pillow, eyes locking with Boisrenard who, very gently places his rapier on the table.

“Ah, yes… yes… “ the innkeeper interrupts. “I was wondering… I cut my foot last month and it doesn’t heal right. So maybe you could take a look?”

It makes sense, Cahusac finds, a woman traveling in their company could be only two things: a relative or a helper, likely both. And if she was not with one of them, she might be free game.

Except she isn’t.

Jeanne had tried to explain it, the preconceived notions she dances around all the time, but all her experiences and explanations were lost on three Alphas who had only ever been treated as male.

Adele sometimes had choice things to say about the expectation of weakness that was heaped on her, the limitations her apparent sex brought, invisible chains that she claimed the other Alphas couldn’t fathom. But she also hinted at the upside of being belittled, overlooked and dismissed.

“Oh, of course,” Jeanne’s voice is calm, if a little tense. “It is our duty to help the good citizens of France. Please sit, Sir, and let me have a look.” She couldn’t possibly be this dense.

Boisrenard turns slowly just to shake his head at Cahusac in astonishment.

“What is she doing?” he whispers.

“Just wait,” Cahusac answers, partly because he doesn’t know himself and partly because he is dying to know what she will turn this into. Because Jeanne absolutely isn’t this dense.
He hopes she knows that she has backup only a stairway away that will tear the man apart should he try anything she does not want. Her father had been right to teach her and her Odem to shoot, it means his pack is just bonus.

Jeanne-Marie Durand can take care of herself, the question is, does she know she doesn't have to all the time anymore.

She talks the innkeeper through everything she does with the wound, explaining in great detail the poultice she makes and how she washes the foot, all the while using over-detailed descriptions that really nobody needs to hear if they want to hold their dinner, to keep the man at bay.

Either she rambles out of nervousness or she is letting them know what is going on.

Since Jeanne does not tend to show nerves, Cahusac guesses the latter and that means, she knows.

She knows they're here, watching her back. He smiles.

“We are going to wrap this around the wound now… and when you do this every evening, in a week the wound should have closed and heal nicely.”

“Ah, you are such a nice young woman, and so helpful.” Cahusac can practically hear the smarmy man, at least 15 years her senior, come closer.

“Men like you are important, Monsieur Blanc. It is you, who make up the foundation on which the Inquisition’s work is built. The Red Guards can’t do God’s work if they don’t know where the threats are. They have to rely on knowledgeable citizens… and an innkeeper, I figure, is a well regarded man, who sees and hears a grea…”

“You are widowed, you said?” He interrupts her mid-word and she hesitates. When she speaks again faint annoyance colors her voice. The innkeeper wouldn’t notice, but Cahusac made it a priority to be able to gauge her levels of impending explosion.

“Yes, a little over a year now.”

“Ah, that is so sad… tell me….” Bernajoux opens the door another inch to watch and Cahusac is glad for it. The man’s voice is getting far too friendly. “Was it the animals?”

A dangerous pause follows and he imagines Jeanne brows drawing together, her eyes narrowing just a moment as she moves to smack her lips, aborting the motion halfway through, because it is a major tell. Maybe she will bite her lips, though that is not something she does, when angered. And she sure as hell is not embarassed.

“Yes.” Her voice is completely level when she answers, calm and collected, the perfectly opaque surface of the sea, harmless on a sunny day, while underneath the currents are raging, only waiting to smash the unwary on the rocks, as Boisrenard likes to say.

“Yes.” Her voice is completely level when she answers, calm and collected, the perfectly opaque surface of the sea, harmless on a sunny day, while underneath the currents are raging, only waiting to smash the unwary on the rocks, as Boisrenard likes to say.

“He died protecting a little boy...an Alpha…” There is gravity to her voice that paints the right picture, though Cahusac wants only to roll his eyes at her presentation, at the way she lets the words run out and fade.

Knowing the backstory she spun in Lyon, and knowing how she is altering it now to make it appear the fake husband didn’t die to protect an Alpha pup, but was killed by one, has him nod to a still wary Boisrenard with satisfaction.

She is keeping her tale very low key and basic, letting the man fill the gaps.
“They’re dangerous, them are.”

“Yes, and strong! So, if you need help, or have suspicions, the men need to know about… please…

“She is friendly, open, she might talk like this to her patients, though with less murderous intent, and
Cahusac can’t help but admire her for it. She knows people and understands how to use them,
pandering to their sense of self-importance, their hatred, or their gratefulness as she had done in
Lyon, choosing people she can be sure won’t betray her.

“I am but a woman, accompanying a wounded soldier, my husband’s brother, but the Red Guards
would be honored to partake in your knowledge and praise would surely be forthcoming to a good
son of the church…”

The innkeeper likely knows everything going on in the villages along the roads around his inn and if
he truly hates throwbacks that much, he knows every rumor there is.

So if there is someone who is suspected, or in danger of exposure…Richelieu can have them
investigated and maybe cleared before the situation gets out of hand.

Bernajoux turns away from the door the same conclusion written across his expressive face.

“Oh…she’s good…” Murmurs Boisrenard to Cahusac’s nod. “I’m surprised you were able to resist
her.” Cahusac’s hand itches to reach out and cuff him on the back of the head. Sadly said hand is still
in a sling and tied to his chest.

“Yeah, she’s different when she hates your guts, believe me.”

They fall silent, listening to Jeanne bid a warm good night to the man, listening too for any sounds,
that he might try and follow her.

He doesn’t, instead the door to the kitchen closes and soon after Bernajoux nods out the door with a
mock salute and a whispered "Bonne Nuit." Before the key to her door turns and safely locks her in.

“Let’s see what comes out of it.” He comments as he closes the door and walks back to the table.
“Hopefully nothing.”

He drapes an arm across Boisrenard’s front, dropping an absentminded kiss to his lover’s temple. A
blissful smile flickers over Boisrenard’s face as he hums in response, tilting his head to give the other
Alpha access to the extremely vulnerable area of his neck.

In any other throwback it would be a sign of submission, honestly not even a rare sight, Bernajoux’s
personality packs a serious dominant punch, if he ever lets the leash slip a little, but Cahusac has seen
them do it so many times now, he knows it for the display and invitation of affection it truly is. And
ture enough, Bernajoux drops a kiss to his mate’s exposed throat adding a few sweet words that
make Boisrenard’s smile grow.

It’s only in a very close circle that they are that open with their love and Cahusac turns away, closing
his eyes to give them the privacy they deserve.

An excuse as good as any to give his weakened body more much needed rest.

***
He’s already sitting in the back of the cart, when Boisrenard walks out of the inn the next morning, face a thunderous cloud.

Cahusac needs one look at that face and knows that their hopes have been dashed that all the innkeeper could give them would be faint rumours.

Those could be silenced easily at any random time in the future by an investigation that, of course, would find nothing.

That look though, speaks of a concrete threat and a life in danger.

They have stopped at a small grove a safe distance from the inn to discuss the inevitable.

“It’s an Omega, someone caught a whiff of heat scent and they want to hunt them down next time. Which should be in about a week, if they’re regular. And let’s pray that they’re regular and not early.” He curses a blue streak, uninhibited by the presence of a woman. Cahusac adds a choice word or two.

“How far away?”

“Half a day’s travel east south east.”

Bernajoux speaks up, bent over a simple map on the cart’s floor.

“There’s no helping it. We need to split.” He looks at Boisrenard. “You ride ahead and find the village or try at least to tighten the search parameters, deter any ambitions to hunt the Omega themselves. Your presence should also warn the Omega. So… be unsubtle.”

Boisrenard nods with an unusually grim face. “Unsubtle I can do.”

That has Bernajoux’s lips curl and look up at his mate with such emotion in his eyes that Cahusac’s heart tightens. Those two are sacrificing too much. He will have to talk to Jussac about setting up double shifts in the Palais for himself, just to give them a few days together, somewhere safe.

Jeanne looks at the map, a frown on her face. “Why aren’t you going with him?”

“I’m going to make good time and inform our commander then circle around, hopefully with backup, and join Boisrenard.” His face is serious as he looks at her.

“Which leaves you with the task to get Cahusac safely home.” His fingers tap on a small dot on the map that denotes a village three hours out of the estates. “There is an inn there, wait until you are picked up. Don’t leave.”

“I know where we have to go. You might remember me? I’m right here,” Cahusac throws in with indignation in his voice.

“Not if you faint again,” is Jeanne’s dry answer and Boisrenard chokes on a laugh as even Bernajoux smirks.

“Excuse you?! That was once! Four days ago. I am sitting up, am I not?”

“Wait there anyways,” Bernajoux says, before Jeanne can answer. “I’ll have someone come and
escort you, just to be safe.”

They say their goodbyes and both Boisrenard and Bernajoux insist on leaving the bulk of food with Cahasuc and Jeanne, despite both their assurances that they can hunt and are in no danger of starving.

Boisrenard even goes so far to drop a kiss to Jeanne’s forehead, as he usually does with Cahasuc, a silent blessing wishing them a safe journey.

“Get your pups and bring them to our house,” he says. “We have the room and I want to meet them.”

Jeanne stills, her whole posture becoming that of a woodland creature she sometimes so acutely resembles, weary and suspicious of a danger she cannot yet fully grasp.

She casts an inquiring look at Bernajoux who nods with a shadow of a smile, still cautious but much warmer than in the beginning and basically a glowing endorsement from a man so protective of his pack that even Richelieu has been known to defer to him when it’s about Cahasuc and Boisrenard.

Then she looks to Cahasuc who just shrugs, as if he hadn’t had a say in that decision anyways. But he smiles. Had he protested when they asked him last night, his packmates would not have overruled him.

But as it stands...while it would be much safer for her to leave France when given the chance, she is an asset. She is a midwife and has an acute way of reading people.

She also has intimate knowledge of a few subjects in Lyon that Adele might want to ask her about, if Cahasuc ever fesses up to roping Michel and Anne into the Resistance and if she ever forgave him for that.

On the other hand she’s also a young woman who suddenly is the sole caretaker of two pups, one of whom is severely traumatized, with limited resources, no place to stay and no knowledge of Paris.

And if there is a faint chance to have them around, at least for a little while longer…

Just a chance, it’s all he wants, to repair what fate and duty broke.

“Be safe,” Jeanne says, accepting Bernajoux’s light touch to her shoulder with a grazing of her fingers over his hand.

“You take care of our little Aleph. We will judge you for the state he is in, when we meet again.”

Jeanne’s eyes land on the Alpha in front her, running her eyes over the outlines of his stern face with a serious expression, before she agrees. “Not a hair out of place.”

Cahasuc lets them. Jeanne needs them to strengthen their connection to her much more than he needs his pride intact, what little of it the idiots let him have anyways.

“Oh yes, nobody would want our pretty boy’s beauty destroyed by bad hair.” Boisrenard slips in as he fastens the saddlebags he took from Bernajoux’s Frisian to his own horse and mounts.

“See you in a week,” he calls over his shoulder as he drives his gelding into a powerful canter.
Bernajoux mounts too, stopping next to the cart to clasp hands with Cahusac. “Take your time, Cahusac, we got this,” he says, with a serious look for both of them.

His horse springs into a gallop that has little stones spray against the cart’s wood and Braise neigh in jolt.

The emptiness their presence leaves is filled with awkward silence.

Jeanne stares after Bernajoux, while Cahusac busies himself with calming his indignant mare.

“Are they now or are they not?” Jeanne’s voice cuts through the faint sound of wind in the trees and a lonely jay calling an empty warning.

“Are they what?”

“A couple.” Her voice contains no judgement, just mild curiosity and a certain honest puzzlement.

“Boisrenard all but confirmed it and they seem so close sometimes, like that thing with the carrots. I have watched them touch…. She turns to him and shrugs. “And then they barely nod at each other when they part, as if they don’t care.”

Cahusac rests his left shoulder more firmly against the wall of the cart, finding a more comfortable position, before he answers.

“Are you asking me to dish juicy details about my packmate’s private lives?”

“Yes!” she cries and he has to curl in to take strain off his arm as he laughs at her desperation.

“They are a pair. For over a decade now,” he confirms.

Her brow furrows.

“But then why…? I mean, any of them could get hurt and…” she flings out her arm, indicating the direction Bernajoux has gone as a means of finishing that sentence.

“Public road.” Cahusac and there is a pang of the sad knowledge that their Alpha will never have the freedom to live as carefree as any of them.

“Bernajoux is overcautious in anything he does… Because this world has far too many things to judge him for and not one it holds in his favor.” He says poignantly.

“ The only thing that protects him most days is the color of his coat and that there is a powerful master behind it. The court loves him...as an exotic prop. God forbid they ever found out how much of what Boisrenard or I do is actually a proxy from Bernajoux.”

Cahusac shrugs, the knowledge one that few possess, but it wouldn’t do any good to keep it from Jeanne. The way alone she defers to Bernajoux shows that she has figured out who is giving the orders in their little pack. It also means, if she is to stay with them, she needs to know how to work around it.

“We can hide what we are, he can’t. He has a vulnerability that is painted all over his body and it makes people look at him a lot closer than they would at me or Boisrenard.”
Jeanne flinches and looks away, the muscles in her jaw flexing. “And the fact that he actually does have several things to hide…. I see.”

“It’s not fair.”

“When is it ever.” Their eyes meet in a tired stalemate, nothing but silence stretching on either side...

In the open air, her scent doesn’t bother him. Truth be told, it doesn’t bother him at all, when he knows it’s her and in the past days since the first panicked reaction after he woke, it gradually improved. Problem is, Cahusac has always been a difficult sleeper.

She smiles wryly...

“I’m sorry,” she adds, holding his gaze and deep inside her woodland eyes there is a softness that is solely for him and that he has sorely missed. If all he has are words, he needs to make them count.

“Me too.” It’s the easy part, because no matter if there is blame to place or not, owning up to the consequences never hurts.

“We’re not always given a choice,” he mutters, almost drowned out by the stumbling of his own heart. “But the choice how we go on and where to will always… has to… always be ours. No matter how hard they kicked us.”

The hazel of her eyes is shadowed by her lashes and the heavy way her throat moves in a heavy swallow the only tell.

“If it’s possible…” Her fingers pick at a loose thread on his coat that she is again wearing and hasn’t yet shown any inclination of handing back. “Hope can be a dangerous thing.”

“As can fear.”

For a moment her lips tremble as she reacts to his words and he can’t miss the way her gaze flickers away and back to him as the corner of her mouth stretches upward.

Neither of them is ready yet.

But they will have time.

BB and their stupid meddling be damned and blessed.

“Cahusac?” The voice that calls his name speaks of danger, of pain, of being hunted and chased by the wolves through….

Cahusac jerks awake.

The back of his head knocks against the wood and it’s that that tears apart the last cobweb remnants of just the same old dreams.

Jeanne looks down on him, brows drawn together and an apologetic twist to her mouth that he is learning to hate.

“Do you have your horses color coded?”
“What?”

It’s difficult to kneel and still more difficult to stand without blacking out again. Even if the pain in his shoulder is manageable, the body remembers how a knock on death’s door sounds.

He has to reach for Jeanne’s hand to pull up and lean against her bench, but the sight is worth it.

Jussac’s chestnut leisurely canters up the soft incline before them.

Beyond, the valley stretches between soft rolling hills, the inn, framed by green fields, at the banks of a small stream. They should be there now. That they aren’t can mean two things, Jussac has been waiting or Jeanne didn’t dare navigate the winding road.

"Stop laughing!" She hisses, at first glance less amused by Jussac’s choice of horse. Her lips are drawn in a not quite serious frown as she points at Rosinante, grazing peacefully at the side of the road, completely undeterred by the fact he’s still rigged into the cart. “What does that say about me?”

“Your other horse was a fat little pony.” He wants to kiss the pout off her mouth. “Don’t complain.”

Jussac jumps off the horse as he reaches them, throwing his reigns to a dumbfounded Jeanne.

Cahusac has to squash the need to duck at the way the steep line furrows down between the male’s brows and his lips draw back over his teeth.

Instead he stands, left hand pushing down on Jeanne’s shoulder, praying silently for her to stay in place.

“It’s good, he’s not a danger,” is all he can push past his clenched teeth before Jussac has rounded the cart and climbed on its bed.

There is a tense moment, where they all eye each other.

Then Jussac’s eyes turn away to roam over Cahusac as he stops in front of the Alpha.

Cahusac’s fingers dig carefully into Jeanne’s shoulder, willing her to not do what he knows she’s thinking about. He saw her hand vanish under the coat.

Jussac can yell with the best of them. Can scream a man into a whimpering pile of regrets, if he wants. Overpowering with the force of a character that developed in the orbit of France’s biggest personality.

Now he reaches out and with greatest care turns Cahusac’s head, touches and bends his fingers, runs a palms with a featherlight touch over his shoulder, before he reaches out and cuffs him on the back of the head.

“Imbecile!” he growls and in a tone that has every instinct in Cahusac standing at attention. “Next time you wait for backup!”

Jussac’s gaze flicks to Jeanne and his eyes that were about to soften narrow dangerously.

“You want to take your hands off the pistol,” he snarls and all that does for Jeanne is light the fire in her eyes and make the muscles in her jaw lock.

It needs Cahusac’s nod and another gentle squeeze of his hand before her hand lowers and rests, small and inconspicuous, on the bench next to her. Only then does Jussac step back with an appreciative nod.
At least now I know why Bernajoux felt the need to point out that you weren’t the one who shot him.” His head indicates Cahusac and moves seamlessly into an annoyed shake.

In three heartbeats Jeanne’s face changes from murderous intent to guilty confusion as her eyes search out Cahusac, round and stunned, her rosebud lips forming almost a perfect “o”.

“There were misunderstandings involved.” Cahusac jumps to her aid, letting go of his rigid posture to sag against the driver’s bench, in the hopes that his commander will not start into a real tirade right here in the middle of the street.

It’s hard to gauge what to say without knowing what Bernajoux told him.

The usual approach is throwing a morsel of information, acting as if it is enough, adding another morsel, if Jussac isn’t content.

It’s the more difficult tactic and needs careful implementation as it’s all too easy to fall into one of Jussac’s interrogation traps and divulge too much.

On the other hand… the alternative is obstinate silence, which always triggers his hunting instinct.

Sadly, and that is another thing Cahusac learned the hard way, Jussac is not just an ordained priest and thus had gone through inquisitorial training, he had also learned the more subtle and effective methods of interrogation alongside the Cardinal. Only contrary to Richelieu nobody ever expected Jussac to employ them.

Lucky then, that Cahusac in turn had learned from him and Bernajoux.

Before Jeanne is tempted to fill the artificial silence, Cahusac takes the initiative.

“She saved my life, Jussac. She just wasn’t particularly nice about it.” His thumb rubs a slow and gentle circle over the cloth of his coat on her shoulder.

Jussac’s eyebrow twitches; face clouded by doubt and a deep seated anger that once had him rip a man’s head off, as his gaze flicks to Jeanne. The woman in turn does the sensible thing and looks in equal measures ostracized and a harmless, fragile Betan female, sufficiently scared of the more physically powerful men.

“We’re good, Jussac. They never would have left us alone, if they didn’t agree,” he adds and it finally seems to convince the man, as the lines in his face smooth over.

“Estates.” He nods to Cahusac and jumps off the cart. “We need to clear her first.” While Jeanne is still fishing for Rosinante’s reins in that hilariously helpless way of hers, Jussac heads back to his horse, mounts and pulls level with the cart.

This time his lips draw into a soft expression, a faint smile, even as Jeanne subtly leans towards Cahusac to get away from his horse.

“The pups would really like to have you back.” Jussac hasn’t finished speaking, as Jeanne aborts the motion, any motion.

The reins drop from her hands as her lips open on a helpless exhale.

From one second to the other the competent, slightly abrasive woman that had challenged and taunted him, made him laugh and cry, had filled him with joy and wounded him to the mark, turns into a broken reflection.
Cahusac will never have the chance to learn who she was before her family got torn apart, but right there, for a short torturous moment, he sees the negative of that woman, the person that failed to reach her own courage, who never took up the guns and the fight. Who never found herself and lost everything instead.

Uncomfortable as it is to suddenly have a noseful of her distressed scent assault his senses, Cahusac pushes up on the bench with a curse and wraps his left arm around her shoulders.

The position, the whole clash of her trying to get him away from her scent and him trying to get her closer to his, is awkward as hell, yet, after he deploys the full gamut of his strength for just a moment to let her know, he is serious about the contact, she curls into him.

His shoulder is the only thing to muffle the high pitched, painful keening sound. Jussac’s glare levels onto him this time, but Cahusac only shakes his head, too tired suddenly to explain.

He drops a soft kiss on her hair - the scent of the grave follows him as the roots close in. Humid earth sucking all the air out of his lungs - and gently rocks them back and forth until her shaking subsides.

When her face lifts away from him eyes and cheeks are dry.

There is a fine sheen in the hazel depths, like a shimmer on the water, the only visual sign of everything she keeps locked inside.

Her lips, swollen and wet where she bit into them are slightly parted, beg him to kiss it better, to take on a small part of her pain.

Only, the invitation is an illusion.

He is the reason, she is still caught in the perpetual limbo of hope and doubt, never quite daring to believe in the idea that this will have a good ending.

For him, every breath he takes lights a faint warning in the back of his mind, a memory of desperation, of fear. The deep earthy tones are not providing comfort. The smell of herbs is not medicine; it’s poison, as his mind provides, and he reacts to it, even though he knows it for the lie it is.

Jeanne gives him a tight nod and he finally lets her extricate herself.

“I’m staying here,” is all he says, as she indicates the back of the cart. That she lets it go, lets him sits on the bench next to her, despite her continued doubt into his ability to sit at all, says all there is to know about her state.

In the end it doesn’t matter.

It’s only three more hours, four at most. There is no difference if he sits them out here or in the back.

And maybe it’s better if he doesn’t fall asleep now.

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Almost four hours later, each bump on the narrow dirt road sends screaming pain through his shoulder.
Cold drops of sweat run down his neck and under the collar of his coat, making the fact that his skin is far too warm again blatantly obvious and the permanent mantra of “just a few more minutes” the fighting song he clings to with his last shred of will.

Ten minutes out.

They are clear of the last sentry. They are at their journey’s end.

Jeanne doesn’t know it yet and Cahusac won’t tell her. She doesn’t need to start and count down the minutes now, despairing over time she couldn’t change with all her stubborn will.

As Rosinante pulls the cart up the last incline and the hunting lodge comes into view, the air around her is permeated with the smell of her fear.

Not the usual heart wrentching fear of someone who is brought into the hunting grounds. Cahusac would have sworn any oath she has no idea where they are going... which is adorable in its innocence and refreshing in a way he never knew he wanted.

No, in her eyes that land on him ever so often, he sees the same question that has haunted him since he woke up in the convent, maybe even since the moment he heard her footsteps approach behind him and prepared for death.

Are they still alive?

How much he told her, how much she actually knows or believes, might forever be a secret for her to keep, but he knows that this one promise is something he needs to make true and he needs to be there, awake.

Rosinante trots down the hill unfazed by everything that is not going on. The silent tension that finds no expression in action, only the soft gallop of thundering heartbeats.

“What if they aren’t there,” she whispers.

“They are,” he whispers back, as much out of pain as piety, and in her eyes fear battles with a crude approximation of trust.

They are, Cahusac whispers again, silently inside his heart as they stop in front of the equally silent hunting lodge. For a moment his own resolve wavers, when Jeanne’s gaze falls onto him and all the pain, all the fear that spurs her anger come to painful life in her eyes.

That is, until a jubilant bundle of vibrant energy comes roaring around the corner, hair a glowing reflection of the autumn trees around them and an ear piercing scream on his lips.

“MAMAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Even Rosinante twitches.

His little legs tangle into themselves, barely moving out of the way before the next step threatens to knot them up again. Arms flail around his body, keeping a precarious balance as he jumps over stepping stones and skips around obstacles in his way. All exuberant joy and longing and maybe a bit of reproach in his voice and on his face.

Cahusac has to poke the woman next to him when she just sits there, rigid as the proverbial pillar of
“Go!” He says and she is off the cart, reins, naturally, just dropped where she stood, and runs toward the house.

Cahusac reaches down with a huff of pain to pick them up, watching Jeanne and her little Aleph out of the corner of his eyes.

Jeanne doesn’t utter a word, she drops to her knees, arms reaching out for Etienne to throw himself into. His body locks, arms, legs, around her neck and hips and he buries his nose in her neck just as she buries hers in his hair, breathing in heaving sobs that tear through the silence of the afternoon like the sound of a heart breaking.

Cahusac has to maybe brush his hand over his eyes once or twice with a crooked grin as Jussac watches him, still ready to pick him up should he tip over.

“Well done, pup,” he smirks.

“Thanks, paps,” Cahusac replies without thought and Jussac chortles at the nickname he had been given by an obstinate 14 year old, suspicious of the world and everybody’s intentions, especially the Beta who took him to a place he didn’t know to do things he thought he had too much of an idea of already.

As Simon walks around the corner, pale, his eyes big and forlorn in his waiflike face, Jeanne gets up, the younger pup still on her arm and almost runs across the entryway.

The little Omega takes one step. Halts. Takes another and halts again. A newborn deer unsure of its place in the world, ground under his legs seemingly constantly shifting.

Until she reaches him and grabs him with her free arm to pull him against her chest with a piercing cry that is laughter and grief and equal measures.

“You came,” the Omega chokes and it’s the first words Cahusac has ever heard him say. “You came back.”
The sun paints golden murals on shoulders a slipped blanket has bared, the warm hue of the skin so much deeper between the white sheets.

His face behind the mussed shock of black hair much more peaceful than she remembers, lips slightly parted to a relaxed, soft expression that vaguely resembles a smile.

A strand of his hair flutters with each breath, it quakes, shivers and resettles, brushing over the skin of his cheek and without fail his nose crinkles in response, only to smooth over with the next exhale.

For a moment there Jeanne forgets fear or caution, forgets to be conscious of her surroundings or the sounds that denote presence or absence of people around her.

There is no danger here at the hunting lodge.

For the first time in her life nothing she or her siblings do, will out them and push them in death’s path and it only took her three days to come to that understanding.

A smile pulls at her lips as she watches him through the crack in the doorway to his room, beautiful and totally oblivious to the gaze that so flagrantly takes its fill from his sight.

She wants to run her fingers through his hair, wants to see a smile tug at the left corner of his sensual mouth as it sometimes does, when he is lost in thought.

Paper rustles softly, the only manifestation of her need to rub her fingers in an attempt to get rid of the need to reach out, to just get up and find out if his skin is just as warm as it looks.

If she only could….

Simon’s elbow thuds against the tabletop next to her and she jumps, jerking her head upright from its
comfortable rest on her hand, a lazy position to read comfortable, in truth though…

“Sorry,” her Odem mutters and Jeanne exhales slowly, refusing the evasive feeling of guilt that bubbles in her gut.

Adèle had sent them out into the grounds before she had set out whatever she needed to do with Cahusac.

“I need to move his shoulder or it will stiffen. And trust me, you don’t want them to see that,” she had said, her demeanor a carefully constructed facade to hide a veiled aggressiveness and anger that speaks to the deepest parts of Jeanne’s soul. It makes it easy sometimes to forget how young Adèle actually is, especially since she is always so caring with the pups and so sweet with Simon.

So Jeanne had collected her siblings and gone into the woods, using the opportunity to spend time alone with them, to reconnect.

Etienne, young as he is, doesn’t understand all the things that are wrong. He won’t remember the two people now missing from his life, but still he is suspicious of the events and motivation that had his mother leave him in the care of virtual strangers, as exciting as they were.

And then there is Simon, suddenly catapulted from the last days of childhood, any sense of safety crushed to smithereens, any sense of innocence, too.

She had let them run free, listening to Etienne’s excited chatter and let them show her the secret paths they had explored with Uncle Jean.

Ema Jean, Etienne had corrected, with the innocence of youth and a big tooth gapped grin, beaming with pride. Simon, biting his lip had nodded and Jeanne couldn’t help but feel a sense of deep gratitude towards the Omega who had watched them and taken care of them, knowing somehow that he had been the one to coax Simon out of his mute, terrified shell.

Dernier had had to go back, they had told her, because his pups are still in Lyon with Michel and Anne and he needs to bring them to Savoy (“Mama, what is Savoy?”) and Adèle had not yet been there, because she had been with Michel and Anne, (“Michel and Anne say hello, she said”) and somewhere in that waterfall of words, Jeanne had wondered if Ema Jean was the same Jean into whose office Cahusac sneaked the red wine and that was before she had wanted to twist Cahusac’s neck, because he had dragged her friends into the Resistance without telling her about it.

But Simon had looked at her, a shadow of a smile only visible in the corner of his eyes, secretly excited about the interesting things he could tell her and she had adjourned being annoyed by the Alpha.

Always with the damn secrets.

They needed to talk about secrets, was the conclusion she had come to as she watched Etienne toddle through the underbrush, Simon’s arm securely linked with hers.

With her sibling’s primary sense being smell, Jeanne hoped only she caught the cut off scream from the direction of the hunting lodge.
When they had returned with mushrooms and wild blackberries, Cahusac had been sleeping, his cheek resting on his left hand, face, though strained with exhaustion, at peace.

Etienne fell asleep on the rug under the table and is softly snoring in that sweet way babies have. Simon sketches. Jeanne works her way through yet another of Adèle’s medicine books.

As much as she can anyways whenever her glance is not drawn to that gold basked display on the other side of the room.

“He was there, you know?” Simon says next to her, voice barely above a whisper.

“Who?” Jeanne turns to him fully, eagerly grasping at the chance to keep her little Odem speaking. It’s so difficult these days and much more so to keep him talking like this, open and without fear.

Now though he looks at her, smudged charcoal on his cheek and all, thinner than he should be, paler than he should be, but still her beautiful, perfect little Odem, and points across the table to Cahusac’s door.

“What?” she asks and encourages him to go on with a smile, though she dreads the answer.

Reaching over, wiping the smudge of his cheek comes naturally. She has done it so many times in her life. Simon needs physical affection, little touches, hugs. He always has and now more so than ever.

“When Mama died,” Simon replies.

Her hand stills, her face asking the question she does not dare speak.

“In prison,” he continues softly, barely audible. “She didn’t scream anymore, but I smelled her and it was all….” he breaks off, gently rubbing his thumb over the black charcoal, watching fine dust trickling onto the table, like the blood in her dreams sometimes does and it is the only thing she can do not to grab him and pull him into her arms.

“Pain… and fear… and it was… so bad.” Simon looks up and the fact that there is not one tear more than anything feeds her worry.

Jeanne brushes back a strand of his hair that has fallen over his brow, brushing over the skin with the pad of her thumb.

“And he came and it got better….” His eyes look to Cahusac’s sleeping form and back to Jeanne. “I didn’t hear him, but the fear got better…it smelled like Mama again… over the…” He hesitates. “…the blood.”

Jeanne flinches, she can’t help it. It’s the thought of her mother tortured. It’s the thought of Simon witnessing it, of too much loss and too much hurt in this room alone. Simon flinches with her, already speaking up to apologize, but she stops him with a shake of her head.

“It’s ok, little Odem, I’m just angry at them…” her thumb caresses over his cheekbone. “Not at you, never at you.”

“He claimed me, you know? Told them, he wanted me for the Cardinal…” His eyes dart away.
“They told me things. What they want to do with me…” Now tears gather in his eyes, but he swallows them down with a painful twist of his pretty face, eyes screwed shut.

“I got scared, but he said…. He said, they mustn’t hurt me… and they didn’t….”

Jeanne closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, wishing secrecy, hiding, fear and suspicions all to hell.

Simon’s fingers sneak through hers and squeeze softly.

His chest expands with a shaky breath before he opens his eyes again to look at her.

“And then your friends came. I knew you would come.”

This time she reaches out and gathers him in her arms, lips touching his hair in a gentle promise, he doesn’t hear.

*I will protect you. Always.*

“Is he good?” he asks, his head tucked securely under her chin.

“Yes.” She answers with a self-deprecating snort.

“Can we trust him?”

“Yes.”

Simon tilts back his head to look at her and then, with a decisive nod, leans against her shoulder.

“Do you like him?”

Jeanne opens her mouth, tempted to say no, because No!

And then her eyes are drawn to that door again.

She remembers sitting with him, watching him read. His habit of picking food off his dagger with his teeth. The skin on her knee warms at the memory of his thumb painting calming circles alone and for a second she thinks, she can smell the dark sharpness of firs and the sweetness of not quite burning wood.

She hasn’t heard his loud, carefree laughter in far too long, instead, his screams echo in her dreams, but she still knows what it sounds like, warm and open and inviting.

And sometimes, when no one is looking, she finds herself watching his eyes shift in the changing light, shining animatedly when he speaks with Adèle or with Simon or poses a wall against which Etienne can test the strength of his will and stubbornness.

“Maybe?” Jeanne murmurs. “And that’s none of your concern?” she whispers and is rewarded with an excited gleam in his eyes.

“Alright,” says Simon and she doesn’t believe him for one second.

“Alright?” she inquires and he shrugs.

But then... the Simon that got into all kinds of mischievous trouble died with their home. This is the extremely well behaved little Omega that tries so hard to never do anything wrong.
“He’s beautiful,” he murmurs with a side glance to Cahusac and this is exactly the moment where Jeanne rectifies her previous judgement in favor of breaking off this conversation. She pulls the book in front of her with a firm motion and ignores her Odem with the longstanding practice of an older sister until he wriggles out of her arms with an exasperated huff solely reserved for her.

She doesn’t miss the smile flitting over his lips and for a moment, one precious moment, she thinks she feels the warmth of the golden sunrays that paint Cahusac’s beauty onto his skin inside her. For a moment it feels strangely like happiness.

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It’s only the next day, that she comes to the conclusion that telling Simon to trust Cahusac was perhaps not her brightest idea. Their combined potential for trouble had not been something factoring into her words.

A mistake.

She had been sitting outside in the herb garden with Adèle, talking about Lyon and what was needed. The peace around them, the fact that they were for once safe, still the most unreal feeling.

Jeanne had collected lemon balm and chamomile to make a tea later for Simon and Cahusac. Of course, it was Simon who needed it, she would never assume Cahusac had trouble falling asleep and needed a calming tea, but since the Alphas seemed to have difficulties refusing her Odem anything, she’d just have Simon offer the tea to his favorite Alpha and Cahusac would drink.

Etienne had tumbled around at their feet, futilely but with great enthusiasm hunting imaginary mice.

Simon and Cahusac had stayed inside. Cahusac pale and exhausted after yet another of Adèle’s treatments. Simon peacefully engrossed in a book Adèle had procured from one of the bookshelves, a priceless print about Italian art that was worth more than her parents had had in a whole year.

Now Etienne he is curled up in bed, dead to the world, exhausted and happy and Jeanne has time for herself.

"No no, take it like this. You can’t just switch side... you need to balance out for the way your eyes perceive it. See? Like this..." Cahusac's voice sounds calm and reasonable, as far from any wrongdoings as can be. And that is exactly the reason Jeanne speeds her steps when she leaves her and the pup’s bedroom.

"I'm not really fast..." Simon comments lowly, unsure and hesitant. The way he never sounded before. But at least he speaks and Jeanne could kiss Cahusac for eliciting any reaction from her Odem... up until the moment she hears the rhythmic sound of a knife hitting wood from the other side of the doorway.
She doesn't yell.

She won't yell. If only not to startle whoever was handling that knife.

As she turns around the corner though and sees her Odem, with Cahusac's very sharp knife in his left hand cutting beets, concentration carved into every inch of his face with the tip of his tongue sticking out between his lips, she comes close.

And it's not made better by Cahusac doing the same, holding a carrot down with his right hand though Jeanne remembers clearly telling him to not move this arm yet. And she has this faint recollection of Adèle doing the same.

“Damn it, Cahusac!” she cries and Simon’s hand stills.

Cahusac doesn't even look up, only continues the gentle chopping motion with precise concentration "Hello, Jeanne, the demon pup sleeping?"

She considers hitting him, as she considers hitting him whenever he has this particular smirk on his lips, a dare to stop him. And that's why she doesn't.

Simon's gaze shifts between them as he slowly places down the knife and folds his hands in his lap like the calmest, most well behaved child in the world, that he never was.

His face closes off as his head lowers.

Jeanne, still standing in the doorway to the kitchen, is too far away to do something about it. Cahusac isn't.

He pokes out his left elbow to catch him in the ribs with a smile so gentle, so sweet, it should look wrong on the hard Alpha.

"Hey, no stopping. We need to eat. Adèle brings the rabbit, we the vegetables."

As Simon looks up, so much dashed hope in his eyes, she nods to him, pointing out the beet.

Her Odem reaches for the knife with his right. Stops. Looks to Cahusac.

The Alpha holds up his left with the knife and his grin alone challenges the whole room.

But Simon looks to Jeanne first, and she sighs. She could say no. Be responsible. She is sure of her ability to overrule Cahusac. She is sure Cahusac is sure of her ability to overrule him. He doesn’t do things without other’s consent, only with their expressed ignorance.

Cahusac had watched over him, let him go slow, but also challenged the little one to something new, something Simon took pride in. Even though it looked way too much like fight training.

"Go on." she smiles.

It's worth Simon's proud eyes. It sure is worth Cahusac's surprise.

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Two days later Boisrenard rides up to the front door of the Hunting Lodge, a bruised and battered Bernajoux in tow.

“They pulled him off the horse!” He curses as he helps his mate down from said horse. “At least I could go all righteous Inquisition on them. I love that damn uniform!”

Bernajoux laughs lowly, arm slung around his mate’s shoulder as he awkwardly slides out of the saddles, his left leg stiff and wobbly.

“I’m alright,” he hisses. “Nothing a hot bath and some ointment can’t fix.”

Cahusac is the last to join the impromptu meeting in the common room where they gather while the newcomers eat and Boisrenard with careful hands takes care of his mate’s injuries.

He had been sleeping, his habit to nap away injury, as Jeanne found out even as his health improved, no exaggeration.

Jeanne and Adèle have just sat down as he grumbles out of the bedroom and stops short.

“What the…?” He still looks somewhat out of it, hair messy around his head, shirt haphazardly thrown on with the right shoulder and arm securely tied under it, but as soon as he sees Bernajoux, he’s wide awake.

“What happened?”

“Villagers” Bernajoux growls as Boisrenard touches a particularly tender spot, the low “Sorry, love.” from the other Alpha almost lost under his voice.

“We have a problem….” Bernajoux opens, as soon as his packmate sits and looks at all of them, but especially Adèle. “We found the Omega.”

Jeanne’s heart sinks, possibilities of how that might be a problem tumbling through her mind.

Bernajoux lifts his shoulder to shrug, as Cahusac silently points to the colorful bruises on his side, but aborts the motion halfway through. “Ran into some locals who so didn’t want to share ‘their’ prey with the Inquisition…”

“We convinced them, that they ‘so’ did,” interjects Boisrenard and Bernajoux reaches up to flick a finger against his ear in soft reprimand. A sweetly intimate gesture that Boisrenard answers by running his fingertips up Bernajoux’s nape. Only another excuse to keep the skin contact he hasn’t really broken since the two of them got off the horses.

It has Jeanne turn her to Cahusac, separated from her by an empty seat.

He slouches in his chair in a crooked half turn that pushes his left shoulder into the back and keeps his right away from it. His expression is far too bored for someone who is still agitated by the fact that a few farmers tried to go up against Inquisition soldiers out to ‘steal their kill.’

He looks like a man who has heard that tale too often to really care anymore, only annoyed by the
fact that they actually attacked his packmate. And that alone is a sad testament to the state of France.

He shoves his hair out of his eyes with his left, an impatient gesture that becomes annoyed when it falls right back.

Jeanne would love to help him out and tie it back, maybe twist it into that bun he wears when he wants it out of the way and that highlights the sharp angles of his face so perfectly…

Sadly, his hair is probably the one thing she isn’t allowed to touch even when he is awake, as Bernajoux had explained to her with a patient smile and steel in his eyes, the intricacies of their sense of smell and the things that set them off as foreign to her as menstruation is to a man.

“She is recuperating at Berger’s house,” Bernajoux on the other side of the table picks up his tale. “A halfgrown pup. Fifteen. This is only her third heat…” he lets his gaze sweep around the table, lips pursed, lingering on each of them for a short moment. The skin around his eyes is tight, low humming anger simmering in the dark depths of his eyes.

“She says, she’s from Metz and someone abducted her,” His clipped words, cool and controlled, fury only apparent in the undertones, take a while to filter through. When they do, Jeanne’s turns to him, her brain failing to grasp for adequate words to say and Cahusac and Adèle seem no better off.

“All you will have to go and talk to her.” he adds. Maybe it is the fact that he had more time to come to grips with it. Maybe it is his more intellectual nature, that he can be so calm, whereas Boisrenard next to him seems to want to kill someone, anyone, with his eyes alone. “They brought her to a chateau and sold her off. There were others, but she escaped when her new ‘owner’—” His voice drops to a growl and Jeanne can see Boisrenard’s fingers still and his eyes sweep to Cahusac.

It’s the only warning she gets, before she is shocked out of her seat by a violent bang as Cahusac’s hand slams into the table with a painful yell.

“THOSE ANIMALS!” Jeanne is gone from the table, driven by sheer instinct in the fraction of a second. She doesn’t actually run, she jumps - and could never remember how - around her chair and retreats into a corner.

There is not one second she actually expects to come to harm, but her hindbrain doesn’t care. It’s simple self-preservation that has her get out of the way of an Alpha that looks that close to a rage.

Boisrenard is angry, his fingers moving in very precise motions over his mate’s skin, but never losing the contact. Bernajoux’s eyes practically glow with fury, the whites stark in his dark face, the muscles in his jaw working tirelessly.

Adèle in contrast looks, while angry, surprisingly calm, hands resting openly on the table in a gesture, Jeanne needs a moment to recognize as deliberately unthreatening, though the set of her shoulders denotes her readiness to spring into action at the slightest necessity.

It’s Cahusac, though….

The fingernails of his left hand, firmly planted on the table where it takes his weight as he leans forward, curl slowly inward, accompanied by the gnashing of his teeth.

He leaves shallow furrows in the wood.

Jeanne notices how his shoulders hunch in, the right quivering visibly.
He gathers control… she hopes he is gathering control.

Because if he is gathering strength…

His head drops forward, lips opened as he gulps in air with deep, tightly controlled draughts. Eyes tightly screwed shut, his face has twisted into the picture of a battlefield, reason warring with far too much emotion.

She wants to reach out, wants to touch his shoulder and catch his train of thought, turn it away from the abyss he’s tumbling into…

Even if it’s the last thing she should do, her mind only recognizes that he is hurting and this time, now and not falling alongside him, she does not overpower her natural instincts. If they are free to run their course, she is always drawn to help.

Though common sense still has her stay where she is.

All of them seem to count down the heartbeats until Cahusac’s eyes open and his fingers still their relentless motion. Outwardly, he seems no fraction calmer, but he manages to slowly lift his head and lock his gaze on Bernajoux’s.

“Sit! Down!” the black Alpha says, voice low and tight, a leash that needs no volume, no violent ripping to hold someone. His right hand rests on the table, palm down, by all intents and purposes a gesture of non-violence, but nothing about the Alpha is non-violent at that moment. He bleeds dominance. A show of power that has no need to physically subdue anyone.

Now with the masks they wear in their daily lives all but fallen away and their natural personalities shining through, Jeanne can’t help but admire the display.

She knows Anne, she knows old Bernat, the city guard and George, the tavern owner, she has briefly met a handful other Alphas in the last six years working as a midwife.

She thought, she knew what dealing with Alphas looked like.

At that moment as Cahusac locks eyes with Bernajoux, challenging him to do whatever he does to subdue another with the thunderstorm force of his personality, Jeanne understands how wrong she was.

And she shouldn’t find that as exhilarating as she does.

“Sit.” Bernajoux’s voice echoes through the room, the volume still so civil and wrapped in a calm veneer, silk over steel, that every hair on Jeanne’s body rises.

Slowly, gaze never wavering, Cahusac moves back into his seat, hand uncurling, bit by bit until it rests flat on the table, a perfect copy of Bernajoux’s.

None of them move, not until Cahusac’s lashes slowly and very deliberately lower over his eyes and his head tilts with careful intent, presenting his throat.
His lips shimmer in the candlelight of the early evening, sweat dots his forehead, the tendons in his neck stand out in tension, every conflicting scrap of emotion playing clearly over his face.

Jeanne’s fingers curl, almost reach out, before they clench into a fist.

If she ever gets her hands on whoever did that to him….

Cahusac should be wild, he should be free to do what he was born to do… hunt, live, protect people, on his own terms, not others. He shouldn’t be carrying that kind of scars. He shouldn’t have to deal with children who are barely older than Simon…

But hadn’t he been barely older than Simon…? How old exactly had he been when he had killed a man who “deserved it”…?

Jeanne draws a sharp breath and closes her eyes.

She needs to imagine the sound of a human head hitting wood, that soft thud, maybe with a little scratch as a vertebra hits the table top, just to not accidentally do something she knows she will regret later.

All of them are looking at her, when she opens her eyes again.

There is sympathy on Adèle’s face, a silent warning on Bernajoux’s, Boisrenard looks studiously neutral and Cahusac… guilty, worried, apologetic.

Jeanne tilts her head and raises an eyebrow.

“What?”

The anger has not abated, it has retreated into the dark abyss where it lies, waiting for an opportunity to break free and hurt those who want to hurt what’s hers. None of them are in this room at this moment though, so she attempts a smile.

“Scared?” It’s Bernajoux, and he, too, barely tethers above the abyss of his own fury. Contrary to her, he does have a potential target. She is far from being forgiven yet.

“Cautious,” Jeanne states, as matter of fact as she can manage. There is too much emotion in this room already. “I am the most fragile here.”

Walking back to the table she touches her fingers softly to Cahusac’s shoulder as she passes him, her reward a surprised, grateful smile that has her heart dance.

It makes even Bernajoux and Boisrenard bearable who both watch her with narrowed eyes, as if they don’t trust the niceties.

In her mind a head bounces off a tabletop like a ball.

“Bernajoux, I think you wanted to continue.” even to her ears the words sound contrived. “Does she need medical attention?”

The glance Bernajoux shares with his mate before he shakes his head in her direction doesn’t elude her, trust still, and perhaps forever, the most precious thing in a room between them all. That doesn’t
stop her from stretching her leg, resting the side of her foot ever so gently against Cahusac’s. Boisrenard and Bernajoux have each other. Adèle isn’t truly fazed by this conversation and Cahusac has a right to not face it alone.

His lips curl, barely visible, and his shoulders relax only a small fraction, but they do.

Bernajoux waits almost a minute, before he picks up the thread of conversation, eyes steadfastly resting on Cahusac, though Jeanne does not miss the way Boisrenard’s hand curls around his mate’s neck, and with good reason probably.

“She doesn’t know where they brought her, but we need to find it.” He scoffs. “I hope her ‘owner’ is too scared of the consequences to run back and confess that he lost her.”

Adèle nods and rubs a hand over her face.

“I know what to do, Bernajoux!” As Adèle snaps Bernajoux leans back, hands raised and nods.

“I apologize,” he says and their eyes meet in a long established ritual of mutual concessions.

“I will come back to you as soon, as I know anything,” Adèle nods, her voice regal, the tone not brooking doubt, “You inform Armand and Jussac.”

“Armand?” Jeanne asks, before she thinks better of it and four heads turn in her direction with barely veiled incredulity.

It’s Boisrenard who has pity on her, as usual.

“The Cardinal.”

“Yes… she murmurs, because of course, he has a first name. One is not born with Cardinal Richelieu as title. Of course the Alphas around her know that first name. Of course they use it.


“Where you are right now.”

Jeanne looks up and stares at him.

That is new. That is shockingly new and he knows it, judging by the smug expression that softens the still jagged edges of his behaviour.

She hasn’t asked about it yet, had not really cared about the ‘where’ so much as she had cared for the fact that it was safe.

“Richelieu…” her lips form around the sounds and it sounds foreign.

It sounds like death and fear, like blood and bodies mutilated.

Blood red, the bloody Cardinal.
Blood red was an Alpha’s color, she hears Boisrenard say in her mind and her eyes snap to him, now again rubbing ointment with slow, calming motion into Bernajoux’s shoulder, though his gaze, and his smirk rest on her.

In the background she hears Adèle.

“Great. She has no idea where she is, does she?” Followed by “Why didn’t you tell her? Did you tell her anything?”

“Where am I?” Jeanne asks Cahusac, more in confusion about Adèle’s tone than real fear or anger.

His fingers, broad, callused fingertips, warm, as she doesn’t remember them, gather her hands in his bigger one and hold them there.

“We didn’t want her to murder us in our sleep,” Boisrenard murmurs, only half mocking, in the background and the thought that they think she is capable of that is hilarious and slightly terrifying, until she thinks of Cahusac and remembers what she did.

“Are you going to faint Jeanne?” the fondness in Cahusac’s voice wraps around her senses, the bright sparkle in his eyes, framed by blackest lashes and sun-kissed skin, drawing her in. Still, she hears the tease and her lips twitch.

“Do you have the impression I am the fainting type?”

“No.”

“Then say it.”

It must be bad if they act like this. It can’t be bad for her, if Cahusac treats her like this. She isn’t scared. She knows what she didn’t before.

Cahusac will not hurt her. Neither will Boisrenard, probably. She is not so sure about Bernajoux, who always seems one mistake away from judging her insufficient. She thinks she can be reasonably sure with Adèle, unless someone orders her to kill her.

“The hunting grounds, mon coeur.” He leans in, thumb caressing over the back of her hand, but his lips, they are pulled into a willful smirk, all exaggeration and showmanship and gentle provocation.

Oh yes, it’s bad, though his use of the endearment almost distracts her from it.

It’s bad, but it isn’t.

If she looked around this table now, she sees the lieutenants of the Red Guard, Boisrenard still in the black and red of the uniform, looking at her.

Officers of the personal guard of the monster, the zealot, that heads the Inquisition in France. The man that is said to have murdered his own brother at this very place.

Hell on earth only ever whispered about among throwbacks, the hushed tones infused with terror.

Knowing the ruse doesn’t take the fear out of the words, it doesn’t take the terrifying reality of the Inquisition out of the name.

Blood red.

It adds something though. Pride. The knowledge of truth she refuses to shy away from.
She smiles. “Are you trying to provoke me, dear Gascon boy from a Gascon farm?”

A surprised laugh is startled out of him, a blazing moment of dazzling levity.

“I don’t think that would work, Mademoiselle Durand.”

Jeanne wants to reach out and bless the laugh lines in his face with her fingertips, willing them to forever be there, forever wrinkle the corners of his eyes like the rays of the sun. She wants him looking healthy and strong and whole and unbroken and not torn apart.

His laughter would be so much less beautiful without the knowledge of how he looked at his worst. She would give it up at a moment’s notice.

“No, it wouldn’t. Boisrenard spoiled that for you, sorry. Someone actually does tell me the things I should be knowing.”

As Cahusac’s gaze flicks to the side, seeking his packmate, the shadow of his rage and whatever had caused it has finally passed. She wants to laugh at the face he makes at the other Alpha, so similar to Etienne, the only thing missing is his tongue stuck out.

She tries not to think of the sound of a head hitting a table top and the darkness behind all their lives. She tries not to think of the deep well of fury that had seethes in Bernajoux, the knowledge why he might have reason to hate people being bought.

For now it’s past them.

For now they all survived.

“What?!” Boisrenard’s voice breaks through her thoughts, an indignant cry. “Be nice to her, she has a red haired Alpha pup!”

Even Adèle laughs as Bernajoux grabs his mate in an unusual display of affection and pulls him onto his lap to shut him up.

***

Jeanne had never thought she would roll into Paris in a closed coach with velvet curtains one day. They had left as soon as possible, packing her and the children into one of Richelieu’s coaches - Richelieu’s! - to bring them to Paris under the pretense of escorting one of his mistresses.

At which point everybody had taken jabs at Adèle, who obviously had landed with the Resistance after she had tried to become Richelieu’s mistress. Speak of insane Alphas. Some things really only the young and stupid can come up with.

Both Bernajoux and Cahusac had insisted on riding. With Bernajoux Jeanne even believed his ability to do so, but Cahusac was not deterred.

He wanted to ride. His flaming red war horse. One armed.

There came a point when Jeanne had just given up and sunk into the luxurious cushion after hugging Adèle goodbye, wishing her luck and a safe journey.
At least Boisrenard had promised to have an eye on him.

Paris is an insane conglomerate of smell and voices and impressions, made only worse by the fact that they must stay hidden behind the curtains, unable to put visuals to the sounds, or in Simon’s case, the smells.

It is a myriad of disconnected impressions, fractured yells, discussions, laughter, a cacophony of sound, unbalanced without the according visuals.

While that may entice someone who still expects the best to happen or bore someone used to it, it sets her on edge and it become an ever increasing problem for Simon with every minute that passes.

Maybe it were less bad, less horrifying, if the endless mumbles didn’t sound like the disconnected whispers of a Latin prayer. Too low to understand, too loud to ignore.

As the sound of the coach’s wheels finally echoes back from enclosed walls and the voices die down, Simon is clinging to her arm, face buried against her neck with his slim shoulders heaving under the force of panicked sobs. Etienne has climbed into her lap, throwing his arms around the Odem he barely knows, but to whose distress he still responds with unfailing instinct.

The door opens and Bernajoux’s face appears, his eyes sweeping through the coach with open concern in the dark planes of his face.

He takes one look at Simon’s state and spits out a curse that would do Michel proud.

“C’mon, chiot.” he murmurs, climbing inside to gather the the slight Omega into his arms with utmost care.

Simon needs a moment to let go of her, his arms like vices around her neck.

It’s Etienne that pushes at him, mumbling “Go, is Eme Benju. Go, Simi” and Simon turns into the big Alpha’s chest with a desperate sound.

The Alpha waits a heartbeat longer, waits for her strained nod, before he carries him outside into the beautiful September sunshine that peeks lowly over the high walls around them.

Jeanne sinks back into the cushions with a sigh, closing her eyes as she pulls Etienne, confuse, irritated little Etienne against her. “Well done,” she murmurs, brushing her fingers through his fiery hair. “‘e was scared…” Etienne shoves his head under her chin, clutching at her sides with tiny hands and a brutal grip. “‘m nah scared!” He states, while Jeanne reaching down to pry his fingers of her.

She is used to the bruises, so far in vain trying to get him to control his strength. Not just for the sake of passing, but for the sake of the poor people he meets.
“I know you’re not scared Etienne, but don’t clutch!” she hisses and Etienne jerks his arms away with a guilty expression.

Boisernard’s body blocks the light, watching them with an absent minded smile. “Simon’s good. Let me take the demon pup.”

She turns her head, smiling at the Alpha who has taken to Etienne with such fervor. Her Aleph doesn’t care much either way, he is just happy to have non-breakable playmates. The fact that Boisrenard actually loves to play with him is only the icing on the cake.

Boisrenard laughs as their eyes meet, his hands moving in grabby motions until she hands Etienne over.

“Take a minute. We won’t bite the babies, promise.” Etienne on Boisrenard’s arm nods fervently at the older Alpha’s words and adds “Don’t bite.”

Jeanne sends them off with a wave of her hand and curls in, staring at the roof of the coach with a smile.

There are times when she isn’t sure, they will get somewhere, especially with Bernajoux. And who could begrudge them, they saw the sorry state Cahusac was in and albeit she didn’t shoot him, he got shot for her and her siblings and she thanked him by driving him out of his mind. It’s almost a relief to know that Bernajoux is not forgiving her that easily. The warm way Boisrenard acts towards her, the thinly veiled flirtations that Cahusac has been picking up again…

Guilt is nothing rational. The feeling of guilt is rarely rooted in the actual fact of guilt. Those who are guilty feel it far too rarely, instead they feel justified, like the Inquisitor of Lyon, Beaumont. She, on the other hand, while she might have had good reason to do, what she did….

But never, under any circumstances would they do anything but their best to the pups.

The first thing they had done, before packing, before readying the coach, was to formally introduce themselves to let Jeanne's siblings know they were safe, before they dragged them away from yet another refuge.

Bernajoux had wrapped an arm around Simon’s shoulder - to let him get a reading on his scent - and Boisrenard had bent down to Etienne, bringing them face to face. He hadn't laughed at her baby Aleph’s fiercely protective anger, he just reached out and brushes his finger through Etienne’s hair with obvious delight and picked him up to twirl him upside down, to Jeanne's Aleph’s obvious delight.

"Their scents are so much alike, it won’t matter who lets whom imprint on his." Cahusac had commented for her, translating an aspect of throwback biology the actual practical application of which still befuddled her and probably forever would.

"It sometimes happens with mates. So, if they know the scent of one, to them the other is safe as well."

And at that moment, her amusement had ended.

“I can see your face cloud up enough to chase away the sun on a day as beautiful as this, Mademoiselle.” Cahusac delivers the line, well thought out in advance probably, with admirable levity, but Jeanne can hear the strain of pain underneath. She knows how it sounds. “I almost find
myself offended by that.”

“You are a nuisance Cahusac, go away,” Jeanne snarls, not entirely serious. A fact knows to him, since her words are met with a chuckle.

“May I escort you onto the premises, Mademoiselle?,” he asks, making her finally turn her head.

Knowing Cahusac, his pain is obvious, but a casual observer would never find anything but a stern Red Guard, armed to his teeth and willing to kill. The absolute best, the Inquisition has to offer. Devout and violent.

The black and red coat hides the injury and the man under the uniform.

Jeanne sees.

A man who, despite the fact that he casually has to lean against the frame of the coach door, reaches out his left with a smile on his lips, eyes sparkling with mischief as his fingers curl slowly, enticing her to come closer.

She knows she should resist, be sensible.

Instead she lets the smile bloom, just once giving in to what she wants. What bad can it do? He had held her hand just fine at the lodge.

She should have asked what bad can he do, when given the opportunity instead.

As soon as she sets foot on the first step, Cahusac, her hand still firmly in his, tugs her forward.

For one terrifying moment as she loses her balance and tips forward, she is weightless.

Jeanne tries to reach back, to find hold on the door and then Cahusac steps back and she falls with a shriek that seamlessly flows into a curse as his arm wraps around her middle and catches her.

It is laughter and the scent of dark firs that envelopes her. It is his warmth that soothes her wildly galloping heartbeat.

“Are you…?” she yells and instead of an response his arms tightens and crushed her, but with infinite gentleness against his chest. “…insane?!” Jeanne mumbles into his coat instead, poking his stomach through the protective leather doublet, if only to stop his subdued laughter.

“Sorry,” he chuckles into her ear.

“No, you’re not,” she snarls and it only makes him laugh harder.

For one wild moment the urge to slap him is overwhelming. Then he lets her go.

Just drops his arm away and steps back, a smile still apparent on his lips, but more subdued now.

“I just wanted to welcome you personally on Paris’ soil, Mademoiselle.”

He laughs as she slaps his good arm, carefree and so incredibly stupid.
Huge Bernajoux, sitting on a rough hewn wooden bench, rocking her little Odem who looks like a little child in his arms, with Boisrenard next to him way too successfully distracting Etienne, who already seems to have forgotten his distress, should look strange.

It doesn’t. It’s painfully beautiful.

Bernajoux whispers, body curled protectively over Simon’s, into the pup’s ear, one of his hands brushing gently through the soft black strands of his hair. Leaning back only a fraction to catch a glimpse of the Simon’s face, before he wraps around him again with a smile.

He looks up, yes assessing her state, as she walks over.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve…” she opens, but Bernajoux places a finger against his lips with a gentle shake of his head.

“It’s ok. Take Etienne and let Boisrenard unharness the horses and sit with me, will you?”

Jeanne has never heard Bernajoux talk that softly, that gently, and surely not to her of all people.

Maybe it’s that what has her take Etienne who puts up only a tired token protest and sit next to the Alpha, smiling up to Boisrenard as he leaves with a last brush of his hand over her shoulder.

Simon blinks at her with owlish eyes from the safety of Bernajoux’s embrace and she reaches out one finger to caress over his child soft cheek.

Etienne’s little finger curl into Cahusac’s coat she is wearing, much warmer than her own.

Maybe that is why she hasn’t handed it back yet. He doesn’t need it and the autumn air gets chilly fast. It smells like him, the small, treacherous voice in the back of her head whispers of what could be, if only…

Bernajoux’s watches her, his fingers slowly combing through her Odem’s hair, face unreadable in its non-descript kindness.

“I’m sorry, I needed a moment. It won’t…” she attempts again.

“Don’t!” he interjects sharply. “First rule in this house.” He looks up, past the small courtyard where Boisrenard just cusses out Cahusac to get him to sit down, past the first floor run around balcony, past the dark thatched roof and into the sunny sky, before his gaze returns to her, softer than usual, but nevertheless deadly serious.

“Honesty. You don’t lie about your wellbeing to us. If you need a break, you take it. If you need help, you tell us. And in return you can actually expect honest answers about their injuries.”

“Thiers? Not yours?”

“Ask Boisrenard about mine. He’ll know.” And his lips pull into a smile that has one bloom on her as well, albeit fragile.

“Second rule. If you need help, accept it without fuss. You can thank Cahusac for that one.” His gaze finds Simon, whose head is securely tucked under the big Alpha’s chin, fragile, so easily breakable, but for now restful in the safety of this embrace. “That goes for you, too, petit chiot.” Jeanne doesn’t think her Odem will react, but he nods, pliant as the well-behaved puppy that he is.

Bernajoux’s big arms change position around Simon’s much smaller body, her Odem slender, even
for an Omega, and looks at Jeanne, eyes full of expectation until she nods, deciding she gives away exactly nothing by doing so.

He gives her a satisfied nod and gets up, smiling, lifting Simon with no effort at all.

“Come then. Before the others burst from excitement.” he says and turns, leaving Jeanne and an exhausted Etienne behind to follow as he walks over to his packmates, amusement on his face.

“Hey, I found a stray kitten. Where’s the other stray kitten? We can put them together!”

***

That night finds her putting on tea in the kitchen, Boisrenard at the table staring at her with bleary eyes and a mix of pity and resentment on his face, as low male voices filter down the hallway from Cahusac’s bedroom.

A sound of metal on stone pierces Jeanne’s thoughts and she needs a moment to notice that it’s her, clanking the spoon against the oven in a furious rhythm.

“He shouldn’t have done it… he knew… “ She breaks off at Boisrenard’s annoyed: “Yeah… I know…”

He hadn’t even been back an hour from returning the coach to the Palais Cardinal - The Palais Cardinal - reporting himself and Bernajoux back for duty, before Cahusac’s blood curdling scream had torn them all from sleep.

Jeanne had almost forgotten, had almost given in to the hope that the way he had hugged her would have no consequences.

Their eyes meet and Boisrenard shrugs and just keeps on petting the cat curled around his shoulders like a stole with absentminded motions.

“He can’t help it. He tried to cheer you up and if that annoys you…”

“Oh, SHUT UP, you moron!”

She has the spoon raised to throw it, only to pull back in the last second and turn to the window that overlooks the street below.

Boisrenard’s follows her with his gaze, lips pursed in unimpressed chagrin.

“Are you annoyed because this is inconvenient or because…”

“He hurts!” She hisses, cutting of the yell at the last second. “He hurts, because he was stupid! I would have been fine, there was no reason for him to….”

“I’m not sure ye would’ve been, Squirrel, not in the long run, but that’s neither here nor there. Cahusac isn’t the kind of person to not be stupid when it’s about others. Anger though, is justified. Let’s be angry together,” Boisrenard comments, his voice softening.

There is nothing left for her to respond to that, so the night finds them sitting together, the cat finally deciding to defy the law of the house to settle on the table between them. Each of them have a cup of lemon balm tea and a hand curled in the fluffy fur of the regal creature.
At some point Bernajoux wanders in, only in his small clothes and stops short as he sees her. He has already almost turned to walk out again before he considers, shakes his head and accepts her pointer to the teapot with a nod.

"I hope he grows out of that," Bernajoux remarks after a few minutes.

“There are people who just don’t have nightmares. Who go through hell and don’t find themselves with a piece of it lodged in their hearts.” He rubs a hand over his eyes with a deep sigh. “And then there is Cahusac….”

Boisrenard next to him pushes his cup to the side to cross his arms on the table and drops his head on them. Bernajoux reaches out and Boisrenard smiles happily as his mate’s hand lands on his head with a sure touch.

“How bad of a sleeper is he exactly?” Jeanne inquires. It is pure medical curiosity that has her ask. It is not that faint spark of ill-considered hope that tells her maybe… maybe this will just be…. “He slept like a stone when we were on the road…”

Bernajoux snorts derisively.

“He spent years alone in the streets of a seaport city, with no backup and everybody out to get him. Do you know what happens to pretty pups like him?” Bernajoux’s voice carries an unmistakable growl that has Jeanne shudder and the next moment it’s gone, strangled like so much of his personality. “He sleeps like a stone when he feels safe. when he doesn’t….”

Their eyes meet and his voice breaks off, the knowing click of his tongue an accusation all on its own.

Jeanne’s chest expands with her next breath, as deep as she can take it and she plants her eyes firmly on his, shoulders squared, chin up.

“I am not going to live this down, am I?”

This time it’s Boisrenard who snorts, his eyes firmly closed, a heartfelt smile on his lips, but still so judgemental of her.

“Let me put it this way, “ Bernajoux opens. “If you take him to your bed…” and just like this the conversation has left known territory.

Jeanne’s head heats up like an overripe apple and though the question of flight or bravado is solved in favor of bravado, she has to dig her teeth into her lower lip to stop the need to duck. Bernajoux stops, clears his throat and controls his twitching mouth into stern admonishment. “if…not when…you do it, without considering the consequences of your actions, if you hurt him like this ever again, I promise you…” the false sweetness that barely covers the gravel in his voice sounds like a death threat. “... I will skin you alive and dump you into the Seine.”

It is a death threat and just like that the embarrassment gives way to dread as Jeanne feels her skin blanche. Her feet prick in an unmistakable need to flee, even as the smile on Bernajoux’s face belie his words.

“I am pretty sure, you are not that dumb.” Bernajoux adds as his eyes meet hers, the violent protectiveness in their depths a warning in itself.

“Cahusac might be, though.” mumbles Boisrenard, slowly bending his head to get his mate to pet him. “He is... evidently.”
Jeanne’s heartbeat slows. They show no intent to attack her or to even move. Bernajoux takes a sip of his tea, going so far to close his eyes with a blissful expression and opening them again with a small smile for her.

“Jeanne will be intelligent for them both then and take proper care and precautions. Right Jeanne?”

She can’t help the distinct feeling that the dark Alpha is joking at her expense, a cruel punishment for her trespasses. No, she will not live that down for quite a while yet.

And she has no doubt, however, that he would carry out his threat. But since she doesn’t plan on repeating her actions…

Boisrenard on her right mumbles sleepy into his arm. “We’d ‘ave to explain to Jussac and destroy his blissful ignorance.” He snorts without heat and adds after a short pause: “Good thing he’s not overprotective of the little one.”

“I swear to God, Cahusac …” Bernajoux sighs and hides his face behind his mug of tea.

“Yeah.” Boisrenard answers in long established synchronicity.

Bernajoux nods and his glance wanders to her.

“I sometimes dunno if he’s and idiot or insane…”

Jeanne keeps her fingers closed tightly around her mug, gaze following the liquid as it slowly, in the speed of her heartbeat swirls inside, as she answers

“Probably a bit of both, no idea where he picked that up though…”

***

They all prove to be more, and at the same time less, than she expected.

From afar “Resistance” sounds adventurous, dangerous, and it sure is. But behind that are people, flawed, normal, and she has trouble to see them as hardened soldiers sometimes.

Even Bernajoux, when he is not threatening her, is easy going, warm, polite, if not always friendly, and he spoils her siblings with a vengeance.

They all do.

Drawing materials for Simon appear, a ball for Etienne. Felix seems to take semi-permanent residence in their room and Simon’s orbit.

Jeanne clears out a cupboard to stow away thread and needle, a bottle of cheap red wine and herbs that somehow find their way into her possession, though she couldn't explain how.

She watches Boisrenard work Cahusac’s shoulder through the exercises to keep it mobile. She listens to Cahusac idling his time away trying to teach Simon Latin or Boisrenard falling in love with Etienne a bit more every day.

She waits with a can of tea when Bernajoux comes in from duty in the early hours of the morning,
purportedly to grab one of the little apple tarts he always brings with him. He doesn’t comment on her sleepless face and sits with her in amicable silence or telling a meaningless story in his deep voice until Etienne toddles into the kitchen, a stuffed rabbit - gift from Boisrenard - in his arm.

All of that makes it easy.

It makes it easy to overlook the awkward avoidance dance she and Cahusac regularly perform, both weirdly gravitating towards each other, all the while being pushed apart by necessity.

It doesn’t help with the yelling they get into when he insists on going out.

Cahusac accuses her of being overprotective,

Jeanne calls him stupid.

It’s Simon that suggests they go together and Cahusac perhaps show them a bit of the city, if it’s safe, please?

It’s guilt that has them both agree.

It becomes a habit.

He shows them the Palais Cardinal from a safe outside distance, the bridges, the inner city, all the palaces and markets, the palaces and noble houses. She has them in stitches when she one night suddenly realises they have probably seen the king.

After that everything somehow slots into place though nothing has actually changed. His room smells of burned sage, she avoids physical contact and they finally all sit down and concoct a false background for all of them.

And suddenly she finds herself related to Boisrenard who is far too delighted to be able to call Etienne his alphew. He doesn’t see the way Bernajoux averts his eyes.

***

“Oh look… I’m good,” Cahusac croons to her a week later, batit long lashes in an expression that is far too innocent to be inconspicuous.

“I don’t black out and it’s just a tavern, how bad can it possibly be?”

Bernajoux and Boisrenard in the background are looking very neutral, or at least Bernajoux is, Boisrenard rather looks like an overeager puppy.

They promise they’ll watch out for him and, honestly, it’s rather a courtesy to her than a necessity or any kind of power that she wields, that they let her have an opinion at all.

But it’s nice that they ask, though Jeanne should have known that with three Alphas nothing is ever that easy.
“Jeanne!” It’s Bernajoux’s voice that wakes her, his night dark form framed by the golden glow of the door.

Outside her window nothing stirs, no light, no sounds, not even the early morning carts that ferry goods to the bakers.

Which means it’s not time to get up.

Which means something is wrong.

“Oh, mon dieu!” She throws back the blanket and reaches for her housecoat.

“Who?” She walks past him and towards the kitchen.

There are no rugs that could get bled on, so that’s where they will be.

“Boisrenard,” he says as he catches up on her, his voice tight with worry and anger.

Jeane stops and looks him over. Split lip, a gash above his eye that covers half his face in blood, though it blends into his dark skin to be barely visible in candle light. That eye will swell and he needs to get something cold on it as soon as possible.

She nods and points down to the well, leaving him behind to get water.

Boisrenard and Cahusac both sit at the kitchen table, a bloody dishcloth wrapped around Boisrenard’s lower left arm.

Cahusac, next to him has has his right hand placed on the table, lower arm resting on the wood to take strain off the shoulder, hand curled into Boisrenard’s. Both of which she approves of.

And then she sees the cut high in his cheekbone, notices how pale he is.

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“Are you out of your minds?! Both of you?” She does not yell, yet.

Cahusac releases a breath and slowly and carefully drops his head onto the table, while Boisrenard just winces.

“What is wrong with you? Cahusac almost died and the first thing you do is to drag him and his broken shoulder into a fight?” It’s hard to keep her voice level, it’s even harder to not slam her hands on the table to get their absolute undivided intention.

As Cahusac looks up, lips drawn into an unhappy line and opens his mouth with

“It’s not their fau….”

“ARE YOU INSANE?!” Jeanne yells, before she gets a grip and forces her voice to lower. “Do you want to die? Is that it?”

“It’s not…” Boisrenard starts and she levels her glare on him. He is not deterred, though.

“It’s not his fault.” He even looks repentant, which, with Boisrenard is a feat. “I lost my temper.” He shrugs and winces again when the movement pulls at the wound. Or, more likely, the cloth tacked on by dried blood.
Her eyes land on Cahusac and he nods. “I’m good. Bit of pain and the face, but I’ve done worse damage with worse injuries.”

“You have?” she asks, calmed by the fact that he sounds like himself. Self-deprecating, proud, brave and clear of mind.

“How many times have you almost died already?” This makes him laugh very carefully as she sits to slowly pull back the cloth.

“What happened?” Outside the door slams shut and Bernajoux’s heavy steps thunder up the stairs. Boisrenard hisses lowly as the long cut down his arm is revealed, nothing major but deep and in need of stitches.

“They taunted us,” he murmurs, looking up at her with serious eyes and murder in their depths, a silent conversation meant only for her, as if he knew something the others didn’t or she did not yet. “They talked shit about him.” His head indicates Cahusac. “How he got a booboo while guarding the flowers in the Palais Cardinal.”

Everything in Jeanne stills, her fingertips that were gently probing the skin around the wound settle softly on his arm and she reciprocates his look.

“What?” she asks and Cahusac in the background curses.

“NO!” yells Bernajoux from the doorway and it’s as if they all just assume that Boisrenard will stop talking and Jeanne stop listening.

Instead he smiles. “Musketeers.”

“Oh dammit, Jacques!”

He already sets out to continue when they all are disrupted by a small voice from behind the black Alpha and a shockingly insecure “Mama?”

Etienne has one hand wrapped around Simon’s and lurks around Bernajoux’s legs. Simon, silent, just looks at them with old, old eyes.

In the end Etienne curls up on Cahusac’s lap, falling asleep within seconds of giving a ‘get better’ kiss to his cheek.

Simon holds Boisrenard’s hand while Jeanne stitches the wound and listens to the Alpha’s convincing tale of how getting into trouble is his job, at least Jeanne can stitch and make it look good. Simon, barely audible, requests a flower on Boisrenard’s arm and she sees how the Alpha is tempted to grant her Odem’s wish. So is she.

Bernajoux spoils it as he sets a can of tea on the table, with a lot of milk and a bottle of wine for the grown-ups.

So, Boisrenard doesn’t get his flower, Etienne doesn’t run around like a pocket sized madman for the rest of the night, Simon doesn’t panic and all her Alphas end up in their respective beds to rest.

She says goodnight to Cahusac at the door to his rooms.

“Are you going to do something stupid?” he asks and she laughs softly, hitching Etienne higher on
her arm.

“What, like trying to go against a bunch of Musketeers?” she retorts and reaches out to touch her fingertips to his cheek, only to check on the cut, of course. “Nah, I’m not crazy. Though next time….”

Their eyes meet and she wants to drown in the way his sparkle with humor.

“Yes, Mademoiselle Durand, comme il vous plaira. We will be more careful. I promise.” Cahusac’s lips pull into the smile Jeanne first saw that night they freed Simon, outside her door in Lyon. Cahusac had just told her his name and promised to bring them to safety. She has seen it far too rarely since. “In the meantime… try not to kill anyone,” he says and turns to go.

Jeanne has never been inside these rooms, her scent safe only as long as he is awake.

“Good night, Alex.”

“Good night, Jeanne.”

She falls asleep with a smile that almost covers the low burning anger in her belly.

***

Paris in the morning, when the air is cool and the ever present stench has not yet risen, is the most beautiful.

The last wisps of mist hang low in the endless labyrinth of narrow alleys. A woman could get lost in those so easily. A woman could be lost there with nobody the wiser.

Some might call her over cautious and mock her attempts to map first the bigger streets around the not quite so modest hotel the pack is living at, then the smaller ones connecting them.

It’s been a week and she knows her way from here to the Île, the Palais Cardinal, the Louvre, the Bastille - four of the corners of the inner city.

They may laugh at the way she sees these streets, how she catalogues their people, but she knows every crook and cranny in the alley behind the house in which the secret exit through the cellars leads.

She makes contact with the women in the market stalls, tells them her story to give it validity.

She asks them about their problems and dispenses advice under the hand, helping them with problems only women know.

She learns about them in return and all the things they see and hear.

Many might laugh about Jeanne’s futile endeavors.

She has three strong protectors for herself and her pups.

This is not a war. She needs not to fight.
They don’t know her.

Her daily absences don’t go unnoticed. Cahusac only looks up when she comes back from a solitary walk. A question about the state of the quarter, about how old Henry’s gout is coming along and a comment that she maybe want to help him with it, that’s all she gets from him. That and an ankle sheath with a slim knife, he handed her three days ago.

“Boisrenard will teach you,” he had said, far too close again, tempting her to shove him back and get him out of the immediate sphere of her scent.

“Until then: wait, ‘til they are close, but don’t let them get their hands on your neck before you use it.” For a moment the need to kiss him had been overwhelming, the wish to taste his lips again, to not jerk back before he comes too close. For a moment she wanted to thank him for being who he was by giving him a piece of herself.

His eyes had sparkled as they had rested on her face, the way he had wetted his lips a blatant invitation before a nod and a polite smile had shut him out and the anticipation on his face had faltered.

Still, the thought that he trusts her, lets her keep silent about his shared need to go out alone and unattended despite the injury that still very much cripples him.

She had promised then and there she wouldn’t needle him about it anymore.

She had let him go last night.

And someone had decided it was a great idea to taunt a severely injured man about his injury, to provoke him and his friends into a fight.

*Are you going to do something stupid*, Cahusac had asked.

“No, of course not.” Jeanne now whispers into the cold autumn touched air before her.

*Will you let it rest?*, she asks herself and smiles.

Sophie who sells fruit and sweets on the market, smiles as Jeanne walks out of the alley next to her stall.

Jeanne inquires about her daughter’s breast feeding problems, about the latest rumours and leaves her half an hour later, armed her with a piece of sweet, sticky pastry, a street name and the knowledge that a public complaint to Captain Tréville would be well placed.

Jeanne loves being right with people.
Chapter Notes

This is a request:

I’m looking for songs that fit the world, so either These Three Remain or Ye Heirs of Glory. My writing playlist is woefully short.

Suggestions in the comments please or at Kat2107.tumblr.com

thank you :)

As an incentive: No chapter warnings. Yay?

“I would like to speak with Captain Tréville.”

The Musketeers sit over breakfast, some milling about with bowls of oatmeal, some sitting around a sturdy wooden table off to the side. In the background laughter and chatting sound from an open door deeper into the small courtyard of the hotel.

There is a boy of no more than sixteen in front of her. His pretty face is crowned by an unruly shock of thick, wavy brown hair that would make every woman hiss with envy and adorned by reserved yet pretty brown eyes. And he seems to actually want to decline her.

“Don’t,” she smiles. “this is going to go one of two ways. Either I talk to him or I let his men’s misconduct be known to the whole street.” Her smile widens as she slowly reaches out a hand, as if to straighten the scarf he wears.

“That is silk lined linen, is it not? Exceptionally fine cloth. Maybe you’d like to reveal the merchant? They’re usually so expensive, are they not?” Jeanne drops her hand when he takes a hasty step back. And while she is at it, she drops her smile all together.

“Captain Tréville. Now!”

Watching the boy hasten off, Jeanne allows herself a moment of self-satisfaction.

That was almost too easy.

Usually the threat of facing the King’s Musketeers might be enough to deter people and the thing the boy had relied on.

Well, being deterred by anything has never been Jeanne’s problem.

The Musketeers’ Captain can’t afford to not be informed of any misconduct. The misbehaviour of his men falls back on the King.

They also need to stop harassing her people. Or at least lay off Cahusac for a while.
It is a gamble.

One she had spent a sleepless night turning over and over in her head.

If she removed the throwback angle this was nothing but a spat between two of France’s elite regiments.

One associated with the King, the other with the First Minister.

And the only throwback angle that could be added with even the laxest standards was the fact that Cahusac had been injured while fulfilling his God given duty to France - hunting an escaped throwback.

That he had been, in an appalling event, attacked by the troops of the Archbishop of Lyon was an absolute outrage.

Sadly one difficult to publicly use against Marquemont. Church infighting left a bad impression and made people take notice. And while Jeanne hadn’t yet met Richelieu, she was sure that outside scrutiny was the last thing he wanted.

So, of course, this had not been a fight between two clergymen.

Bandits was the official communique. Protecting the citizens of France from bandits was as good and as broad an explanation as any.

Should someone have doubts and dig deeper, he’d find nothing but the terrible secret that the Archbishop of Lyon, Primate of the Gauls - that damn pisspot - had attacked the Inquisition over an adolescent Omega.

Absolutely scandalous.

Jeanne can't take the weight of their own people’s hatred off her Alphas.

They had chosen a life of service. A life given to the task of protecting those who couldn’t defend themselves. The had forfeited safety, freedom and the respect of the very people they risked their lives for.

And they must never change that.

Jeanne understood her privilege to know better. She understood her privilege to do something.

What she could give them, at least this once, was the reprimand of those who had wronged them. She was a Beta, safe and secure in the privilege of being the standard by which people were judged. And she was absolutely not above using that.

As if it wasn’t bad enough that the throwbacks hated the Red Guards, they had to endure public mockery of the injuries they sustained in service.

Cahusac had almost died. Cahusac had almost died defending a thirteen year old and a three year old and they had had the audacity to mock him for it!

It’s that thought that informs her expression as a man in his late twenties walks down the stairway.

His brown hair is cut military short, chin covered by well groomed stubble. He is good looking, his
face dominated by pair of remarkable blue eyes under nicely kept eyebrows, now drawn together in irritation.

“Captain Treville, good morning. I hope you are having a pleasant day so far.” She curtsies and that is all the courtesy he will get from her.

“Why am I having the feeling that is about to change, Mademoiselle…?”

“Madame. Boisrenard. I am widowed.”

Jeanne wishes for the ability to growl every time she has to squash that assumption.

Under his healthy suntan Treville blanches.

It’s nothing overly obvious, but Jeanne, still attuned to her surroundings, notices the changes.

He is staring at her, his bright eyes widening slightly as he stalks a step closer, something shimmering in their depths that becomes more pronounced with each heartbeat and that is, if she didn’t know it better, best described as dread. Before it’s squashed and nothing remains but polite interest.

This is not an inexperienced boy she can rein in with just a few choice words and the innate knowledge that she is superior to him, aided by the dominant behaviour she learned from raising a baby Alpha.

“Captain… I know-” The man’s eyes narrow, as he leans in. Far too close to be proper. Close enough to maybe catch her scent. Jeanne does not wear a scarf and it is on purpose.

There is no scent she has to hide and she is not ashamed to let people know.

To the contrary.

Another layer of security.

“No, you’re not,” he says and leans back again, his gaze still holding hers. A challenge.

A threat.

Jeanne is living with Bernajoux.

There are things that shock her. Men trying to scare her aren’t one of them.

The fact that he is sure in his statement though...

“Excuse me, Monsieur?” she protests.

He is testing her. He must be.

There is no way this man knows their story is a ruse. That story is three days old. Not enough time to corroborate. There has been no reason to corroborate it for anyone yet.

But something is afoot here and Jeanne is glad for the gentle weight of a knife along her ankle.

“You’re not his widow.” His left rests on his sword, ostensibly relaxed, as his eyes take her in, rake over her body in outright brazen fashion.

“What I am, Monsieur, is angry and you are not doing much to mollify that absolutely justified
anger.”

“I saw Boisrenard at court yesterday.” He smiles and it is cold. The expression of a man who knows how to kill; who has done so. “You are in no way his widow.” His voice, if it gets any colder, will have frost appear between them. “So, I ask you again. Who are you?”

Jeanne wants to sag with relief. Would, if weakness were not exactly what he was waiting for.

“Boisrenard is my brother-in-law and has kindly taken me in, and it’s on his behalf I am -”

“Boisrenard has no living relatives, as far as I know,” Treville cuts in sharply. His hand closes, lightly for now, around the handle of his weapon and Jeanne curses fate, curses the devil for bringing her face to face with the only man in the whole damn city who would make an issue of this.

“Which is, in an absolutely shocking twist, why I am a widow!” she cries and all around them silence settles as faces turn, only to turn away at once when Treville casts a glance over his shoulder.

“Of course, Madame Boisrenard. I apologize for the presumption,” he says, turning back to her, his eyes guarded and his lips set into a stern line. “Perhaps we should relocate to my offices.”

Jeanne forces her shoulders to settle, forces herself to nod politely.

“Of course, Captain. As you wish.”

He turns to go, shooting her a warning look, with his hand still resting on his sword.

***

Tréville’s office is small room behind thick walls. There is a simple bed behind a paravent, a sky-blue cloak draped over it, waiting to complete a formal uniform. A sturdy desk framed by cabinets faces the door and everyone who might enter and a second door on the opposing wall.

It is modest and practical and as soon as Tréville closes the door behind her the outside sounds die down completely.

They turn to each like two fighters with weapons drawn and somehow this is nothing like Jeanne had expected. The security that had led her here, the conviction that this was a safe and easy way to get the brutes to back off of her men, evaporates into thin air.

She can’t admit that she lied and go. More, if she did admit that, her identity and that of her family would be compromised.

Captain Tréville can’t know Boisrenard well enough to know if he truly has no family left in the coastal town he hailed from. So it’s a ruse.

A defensive provocation to get her to lay off her accusations perhaps?

His intentions will be revealed in time and until then it is up to her to not let him break her resolve.

“First of all, Captain, I want to apologize for disturbing you at this early hour. I figured the
unpleasant business of your men’s misconduct was best addressed before half the city was out on the streets to witness it,” she amends as way of a half-hearted apology.

“Very well then, Madame, state your case. I am listening,” Tréville says in a sharp tone. His distrust of her is obvious, at once negating any advantage she might have had as a harmless young woman.

He saunters past her, deeper into the room and towards his desk to lean against it. It forces her to turn to follow him and at the same time gives him a constant sightline to her as he walks.

Tréville’s eyes never leave her form, standing in the middle of his office like an unruly recruit.

So, he doubts her motives.

Funny how that goes, with those, for once, without any treacherous purpose. It’s just as well. The fact that she has an honest complaint gives her an additional level of security and one extremely difficult to pierce.

She is angry at him and by far not convinced that he didn’t spur his men on.

So they meet each others as equals. With equal tempers.

Likely, if she continues to employ an aggressive approach, he will respond in kind and they will be in a shouting match in the middle of the Musketeer garrison in less than five minutes.

As amusing as that would be, and getting into a battle of wills with a sharp minded individual usually is amusing, she has the pack’s safety to think of. The more of a fuss she causes - not the fuss that comes with a complaint of misconduct, but the kind that usually is generated around a woman not conforming to gender expectations - the more scrutiny they will be under.

While she is a Beta and can prove this beyond any doubt, the others aren’t.

Jeanne lowers her head in a deliberate show of compliance. When she looks ups, she straightens her shoulders, remembering how it had felt to see the cut on Cahusac’s face.

“I have a report to make, about gross misconduct by some of your men,” Jeanne opens and Tréville, until that point comfortably resting against his desk with his arms and feet crossed, straightens at her words.

“Misconduct?” Blazingly icy eyes narrow as he looks at her, lips pursed with doubt.

“Last night your men met three men in a tavern…three Red Guards,” she adds, fixing her eyes on him. “Now, even someone who has been in Paris as short a time as I, is aware of the intense rivalry that exists between the King’s Musketeers and the Cardinal’s Red Guard, Captain,” Jeanne states with calm voice.

“Misconduct?” Tréville in turn nods, encouraging her to go on, though his eyes stay cold.

“But still, it is abhorrent that members of one of France’s elite regiments would lower themselves to such a level that they taunt and shame a man ... A man who was severely wounded in service to his country and is far from fighting shape,” Jeanne’s voice rises with every word, until each vowel is pronounced with sharp cutting precision. “... publicly and in such a manner that he and his company have no choice but to fight to defend their honor, Captain.”
There should be blame laid on Boisrenard here, too, except, had she been there, she would have done exactly the same.

“I don’t care what you or your men think of the Red Guards, but that conduct is unbecoming and shameful!” Jeanne snaps and he flinches.

“Who?” Treville demands to know, his eyes two piercing shards of the froastiest glacier.

“Who? Who did it? Who did they libel? Does it matter? Does one man deserve that more than another?” she retorts, out of patience and out of understanding.

“Who?” Tréville repeats the question with a sharper undertone, his hands closing gently around the edge of his desk.

“I have no idea which of your men were involved. I am convinced, however, since it is your job, you will do just fine to find out,” Jeanne hisses. “And the man they slurred was Cahusac. Mocked him for ‘getting hurt guarding Richelieu’s flowerpots’ and dragged him into a fight.” Now she is yelling.

“That may mean nothing to you, but the man has a gunshot wound and a shattered shoulder that needs at least another month to heal. And I’d expect the modicum of respect from your men to not abuse that, so see to it that they don’t!” Jeanne does not take her eyes off him. She sees the flash of pain that crosses over his features, only a shadow and it’s gone in a blink, but she saw.

Tréville pushes away from his desk, crossing the room to the windows overlooking the courtyard. For a moment her annoyed breaths and his heavy footsteps are the only sounds in the room.

He clasps his hands behind his back in the manner of soldier, silent for almost a minute.

“I heard rumours he had been injured, but nothing about the severity….”

“He was fighting for his life for a whole week, Captain. And we count ourselves lucky, that he won.” Jeanne is not in the mood to be forgiving, she is not in the mood to be soft or lenient. She is in the mood to bleed someone.

Tréville swivels around, his lips set in a severe line and just stares at her, eyes narrowed, deep furrows carved between his immaculate eyebrows.

Jeanne pauses, before she continues with a smile, intended to leave bloody bruises. “I am pleased that the severity of the situation is not lost to you, Captain, but I didn’t think that you cared that much. Why... I am almost touch-”

Tréville’s hand shoots up, halting her words with a clear warning to not keep talking.

It’s as if he needs a moment to catch his breath. Which is ridiculous.

Even if he knows Cahusac beyond a passing acquaintance, and how likely is that for a soldiers and the commander of the King’s personal regiment, the reaction is out of proportion for anyone but a friend.

And friends didn't let anyone treat friends the way Treville's men had Cahusac last night.

Another possibility is that his men had not done this for the first time and there was more trouble brewing here for him than simply the King’s displeasure or public scorn.

Not that anything was simple about the King’s displeasure.
A terrifying thought.

But one that might come in handy.

Jeanne is not used to having to think about the King’s displeasure. The King’s!

But that doesn’t mean she’s above using it.

Or - her eyes find the coat again, noticing the beautiful sky-blue color.

An odd choice of color for a military regiment.

Just more secrets, more layers and smokescreens.

“He is better,” Jeanne amends, following an unspecified feeling of sympathy. "We don’t yet know how much use of his shoulder he will retain, but the doctor was hopeful,” she adds, as much to put him at ease as to convince herself.

Adèle thought it looked good and Jeanne is only too willing to defer to her in that regard.

Tréville doesn’t look at her as he returns to his desk and sits, his face closed off, pointing to the chair across.

Jeanne sits and watches him closely.

His hands, as he reaches into a wooden box on his desk and retrieves a small skeleton key, are almost unnaturally steady, the movements as he unlocks one of the doors on his side of the desk conscious and perfectly controlled. It’s only as he sets a bottle of wine on the table, that she recognizes it as the equivalent of a deliberately neutral expression.

Next to the bottle he places two glasses and only then looks up again, one eyebrow raised in invitation.

Jeanne declines with a shake of her head.

“I must admit,” she remarks instead. "I am a bit surprised that you actually care about the incident.” Jeanne leans back and watches him pour himself a healthy glass of dark red wine. The bottle then goes back into the compartment. She finds herself thinking that he is restricting himself, trying to savor it.

There is of course a chance that Cahusac and Tréville had met in the course of both their official work and befriended each other. Unlikely, but not impossible.

Had that been the case though, someone would have mentioned it last night, at the least Cahusac, if only to keep her out of harm’s way.

He hadn’t and that excludes the possibility of an official friendship and opens up other, more worrying ones.

Tréville opposite her doesn’t react. He only raises his glass to a silent toast.

“Would you admit that your name is in fact not Boisrenard?” he asks, with a touch of mirth in his voice that is otherwise absent on his face.
And here again she finds herself at an impasse. She can’t admit to the ruse. However small the chance, this could still be a trap.

Trusting Bernajoux on the mountain had been easy. There had been nothing left to lose. Here and now everything is at stake.

Tréville might just as well be nothing but a talented actor.

At the same time, he can’t come out and tell her the truth, whatever it is, without taking the exact same risk.

“What else would it be, Monsieur?”

“If I had to guess?” Tréville’s lips stretch into a slow smile, eyes fixed on her with a calm intelligence. “I’d say Durand.”

Jeanne ponders jumping over the table to slit his throat.

She has no idea how to actually do that, but it can’t probably be more difficult than to slaughter a rabbit, throats are all the same.

It’s only a passing thought, borne from the darkness inside her that will do everything to protect what is hers. At some point in her life she had believed she was unable to kill, a midwife only trying to save lives.

Then she had had to kill and it had been so easy, so shockingly easy.

Tréville across from her watches her with shrewd eyes and his lips curled into a pleased stretch.

He notices her unease and shock. He is happy to have thrown her with the knowledge of her name and maybe he thinks, it will make her falter.

Men rarely think of being murdered when they provoke a woman.

Jeanne does.

While she isn’t armed - fitting the pistol under her skirts too much of a hassle - the knife is a warm, calming presence against her calf, that reminds her of Cahusac and what is at stake.

He is a professional soldier, she isn’t.

She knows what she is capable of. He does not.

What she is capable of, she remembers, what she learned the hard way, is to think, to regard every angle before she acts. She doesn’t need a second Mont Beuvray.

She doesn’t need to ponder killing a man, only because he knows her real name.

The hunt on her family had been an exclusive church affair.

Tréville is not a church man. Not even remotely. The deep animosity between he and Richelieu is a well known fact on the streets of Paris.
And that leaves exactly one line of communication by which he could have gotten her name.

She thinks of the coat hanging behind her.

His incredulity at her false last name.

Jeanne’s eyes land on the the dark red liquid in his glass, shimmering like crystals in the morning sunlight. Or the deep red in church windows.

Of course.

As their eyes meet, his doubtful, hers almost amused, she snorts softly.

“Cahusac likes to tell stories, when he’s bored.” She points to the wine on the table. “That is a very expensive slightly dry but fruity wine from Bordeaux. I have no idea what that means, but it seems to be popular among Gascons.”

Tréville’s eyebrows shoot up. The corners of his eyes wrinkle with something like approval as his lips curl.

Jeanne turns, her eyes on him, encouraged by his mild reaction, to point to the cloak behind her, thrown over the paravent perhaps, before he went to bed the night before.

“That is an extremely unusual color for soldiers. Normally they prefer colors like… oh I don’t know… blood red or something….But I have to say, the blue is very pretty.”

She deliberately uses a more female connotated term and maybe she feels an uncalled for sense of satisfaction as he flinches ever so slightly. Not in fear, no, but in the slight unease they have all learned in association with anything outside the permitted norms.

A Beta, though, would have been at her throat already.

She is being subtle, but not that subtle

Her lips twitch in a smirk. It’s an extremely impolite thing to do, though not unjustified in this case. Especially not as he rolls his eyes towards the ceiling and releases a heavy breath.

“But the blood red was already taken, wasn’t it?” She turns to him, only to fold her hands on the table top. "And you wouldn't want it anyways."

Jeanne hesitates here, loath to admit anything. Yes or no amount to confessions and confessions got you killed.

Even if she hadn’t been through that drill early one morning with Bernajoux, sitting over tea and warm oatmeal before he went to bed after shift and she to wake the little monsters, Jeanne-Marie had been doing this in one way or another since she was a child.

She did not need reminders to bolster her healthy, natural distrust.

"Jeanne-Marie Durand. A pleasure," she grits out and even to her it sounds like the bastard child of an insult and a threat.

Staring at each other across the table both Jeanne and Tréville refuse to blink, refuse to back down before the other does until, finally, Tréville’s eyes close with a heart-heavy sigh and Jeanne curses.
“I can’t believe you let them attack Cahusac like that!” she spits, at the same time as he leans closer and demands to know:

“What the hell are you still doing in France?”

“I didn’t…” The blue that earlier had seemed like ice cold fury now more resembles the blue of his uniform. Or a sad version thereof. He sighs again, just as heavy. “Or maybe I did. I didn’t discourage it after all. Is he alright?”

Jeanne looks away and nods. The anger she had been feeling so acutely only moments before fading away until it is a warm glow in her heart, only waiting to erupt again.

“It was a very close call, though. I… What the hell, Tréville? Is anybody in this damn country even remotely who they seem?”

Tréville’s lips twitch, as his gaze drops to the liquid in his glass.

“If they weren’t, we wouldn’t need to be, now would we?” he states with a fine thread of humor and warmth in his voice and looks up again.

“No, we wouldn’t, Ema Jean.” Jeanne smiles, satisfaction unfurling in her chest. She barely whispers the the old term before his name, even now unwilling to risk discovery.

But Tréville hears and he is surprised, not shocked, but a mild curiosity in his eyes gives him away.

“My name is not exactly a secret.”

“But it’s not exactly known either in the circles in which I move.”

At his questioning gaze, she elaborates. “Marketwives, housewives, women of low status.”

He opens his mouth to speak and yet he stays silent, appraising her, adjusting his impressions.

If she is honest with herself, she is maybe enjoying this a bit too much, her mean streak none too subtle in the face of her still justified anger at the Musketeers.

Though it doesn’t douse the one feeling that is above it all.

Gratitude.

“Etienne gave you away,” she mentions with a smile. “But I must admit, I spend a good deal of time thinking about the mysterious Uncle Jean.” She stops to clear her throat.

“I wanted to thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you did for my siblings, but especially for Simon.

Thank you, may God bless you and may you walk forever in his favor, because no matter what they did or didn’t do to him, I was sure I’d lost him and you brought him back.” Tears prick at the back of her eyes, now that she accepts the reality that he is in fact one of them. Tears she shuts down with immediate will.

Crying is probably the fastest way to get men to not take a woman seriously. Or Alphas. Or any other throwback, probably, who can pass well enough as male to be in an exceedingly male position.
Jean de Tréville though just smiles with such sadness, that it makes her hurt all over again. His hand is warm where he places it on hers and that, together with his heartening nod, almost breaks her resolve.

“He will be all right. A different all right maybe, because the things we experience, no matter if bad or good, they shape us, but he’ll be alright.” For a second he sounds more like the relaxed and easy version of Cahusac, who lets his language slip more towards the rolling vowels of Gascony.

As he leans back, leaving her hand bereft of the warm human touch, he is the immaculate career soldier again. Impeccable speech, impeccable to look at.

“I am impressed. I will admit it. Most don’t have this eye for detail… or the rather obscure information to use it.” This time as he bows his head, respect shines through the gesture that can be, and often is, used to mock, to stall or simply fulfill the basic requirements of politeness. “It doesn’t answer my question though… Why are you still in France?”

Well, maybe he was stalling after all.

Jeanne smiles. “I am a trained midwife. I figured I’d be of more use here… and… the boys agreed… preliminarily. I may not be much use anymore for…,” Jeanne breaks off, pondering how to best not use the words ‘the Underground’. Even if this office is sound proofed, every bit of long trained instincts tell her not to speak of it.

Tréville should be in it deep enough to figure it out. “…my normal work, but imagine them coming across a situation where I might be needed…” Jeanne shrugs with a wry smile. “Or rather… don’t…because that’s traumatizing….”

He laughs, but still shakes his head.

“Of all the people that I might believe to keep a midwife just because they found her…”

“I set fire to the Inquisitorial compound in Lyon.” Jeanne says, plastering the most innocent smile she’s capable of on her face. Tréville, in the process of taking the next sip of his wine, sputters. “I freed my brother.” She shrugs. “Sadly probably killed no one. Rectified that later.”

This time, her smile isn’t false innocent, it is willful and perhaps a touch bitter. “Is that enough for you to “keep a midwife”, Captain Tréville?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle. That I can believe without doubt.” He chuckles, his blue eyes shining brightly. “And now you are here, making a complaint about the misconduct of my men.”

“Well that be a problem?”

“No, it will give me an excuse to have them lay off for a few weeks. And maybe I’ll visit the Palais Cardinal, to extend teeth gritted apologies.” The corner of his mouth quirks up, lighting up his face with humor.

Jeanne frowns before she understands.

“Oh.. oh… yes, you probably should. They will not be happy about further damage to their men,” Jeanne agrees. “We don’t want you to get in trouble, after all.”

Living in the heart of France, right under the eyes of King and court, embroiled in a charade that their respective regiments hate each other’s guts… it sure makes for a difficult working relationship. If there is one thing Tréville is probably immensely grateful for, a safe reason to be in the Cardinal’s
vicinity to talk without prying eyes and ears, should be it.

“None of that answers another question, though… no, maybe it does, I just don’t see how…”

Jeanne leans back and looks at him, the frown wrinkling her forehead.

“Why did Boisrenard sic me on you?” she asks and of all the possibilities that come to her mind, get them acquainted to each other, have her to get them to actually leave them alone... none sticks.

Tréville, too, seems bemused by the idea. “He did?”

“He deliberately told me that it was Musketeers who provoked them until he lost his temper.”

Tréville narrows his eyes and gets up, walking a few steps, only to turn around and look at her with a puzzled expression.

“If he wanted to convey a message, he could have done that much more clearly and with less risk…”

“I know,” Jeanne throws in.

“Though the risk was low to begin with. Boisrenard is not actually an inconspicuous name.”

“I know.” Jeanne concedes. “But still, if it’s not that… why did he…”

“Set you up on a meeting with someone who is neither an Alpha nor a man?” A shrewd smile plays over his lips as it dawns on Jeanne what she had neglectfully disregarded.

Tréville, for all his soldiering ways, is the only adult Omega around her. And if, what she saw about the Resistance so far held true, the same goes for him.

They are surrounded by Alphas and men. And those, no matter how well meaning, tend to cram women and Omegas that don’t pass as male into categories that in the end all meant one thing: vulnerable.

Of course, Jeanne blends in better with them than she has with any of the Betas in her life so far, but there are times…

Sometimes she needs to not be strong enough to butt heads with their domineering personalities, but sit with a cup of tea and just talk about whatever she wanted and not be judged as “female”. There is of course Simon, but Simon is a pup and he needs her strong and supportive. He doesn’t need her hating her body and doubled over with pain from stomach cramps, or crying or simply exhausted. And she can’t afford to share that with the Alphas, the risk that they see her as weak far too great.

Maybe Jeanne should have made the connection sooner, but Tréville as he stands in his office, broad shoulders squared, face roughened by very deliberate stubble, comes across as so male...

And he knows. He may not begrudge her, but he read her blunder loud and clear.

“Boisrenard told me, he is not a complicated man…”, “ she whispers, her shocked gaze firmly on Tréville, who laughs in return.

“The opposite of complicated is not always simple,” there is a pause, a short hesitation, before he adds with a humorous twist of his mouth. “...Jeanne. That is an assumption that might cost us dearly. We should never think less of our friends and our foes alike. But tell me, why would he think we
needed to talk to each other…”

Jeanne can see why Tréville would be a leader of men.

Firstly, there is his personality, strong and charismatic, but underneath there is a warmth, a caring openness that makes people trust him and like him.

It makes her like Tréville.

What makes her trust him, however, is the fact, that Simon trusts again, however little, thanks to Ema Jean who took care of him in a way Jeanne had simply been unable to provide, and that Cahusac genuinely considers Jean de Tréville a friend.

And if someone maybe can help her find a solution to a problem that is not helped by all Alpha straightforwardness, it might be him.

“He probably thinks I need to get away from Alphas for a while.” she snarks and Tréville laughs again. A laugh that falters quickly, when she continues

“But I… it’s Cahusac, I think. There has been an incident, and let me please state how profusely sorry I am about it and add that Bernajoux has not killed me yet and let that be my defense…”

Jeanne digs her teeth into her lower lip and takes a deep breath, along with a leap of faith that Jean de Tréville sees a different side to all of this, one that does not consist of ‘You failed spectacularly, now deal with it.’

“…and now Cahusac is triggered by my scent and that is a problem because …we… it’s complicated.”

“I see,” Tréville says and rubs his forehead, thumb firmly resting at his temple, as if that could provide any stability. “No. I don’t. Start at the beginning, if you please.”

Jeanne nods, watching her fingers fold and unfold in her lap, a gesture he can’t see from his post at the window. It’s nervous fiddling. A sign of weakness.

She hadn’t apologized to the cat. Felix didn’t care about your deeds, as long as you spoiled him adequately. But she had been right, there was one more person she had to apologize to and spread the whole sordid thing out to.

“I met Cahusac for the first time as I was lighting a firebomb outside the Inquisition…” Jeanne sets out, her gaze fixed to whatever she finds in front of her. Fittingly it’s either her fingers - digging into his shoulder to staunch the blood flow. He was losing too much too fast and he was not allowed to die just yet - or Tréville’s glass, still filled with a finger width of dark red liquid, glowing in the sunlight - too much blood.

Tréville watches the courtyard below, his shoulder resting casually against the wall next to the window, but his body angled towards her. He listens intently, not without judgement or grudge, but maybe, of all the people who have heard about it so far, the most neutral.

So she tells him everything. Bernajoux had never come to ask for the actual details, Boisrenard hadn’t even asked.

And maybe it’s not about finding a solution after all.
“...and he lifted me out of the coach, the moron....”

Her eyes have at some point found the calming whitewashed expanse of the ceiling as the most neutral point of focus, not looking down, even as Tréville sat again, folding his fingers, a silent but extremely attentive listener.

“...and of course it caused bad nightmares,” she sighs, “And I guess, that’s my punishment.”

Jeanne looks down, finding Tréville’s eyes with the expectation of dismay, anger or rejection.

Instead, she finds a remote sadness, some kind of fondness and exasperation, as he shakes his head.

“The things fear and love make us do... especially when they come together,” he sighs, but with a faint smile. “That is an impressive problem you have there. I’m not sure it is what you think it is, Jeanne, and I am not sure if this can be fixed... frankly, that is between the two of you to figure out. But I have an idea... if you want to try?”

Jeanne doesn’t even hesitate before she nods fervently. Tréville raises his hand with a smirk.

“Hear me out first. I am not talking about friendship. I don’t think anybody here thinks about friendship. Well, you might, perhaps. But knowing him, Boisrenard is thinking about anything but friendship... I have been on the receiving end of his meddling. But Jeanne, be honest to yourself...”

Tréville’s eyes lock on hers, faint lines around them crinkle liked bright sunrays on his tanned skin. His lips, curled around a knowing smile, twitch softly, as if he tries to not just give her that lopsided grin of his.

“Do you want him?”

Do you want him?

It throws her, the private nature of the question unheard of in conversations with men. Only Tréville isn’t a man. And he is asking the one question, she had tried to avoid like the plague, thoughts she had locked inside a dark box inside her heart whenever they came up. The same question Simon had asked and that she had rebuffed so curtly.

The question she had discarded on grounds of practicality. Hopes she had buried in a convent in Autun.

The answer is shockingly easy.

When she thinks of the man who kept the fact he was an Inquisition soldier from her, she wants to twist his neck. If she even allows herself to think about the man who endangered his own life, setting himself up to be shot, to protect his pack and the organization he serves with unfailing loyalty...

How could she not want a man with a strength and a loyalty like this? And the kind of body and face and fine sense of humor he was blessed with. And that deep running pleasure for the fine things in life.

If given the chance and the freedom to do so, Jeanne-Marie Durand would want this man.

“Yes,” she states and smiles, a wide, shining smile that surprises her.

Because maybe...

Tréville’s grin breaks free as he nods. “Then let’s see what we can do for you, shall we?”
Jeanne follows him with her eyes as he turns and heads to the door that leads further into his set of rooms.

Maybe…

“I uh… can I maybe…” she stutters and curses herself, for someone who has no qualms to walk into every fight, she is woefully underprepared for this conversation.

“Yes?” Tréville asks, coaxing her on with gentleness in his voice, as he sits and places a small box on the table.

“…ask a few questions…” Jeanne feels that horrible blush, the curse of her fair skin, creep upwards, the heat settling onto her cheeks in an embarrassing display of her inexperience.

She can’t express how grateful she is that Tréville doesn’t laugh, although the temptation is there, if the way his nostrils flare and his eyes sparkle is any indication.

“Shouldn’t that be something your mother… Jeanne, you are a midwife…”

She can feel her skin color explode in heat and flaming redness and catches her teeth digging into her lower lip. “Carrier…” she mumbles. “My carrier… and my… father is… was…”

“Betan…” Tréville completes her sentence. Now his lips twitch, but he opens the compartment again and fills half a glass of wine that he pushes across the table and into her hands, brooking no protest.

“Ask,” he commands and Jeanne doesn’t miss the irony that she is sipping the wine that Cahusac smuggled into this office while grilling Tréville about things that go far beyond the simple technicalities that she as midwife knows.

Neither does she miss the irony of the solution he presents, laughable in its simplicity. If only it works.

She will have to kiss Boisrenard.

Right after she slaps him.
It is a knock that wakes him from yet another bout of unsatisfying sleep.

Contrary to common assumption the pain is not what keeps him awake; he had slept with much worse.

It is the lack of pain, the weeks of forced rest and the many hours he had spend dead to the world that now find their counter weight in the restlessness of a body that feels fit enough and demands action.

Outside, everything is still swathed in darkness and for one short blazing moment, he hopes something - anything- exciting is about to happen.

Then he notices the lack of a scent.

Jeanne.

Cahusac sits with a suppressed curse and pushes his legs out of bed. There will never be a time when he doesn’t miss the use of his right arm, ambidextrous or not.

“C’mon in,” he calls, remembering in the last moment to pull one of his blankets across his lap.

Jeanne does not need to see him in his underwear.

Cahusac does not need her to see him in his underwear, emergency or not.

It must be an emergency. Nothing else could possibly get her to come into his rooms.

That is a risky move. One befitting the violent minx that had set fire to the most dangerous building in Lyon and stared down the sole witness, challenging him to do something about it if he dared.

Jeanne isn't that bold anymore. She is risk-shy and fixated on security, mapping Paris with single minded focus.

Something had broken in her on Beuvray, more so than maybe in him.

She had lost her confidence, the surety in herself and her actions.

Cahusac would have risked kissing her at the lodge, would have risked getting a taste of what he coveted in the knowledge that he was at the safest place in France.
The wounded look in her eyes had held him back.

She just isn’t as bold anymore.

Except, in that moment she slips inside, no sign of danger, no sound, no smell.

She turns to him, a delicate curvy woman, the skin ghostly pale in the low moonlight filtering through the windows, her dark hair like a halo or a shawl, like the women in Spain sometimes wear, an impression of modesty, of faith. The contrast gives her a gravitas that is befitting the new, responsible Jeanne.

Then he notices her nightgown.

And the fact that it’s the only thing she is wearing.

Cahusac takes a deep lungful of air that is meant to settle his composure, danger and warning signs forgotten, because that...

Something is wrong with her scent...

Something foreign entwines with the earthen tones and the herbs that underlay everything that is her.

A touch of sweetness that comes close to the pack's, turning her autumn tones into a glowing hot summer day, when the sun flickers over hard baked dust roads in Gascony, half roasted grass scenting the air with the promise of sweet apples and plums, ripe and warm.

Jeanne pushes the door close behind her and leans her back against it, hands pressed flat against the dark wood. He can’t see her expression, her gaze fixed on the floorboards.

Maybe she is shivering, he can’t tell, his eyes not acute enough to pick out her expression and whatever she is wearing is covering her scent to...

It’s Sandalwood.

That is without doubt Sandalwood twining into her scent in a finely crafted composition that changes it to something new without overpowering the natural notes into submission.

Whoever had given the oil to her, it hadn't been her own idea.

She can’t afford something that expensive. And the way she presses up against the door, as far away from him as possible, says more than anything that she is not sure about the whole thing. Still afraid...

Because she can't smell it like Cahusac does.

She doesn’t know.

Yet she is in his room in her nightgown.

A flimsy, soft flowing thing that molds around her slim shoulder and flows over her breasts like a lace trimmed waterfall, an idea of translucency that is laughable as a barrier.

It’s no barrier to him.
Cahusac corrects the blanket across his lap before he leans forward to find her eyes in the dark.

"Jeanne?"

"Is it alright? The smell?" Jeanne murmurs and across her cheekbones, the skin so fair the slightest shadow is an accusation on the translucent skin, creeps a deep blush.

“What are you doing here?” Cahusac wants to believe. He wants her to dare to go after what she wants again. And he is not stupid enough to be oblivious about what she wants, even without Simon dropping hints in the unsubtle manner of thirteen year old’s.

“I…” Jeanne digs her teeth in her lower lip and shakes her head. Her eyes flit across the room, moving sideways to avoid him before landing back on the floorboards in front of her.

He wants to tell her to leave, wants to tell her that she is not welcome, if she doesn’t want to be here, when she lifts her head and her gaze lands squarely on him.

“I want you,” she states, all traces of the shy blushing virgin that he knows she is, gone.

“But only,” she continues. “If it doesn’t hurt you. And only, if you want me.” Jeanne falters again on the last words, her shoulders slumping forward, before she catches herself and levels the full force of her glare back on Cahusac’s face.

Maybe she isn’t as bold anymore, but she sure as hell hasn’t forgotten how to be.

“I like your scent,” he says, as a way of dispersing her worries. “...but…” her eyes blaze bright and then narrow in the dark and he wants to laugh. “... I am unsure as to what I am supposed to say. This is the first time a lady asks my consent before bedding me.” Cahusac can help the way his lips shape into an amused smile as much as he can resist the temptation of teasing her.

Jeanne, though, is as serious as she was.

“You could say no,” she murmurs, gaze dropping to her hands, her teeth worrying at her lower lip as she is wont to do when unsure of herself or plain embarrassed.

“I won’t ask again, though”

So much for embarassed, Cahusac thinks.

“And if I say yes…”?

Her gaze lifts and settles on his.

“Find it out, if you dare, Cahusac.” Oh yes, so much for embarassed.

Butterflies flutter around his stomach in joyful anticipation and his breath catches in his chest.

He doesn’t resist the wilful grin on his lips as he raises his left hand and beckons her closer.

“Say it,” Jeanne whispers, her feet already padding like soundless kitten paws across first the raw wood and then the soft and deep rug that leads to his bed.

Cahusac leans forward to catch her hand, to press it against his lips as soon as she is close enough. He turns it in his and presses his nose against the pulse point, drinking deeply of the warm perfumed oil.
“Will you tell me who gave you the oil?” he inquires instead, intrigued in spite of himself.

It is all he could have hoped for when the corners of her mouth bend upward just the tiniest fraction.

“Say yes, Cahusac. Or say no.”

“A lady and her secrets?”

“Her friend’s secrets.” She smirks now. “Say yes or say no, Cahusac. And I will leave and forget I ever was here.”

She will have his hide for the question, but Cahusac can’t help himself. He needs to be sure. He needs to make sure not to break anything else, risking to push whatever is between them beyond anything worth repair.

“Is this some weird sort of apology?” He hasn’t yet finished speaking when her eyes narrow and that steep crease appears between her eyes. He curses himself and pulls her back when she turns away, pulls her close enough that he has to spread his legs to make room for her.

“Humor me, Mademoiselle. I need to hear this as much as you need to hear my agreement, please,” he urges her with another kiss to her hand.

Will the trick hold beyond physical exertion? Will he wake up screaming again?

Does he care?

“I want you, Jeanne. So yes.” His lips brush across her fingers that twitch in response in his light grip and he smiles. “Make that a resounding yes. But I need to be sure.”

Jeanne raises her free hand, slowly, giving him all the time in the world to move out of the way, and caresses back a strand of his hair that threatened to fall into his eyes. The pads of her fingers are soft as they brush over his temple and come to rest on his cheek bone.

Cahusac never takes his eyes off her, following her explorative gaze with hypnotized fascination.

“You are so beautiful,” she whispers and there might have been a time when those exact words would have made him flinch, but those years are long past. Now he feels like reveling in her praise, preen to her approval.

“I still don’t know what you smell like,” her comment is seemingly unconnected until she clarifies. “But I like it. So much.” Her face, cheekbones now only dusted with a fine layer of pink, breaks into a wide smile. “Enough apology. I want you.”

And he hears the dare loud and clear and brazen. Maybe she will falter again, but right then, she is Jeanne, bold and brave and just a little reckless.

He opens his knees and pulls her closer yet, until her hands have to rest on his shoulders and he can look up at her face, along this ridiculous excuse for clothing she is wearing.

He smiles as he sees her blush again, and touches a careful, almost innocent kiss against her belly.

In the silence of the room the sound of her breath catching echoes like thunder.

“Hello Mademoiselle Durand, I missed you,” he whispers.
“I missed you too, Monsieur Cahusac,” she responds just as softly, fingers trembling on his shoulders.

This time, it’s Cahusac who looks down, away from her bashful expression down to his one functioning hand and the fingers that have curled into the fabric.

"Shall I take it off?" she whispers. Her pulse thunders under Cahusac’s fingertips and the nervousness in her scent borders on fear.

He wraps his arm around her waist and, to her soft squeal, pulls her onto his left thigh to seal her lips with a kiss.

Jeanne thinking, Jeanne worrying is never a good thing.

Her ability to be distracted by what she likes, is.

She opens up to him without hesitation and a gentle sigh, her tongue already sneaking to touch his, caressing without pause or shame into a slow, sensual dance that heats his blood into a storm.

Sitting across his legs as she is, her torso pressed against his left side, it is easy to wrap an arm around her, hand pressed flat on her belly to feel the warmth of her skin, the rapid tattoo of her pulse through the night gown.

The scent of her arousal fills the room, perfume oil or not, and it mingles with the sweet warmth of it into a heady mixture. Her right arm sneaks around his back, the slender hand pushing under his hair to find hold on his neck, short fingernails digging into the skin like little claws that try to hold him on the spot. The other hand lands on his ribs with a soft tremor and he can feel her gathering her courage, the moment of hesitation where her tongue stills, right before he nips at her lower lip and shakes her from her insecurity.

Then the fingers spread on his skin, as if trying to wrap around his whole side, before they curl in again and start to pet him. Long, sweet caressing motions up his rib cage to his arm, still - annoyingly - bound to his chest and back down again.

He wants to taste her.

“When I promise you to buy a new one… can I rip the nightgown.” Cahusac murmurs into her mouth only to nudge back her head to bare her beautiful, white throat to his lips.

“Why?” she squeaks and the sole reason he doesn’t laugh is the knowledge that she would skin him alive if he dared.

“Hrm… because it’s in the way and I want to sink into you to the hilt and hear you scream your pleasure into my mouth when you come on my knot.”

Her blush is instantaneous. “Oh God, you can’t keep saying that!” she groans and Cahusac laughs, pressing a kiss to the soft skin where her neck joins her shoulder.

It is not completely innocent, he is checking her scent, checking the application of the perfume. While he may risk the exposure, he doesn’t want to wake up to a nightmare when she is still next to him. Too much insanity even for him.

It’s only after he finds that here, too, where it should be most intense, the sandalwood oil weaves into the earth and herbs in fine threads and alters the fabric of her scent in a subtle but undeniable way. He takes a deep breath with open lips and licks along the sensitive skin up to her ear. Whenever
he finds the genius that did this, he will have to kiss her or him.

“But first… I want to eat you up,” Cahusac whispers as his lips touch her ear, baiting her, trying to incite one of her predictably passionate responses to thwart her edginess.

Instead of blowing a gasket, she gulps. Not scolding him, but turning closer, wriggling on his lap in a nervous gesture he feels through the protective layer of the blanket.

His cock is rock hard from the thought alone to have her in his bed… finally… and the movement is not helping. “So…” he clears his throat. “how much do you like this nightgown?”

The thought that he would need to buy her a new own, triggers a reminder that she has no income. They need to fix her up with a pack allowance or something.

It is a fleeting thought only, tossed aside the moment she turns her head to present the silk soft skin of her neck with a groan. “You are annoying,” she says and slips off his lap, pulling the offending fabric off with one fluid, shameless motion.

Nervous she may be, but Jeanne-Marie Durand is not ashamed of herself and Cahusac loves her for it.

Cahusac reaches out with his left arm, pulls her against him with a delighted laugh to lift her, just enough to turn them both, and drops her on the bed.

He doesn’t know how long it has been since she laughed, truly laughed, for him. That she does now makes his heart swell, her willingness to passionately respond to his kiss makes it almost burst.

“I can’t believe I’m here,” she whispers, “Are you alright?” Their lips still touching, her hand resting against his chest and left shoulder, while his lone functional arm keeps him from crushing her much smaller body.

Cahusac wishes, he could use his hand to caress her as she deserves, to gentle her jumpy nature into soft submission with long languid strokes.

As it is, he has to make do with his lips and tongue, painting faint lines of goosebumps on her body until she sinks into the blanket, soft and pliant, a soundless sigh on her lips.

“Yes,” Cahusac responds, nipping at the skin of her neck, only to wander lower. He wants to explore. “You?”

He hears her breath catch as his tongue paints wet lines across her collarbone and he slowly dips lower, his lips caressing over silk soft milk white skin.

She is a dream, she must be. There are freckles on her shoulder, pretty pale dots that demand to be kissed and caressed, each one individually. And she is soft, so soft.

Between the two packs all of them - including Jean - are hardened soldiers with bodies built, or trained, for war.

Jeanne on the contrary is generous breasts, generous hips and a gently rounded belly wrapped in alabaster skin. She looks like a doll, like a classical painting, a bit quirky, and not perfect, but so breathtakingly beautiful.
“Yes,” she whispers as one of her hands digs into his hair to guide his mouth down to her breast.

She is pushy. Of courses she is, he thinks and swirls his tongue around one tightly furled nipple to her shocked “Oh my God!”

Cahusac hums in amusement and turns to her other breast, reveling in her just as visceral reaction.

“What are you...?” She never finishes that sentence, as if the question itself lost its relevance in the light of another.

“Why?” she inquires in a breathlessly, astonished, as if she hadn’t expected so much sensuality. And it incites irrational joy in him, a deep pleasure to be able to surprise her.

It wakes his tenderness, the knowledge that she deserves only the best he can give her, the burden that he can’t fail at this.

“Worshipping you,” he quips. And slides down her body, drawing his lips across the skin of her belly.

“That’s blasphemy!” Jeanne’s moan vibrates under his lips, under his tongue as he circles her belly button.

Cahusac can’t help but laugh, pushing her knees apart with his to slide off the bed and kneel on the rug.

She is spread out before him under the faint moonlight, like a white marble statue, Aphrodite as Praxiteles created her, only warm and breathing and soft.

His hand stroaks down her body, her breast, her belly, her side, to come and rest on her hip.

Her gaze, wide eyed and breathless, is fixed on him. Her teeth nibble on her lower lip again. A fairytale creature. His fairy tale creature. Her low, panting breathes echo through the room, chest quivering with each heartbeat, her scent, so close, intoxicating.

“Dearest,” he laughs. “I am an Alpha, I was born blasphemous.” and bends his head to the patch of dark curls at the juncture of her thighs.

“What...?” she moans, as if he were more inclined to answer this time.

He is.

“Taking care of you.” he murmurs and dips his tongue between her folds, the musk of her arousal damp and hot in the air. A delectable drug. He wants to feel her clench around him, wants to hear her groan his name. He wants to feel her come and shatter apart, just as he promised on the mountain.

The sound she makes as he swipes his tongue through her folds, just a teasing lick, is a heady combination of shocked surprise and sweet hot need and it curls around his knot like physical touch.

Jeanne doesn’t need an incentive to curl her left leg around his shoulder, her right wrapped around his hip, pulling him closer as soon as the tip of his tongue touches her most sensitive point for the first time.

“You are beautiful, Mademoiselle Durand,” he whispers against her flesh and lets his fingers follow his tongue.
“Beautiful and delectable…” he adds between her soft moans, running a finger over moisture soft skin to nudge at her entrance to her shocked exhale.

“And I want to make you feel good.”

Cahusac lifts his head, watching her, as his fingers slowly slides into her, coaxing her to open up to him.

“A privilege.” He dips his head to place a featherlight kiss on the inside of her thigh. “A pleasure.”

Jeanne fingers dig into the blanket under her, a low, needy whine the only sound coming from her as Cahusac adds a second finger.

“So good…” he watches his fingers slide in and out of her body, the skin of her sex glistening with moisture.

It is an invitation. She is an invitation. He smiles as he bends down again to feast on her arousal, his tongue dancing over her flesh, spurred on by the way she twists against his mouth.

She is tight, she is so tight, her body clenching on his fingers with the desperation of her harsh breaths, following the movements of Cahusac’s tongue with unfailing trust and little moans, telling him what she wants in sound even as words fail her.

It is as he playfully bites her thigh that her right hand clenches into his hair, turning him back to the task at hand with a deep groan and a roughly grated “No you don’t.”

Her fingernails dig into his shoulder and Cahusac knows he will have welts in the morning, possessive signs of her claim.

He chuckles still as she comes apart with a desperate whimper that uncannily resembles his name, a last surge of her hips against his tongue, before her muscles clench tight around his fingers.

Probably, if Cahusac took her now, he’d last all of ten seconds. He hurts. He wants so badly to feel her around him, that his cock is ready to come from the smell of her orgasm alone, his knot swelling from the thought alone.

He finds her with her teeth dug into her arm, eyes screwed shut. Her legs closer around him, holding him in place while she catches her breath.

Cahusac doesn’t mind. He doesn’t mind to slowly kiss his way up her body, dropping featherlight touches on the silken skin of her belly and breasts, her neck, until his lips hover over hers and a pair of mirrored woodland pools stare up at him, the moonlight a weak reflection.

“Hello,” he smiles, the only thing he can say, before his woman grabs his hair and seeks his mouth for a kiss.

His delighted laugh is muffled by her lips. As is his deep groan when she rocks her hips against his.

His erection is painfully pressed against her hip, he needs to… any kind of relief, because….

Jeanne curls her legs around his hips and whispers a soft, barely audible “Yes.”
“Yes?” he asks, for a moment thrown.

“Yes,” she whispers and nips at his lower lip.

He wants to say yes. He wants to say yes, act on this yes like a man parched wants that sip of water, no matter how poisonous it may be.

Cahusac buries his face in the juncture of her neck and groans, almost cries his frustration into her skin.

“No.” His lips find the soft skin of her throat again, brush against her pulse with desperate need and a wordless apology. “Can’t hurt you.” Before her face can falter, before her eyes can shut him out he takes her lips, not biting, just conquering in a silent prayer for her to understand.

“I will knot,” he murmurs between her lips, while his hips still rock slowly against her body. He is not that good of a person. “I would hurt you. And I can’t. Not tonight, only pleasure, mon coeur. Please. I can’t tell you why, just….”

Her hands reach for his face and hold him still, to place a sweet, almost chaste kiss on his lips. “Of course.” she concedes and shakes her head at the same time. “Just... what about you? Can you? Like…”

“Uhunh…” There is something intelligent to be said here, something more eloquent that an affirmative grunt. “Count that in heartbeats.”

Or maybe, saying nothing is best, just following her huge eyes with his, locking onto her gaze as the only fixpoint in wildly rolling sea that threatens to swallow him whole as she tightens her legs, pulls him closer, effectively trapping him against the heat of her silken soft skin. If he asked, she would release him. He is handing her this power of his own will and it sets him free.

Her fingers are holding his gaze fixes on hers as he, slowly at first, rolls his hips and his already swelling knot against her skin and the friction on the softness of her body is almost dragging him asunder.

The intimacy is staggering, maybe even more so than if he were in her. It’s her eyes, holding him captive, with him every second. Her sight drinking in the faintest stir on his face. She sees it all. She shies away from nothing.

It’s that that has him undone.

He can feel his knot swell, can feel her tense under him, increasing the pressure.

And then she starts to shift against him.

He probably shouldn’t dig his teeth into her shoulder to muffle the noise. It says a lot about instinct and all the bad things people say about Alphas. If only he had half a brain to think left.

If only he had any ability to think left.

***
Jeanne is a soft warm weight curled around Cahusac’s left, her head tucked securely under his chin. Her arm is thrown over his body, fingertips caressing the sensitive spot where the musket-ball had entered his shoulder.

Cahusac is not even sure she’s noticing doing it.

She is as complacent as she ever gets. Sweet. Even mooded. Her smell is filling Cahusac’s nostrils. Right under the fresh notes of soap and sandalwood. So close to the notes of Boisrenard and Bernajoux and himself. It’s genius.

It’s impossible to not recognize the earth and herbs as intrinsically hers…

All the living things. Around all the time since she and the pups moved in.

It made for rather problematic sleeping. Not as bad as in the beginning, but Cahusac’s hindbrain had been in overdrive for days now and it had just begun to settle, to trust nothing bad would come out of that scent.

Contrary to popular believe, Cahusac is not totally stupid.

Either this is going to push the process forward, and Cahusac deludes himself into believing that this will be the case, because something this good making it worse is not possible.

Or it’s going to be a setback.

But for now, Jeanne is snuggled up to him, sated, limp and most of all, harmless.

And of course, there is the sweet, heavy smell of sandalwood.

“Who?” Cahusac murmurs and she chuckles.

“I’m not telling.”

“Why not?”

“A lady’s got to have secrets.”

“Good for a lady then. Now spill.”

“Noooooooooooooo”

Her laughter is addictive.

Cahusac closes his eyes and drops a kiss on her hair, smiling blindly into the dark.

“We could trade. An answer for an answer,” he murmurs against her skin and feels how she stills in anticipation.

“I don’t think that’s fair. This is just… fun, but what I want to know is… you won’t answer, if you don’t want to, will you?”

“I won’t,” Cahusac acquiesces, pulling her tighter against him. He has a pretty good idea whom she had been speaking to. He’s not sure, but the circle of persons is small and very exclusive and Boisrenard was not being exactly subtle.

That doesn’t keep him from preserving this precious intimacy just a few minutes longer.
“Then I would like to know your name.”

The gentle hesitation in her voice has him still, as if she treded onto perilous ground. She does. Telling her that she does is dangerous in itself. Not telling her would not be fair.

The boy that had been given that name never recovered enough to accept it again. Or maybe there never was someone who reconnected him and the name.

He had been Alex or Cahusac for so long now… but he wasn’t Alex anymore, either.

“Would you refrain from using it, if I asked you to?” He softly asks her and feels her nod to his smile.

“Of course… I’ve seen… yes, I will.” Her fingers paint slowly designs on his ribcage, anchor him here, in her touch.

“Matthieu-Alexandre de Cahusac. Chevalier de. Vicomte de Juliac.” He hesitates, but decides to go on. There is no harm in telling her the rest. He already knows almost everything about her family. It’s only right that she knows whose bed she’s sharing.

“But my paternal "uncle" manages the estate. After I, against all odds and with God’s grace survived and came forward to inform the Inquisition of my mother’s brother horrible crimes,” he scoffs, “they outed him as evil, scheming throwback and executed him to take justice for the good son of the church that was my father. A martyr, almost, murdered by hitherto unknown parts of my mother’s family.”

“Seriously? Isn’t that a bit… heavy handed?”

“It’s the truth. When lying, always stick to the truth.”

“I know, but that’s… audacious,” her smile is loud in the dark. “Cheeky.”

He can’t help but laugh a little.

“Matthieu-Alexandre...,”

Jeanne rolls the vowels on her tongue like Bernajoux would a good wine, relishing each note. Until she finally nods. “It suits you. It’s a beautiful name.”

She says it, but at the same time brushes her lips over his shoulders, adding a silent “Cahusac” as if to reassure him.

She falls silent and he knows she is looking at him, almost like a physical caress.

There is not a hint of guilt in her voice, when she finally speaks.

“Tréville… Jean…”

Cahusac groans.

“I knew it!” he grumbles. “You talked to him about… this?”

“Maybe?” he can feel Jeanne’s lips pull into a smile against his shoulder.

“Oh God! Don’t tell me. Whatever he said, I so don’t need to know about his love life.”
That has Jeanne perk up, but he appeases her at once.

“I can’t tell. Whatever Jean’s love life.. you’ll need to ask him. I’m not dishing.” Though she will have to find out at some point and soon. He adds in his head. If she stays, that is.

“But you’re talking with him about it,” she exclaims. Her mouth and eyes form three almost perfect “o”s, her face alight with glee “Gooooood, Cahusac you are such tattle tales, all of you.”

“No,” he grumbles and pulls her down again, back against his body, already sorely missing her warmth.

She giggles and curls against him, planting a kiss on his shoulder.

It’s a strange, carefree sound. Such a happy sound. He wants to grab it and hold onto it forever.

But of course, Jeanne doesn’t forget the bad things for more than five minutes.

“Will you be able to sleep?” she asks.

“No, if you keep talking.”

“Cahusac, I’m serious.”

He sighs.

“I don’t know. All I know is that this scent is perfectly chosen and I want to kiss Tréville for it. It changes yours into something new, without denying who you are.” Cahusac sneaks his arm around her, pulling her close enough to breath deeply. A reminder to her, that he, if nothing else is willing to take the risk.

“It doesn’t cover it up. It’s like a perfect complement. Like a dress that makes you appear different, better able to blend in, but it doesn’t hide you. Does that make more sense to you?” He brushes his lips across her cheek. “It’s warm and sweet. It brings the pack scent into it. Safe. Like one of us.”

“Though I am not,” she whispers, sadness heavy like old pain. Not fresh or cutting, just the weight of a well worn blanket that is of a comfortable familiarity.

It’s wrong on so many levels, that he can’t begin to fathom the anger welling up inside him. She sounds lost. Perhaps it’s that that has him respond like he does, maybe it’s wishful thinking - a stupid irrational wish to keep going down that road where Boisrenard takes to Etienne as if he were his own. Where he haggles with Cahusac for time to spend with the little one, to be the one to teach him something new.

A road where Bernajoux sits with Simon on the balcony overlooking the courtyard, watching him work on a piece of wood, a steady solid presence next to the skittish pup, caring for one of their own that has been wounded.

“Yet…” he murmurs into her hair, holding her to him.

He knows it hinges on him. He knows that Boisrenard already started listening to her and that Bernajoux turned to her without reservation when his mate was hurt, referring to her skill. That they sit and chat, getting closer without truly having to try.

“I’m Betan, Cahusac.”

“That’s no criterion for exclusion,” he growls, he can’t help it.
There is a tone of self-deprecation that is right and then there is whatever just rose in her voice, that old pain coming to the forefront where it connects with the thought that nobody had ever made the effort to introduce her to the Underground, to give her the token, denying her that protection though she worked for them for years.

“I don’t know where you got that from, who made you believe that, but being Beta is not a reason.” Cahusac needs to talk to Tréville about her teacher, just have her checked out. Or have Adèle sic Anne and Michel on her. Just to be sure.

Jeanne shakes her head and when he playfully growls and nips at her nose she nods.

He has no idea if she agrees or denies what he just said, it doesn’t matter.

“If you don’t believe me, ask Jussac and Richelieu.”

She tries to push into a sitting position again. He doesn’t let her. It’s laughable, how little strength she has, compared to him. And a bit frightening. A lot. She’s so fragile.

“Richelieu?! But I thought he was…,”

“Oh, Richelieu is. Jussac isn’t.”

“Jussac?!” Her tone is beyond disbelief at this point. “Jussac is a Beta? For real?”

“For real.” Now he laughs, her sad disappointment evaporated into incredulity, or maybe hope. “Our commander is Betan.”

“You’re pulling my leg, Cahusac!”

“I swear I’m not.” Next to him she raises her head, the only thing he lets her lift and stares at him. “Ask him, when you see him. There may still be some stupid enough to exclude you and he, yes, but we can’t afford that. And let’s be truthful, that treatment of Betas as lesser was a good part of what got us into that whole mess in the first place. You are not lesser. Never for us.”

He wants to explain, wants to make her see the fine intricacies that connect them. The layers of trust and familiarity that binds he and his Alephs together, beyond scent, beyond being different together. He wonders if she knows how intertwined her and her siblings scents are, distinct, yes, but unmistakably family. As he and his pack’s are.

He wonders if she even knows that effectively and strictly speaking she is the Alpha of her own little pack.

But how would she know?

Does she even know what she smells like? It’s followed by another question, one he never had to ask himself. What does Bernajoux look like to her? And how much does it inform her view of him, as compared to his and Boisrenard’s, who connect him first and foremost with scent?

“Jeanne…I have a question.”

There is no time like now, his body still thrumming with the energy of too much rest. Jeanne’s with too much worry.

It’s not the first night he spends talking, turning over new ideas, different concept or battle plans. He can use it later to go to bed earlier or maybe to persuade her to a nap. To convince her to sleep in
his bed again, instead of her pup’s. Or simply to have her to himself for just a while longer.

***

It is Bernajoux’s third night on duty on a row. Jussac is taking over the day watches, Adele is following the trail of the throwback slavers and with Cahusac down he and Boisrenard had been pulling far too much overtime already.

The fight with the Musketeers couldn’t have been more ill timed.

The other Alpha had wanted to take over guard duty anyways.

Not as long as Bernajoux was able to stand would his mate have to go in to pull a shift when he was injured and still in danger of bleeding.

It had been the same old discussion, the same old complaints and the same old compromise.

Bernajoux was allowed to take over two shifts and then Boisrenard would double up.

“I love you with all my beating, bleeding heart, Bernajoux.” He had said, his body curled against Bernajoux’s own, the wounded arm draped securely over his mate’s chest, “But your idea of compromise is laughable. It’s guard duty, for heaven’s sake!”

Bernajoux had kissed him and shut him up. He isn’t risking infection. Not over something that menial.

He expects to sit with Jeanne, to accept the bowl of warm porridge she will push into his hands without fuss.

She is not a bad cook, but in comparison to Cahusac who actually loves doing it, and Richelieu’s cook who makes it a point to regularly feed “her boys” as she calls them, Jeanne is simply not bad.

Except her oatmeal. She makes it fresh and sneaks in honey and apples and berries and makes it just sweet enough to tempt and not so sweet that it overpowers. Because Etienne loves it the way she makes it. And incidentally, so does Bernajoux.

Maybe they will talk, about Paris, the Resistance, history. It’s what they do when the others are still asleep.

To her it’s the only minutes of a day she has to herself. To Bernajoux it’s a way to gauge her, to find out who this person is that suddenly is in his territory and under his protection.

He hadn’t missed the fact that she was missing the day before.

Boisrenard and his meddling ways be damned.

The first thing that welcomes him inside the door is Etienne’s happy cackling, followed by Jeanne’s sharp “Sit still!”
He turns around the corner and is greeted by the view of Cahusac, bare to the waist, bent forward at the kitchen table. His left hand is stretched on the table top, just inside the reach of the Alpha pup on the other side.

He animates the little one to catch his hand, playing upon his natural competitiveness.

The game is perfect to keep the attention of a three year old. It’s also perfect to train his reflexes.

That in itself is not yet unusual. Boisrenard does it all the time and thankfully Jeanne is indulgent enough to act like she doesn’t notice.

“Don’t excite him too much, he’ll fall off the chair, Cahusac,” she murmurs now, bent low over the shoulder of Bernajoux’s little Aleph, working a strong smelling salve into the angry red scar tissue that covers his right upper back. “And then I will have to slap you and Bernajoux will get angry.”

And this is when Bernajoux discovers the angry red scratches on Cahusac’s skin and the red and blue bruise on Jeanne’s neck. This is the moment, when he notices the foreign scent on her and turns away, walking past the kitchen with steps as light as he can make them, and straight into his and Boisrenard’s room.

His mate is fast asleep, curled around the two blankets Bernajoux usually calls his own like an oversized kitten around its favorite toy.

He doesn’t wake up when Bernajoux drops his weapons and belts, nor when he shucks his clothing.

Only as he crawls into bed and sneaks into his mate’s arms does Boisrenard stir with a content sigh and a broad smile.

“G’morning love. Watch been calm?” Boisrenard mumbles.

Bernajoux rolls him onto his back to take his mouth in a stormy kiss and with a deep laugh as the idiot sprawls under him, arms and legs lazily thrown every which way.

As Bernajoux lowers his body to pin the other Alpha’s to the bed, arms carefully curled around his mate’s head, Boisrenard blinks awake with an expression of pleasant surprise and a low hum.

“A’right, beautif’l… “ he mumbles. “Gimme a hint… how did I earn this?”

“By being obnoxiously yourself.”

“eh?” is Boisrenard’s answer but he doesn’t waste a moment to curl his arm around Bernmajoux’s waist to hold him in place

“Let’s just stay in bed a little while longer. The children are occupying the kitchen and need some privacy.”

“The kids, why? Wait, you are not talking ‘bout Etienne ‘n Simon, are ya?”

Bernajoux runs his tongue along Boisrenard’s lips and hums to the negative.

“Oh….oh! She came around. That’s good.” Boisrenard laughs and wraps his second arm around his mate.

“Cahusac will have your hide.”

“Nah. Lil’ Matthieu loves me.” he snorts and in a slow, languid rhythm rocks his hips upward,
staring at Bernajoux as if he were the world.

Bernajoux’s breath catches in his chest, his gaze captivated by the deep brown eyes of the Alpha under him who smiles with warm pleasure, soft and relaxed and inviting.

He is like this in the mornings. Speech soft and a little slurred with his childhood dialect, soft rolling like the sea. Pliant and open, without defenses. Giving. Always giving.

“Don’t let him hear that name. I can’t protect you against that, Jaques.”

“I love you, Bernajoux…” he pauses.”I should, I married you. But lil’ Mathieu wouldn’t hurt me.” Boisrenard laughs against Bernajoux’s lips. “And now… on with the morning program”

End of Part 1

Chapter End Notes

I asked for song suggestions. None came forward, but, as proof I actually have a playlist:

Chapter soundtrack: David Guetta (feat. Sam Martin) - Dangerous

SOfmebody askes me where the title of this fic comes from:

Corinthians 13:13

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
Same old trouble

Chapter Notes

If you read this before you might have noticed a change.

Ever since I wrote this part something bugged me, but it took me going back to it now, months later, to find out what it was.
The joys of writing, really.

The first twelve chapters of These Three Remain are very much the story of Jeanne and Cahusac falling in love and overcoming all the things stacked against them. And that part was finished (yay) they made it. They crossed a divide placed between them by fate and the reality they live in to find to each other and overcome what happened to them. They worked hard for it. And just going on after that always felt like I somehow diminished that hard won achievement, the bravery they needed and how hard they fought through all that pain.

But there is more story to tell, not only about Jeanne and Cahusac, but their pack and the Resistance. There are still bad men to be punished, lives to be saved, and let's face it, the hardest part of a relationship is making it work.

So, welcome to part two, of which so far three chapters have already been published, number 17 is in the works and the rest is plotted.

Part 2

When a Red Guard shows up around noon three days later to summon Cahusac to the Palais Cardinal he doesn’t even grumble. He just looks at Jeanne and rolls his eyes to her grin.

The Captain of the Musketeers wants to apologize.

Before he steps out of the gates and onto the street, a Beta, a Lieutenant of the Red Guard, clawed hand of Richelieu and the Inquisition, he steals a kiss goodbye.

It’s easy to ignore Boisrenard’s wolf whistle and the way he wraps an arm around Jeanne’s shoulder, stating loudly that he intends to amuse himself with Cahusac’s woman.

Then he drags her down into the courtyard as soon as the doors close behind Cahusac to teach her how to fight.

He laughs at Benrajoux’s bleary eyed and sleep fogged expression and dumps Etienne in his lover’s lap, where the pup is caught by a pair of heavily muscled dark arms, that wrap around the squirming body with care and determination.

Simon sits next to Bernajoux at the kitchen table, just as sleep tousled, his head bent over a book that somehow appeared in the household in the last days. It's a copy of a book of throwback fairy tales, not edited to conform to Betan worldviews.
Once outside Boisrenard’s amusement fades as he eyes her clothes with deep seated discontent.

“Knives, not rapier.” He walks around her as she stands in the yard, wearily eyed by Felix who languishes in the late October sun.

“Because you’d never be able to be the least bit effective in that.” Jeanne can’t help the feeling that he is personally offended by her long linen skirt and the vest she wears instead of a corset.

“Those are designed to hamper you,” he rants on, “make you more vulnerable. But since you need to move out on the streets, we can’t even put you into something more sensible.”

“And it’s angering you…” reaching out she steps closer, only for him to draw away.

“No, it’s pissing me off! It’s deliberate. It’s targeted at women, at Omegas, at unaligned Alphas to make them more vulnerable and less able to resist and it’s wrong on so -”

“Boisrenard!” she shouts. “I know.”

This time she does reach out and touches his arm, before she repeats, mollified and oddly touched that he cares: “I know.”

Standing in front of him she places both hands on his arms and looks up at his face that can be so open and happy and now is so drawn and angry. It seems if his hurt is only ever sleeping, waiting to awake at the slightest provocation.

“And they will see my skirts and think I am vulnerable and come close enough so that I can kill them if necessary. Same as Adèle.”

His dark eyes rest on hers as he nods, raising his big paw of a hand to brush back a strand of her hair.

“You are either weak and a carrier and can be overpowered…” he murmurs.

“...or you can defend yourself and they need to be scared of you. Like Adèle or Anne... She’s my friend in Lyon, an Alpha, too. She once said something to me along those same lines.”

Boisrenard nods, twirling the strand of her hair around one of his fingers.

The touch would be inappropriate in public; with Boisrenard it feels normal and right.

Enough so that she leans into the contact as she continues.

“They hate it when someone can make them as weak as we are. They don’t want strong people in victim’s clothes. People who can defend themselves.

They don’t just hate you, they hate their own weakness and the fact that you are stronger. That’s is, too, why they need to beat us down. To feel more in power.

I know that, Boisrenard. I live it!” Jeanne sets her jaw and lets him see her own anger, the thing that boils deep down inside her heart. The knowledge that this is how it is and she can’t escape.

It’s the one thing that connects her so intrinsically to any of them, but especially him. Because when it comes to temper, to the ability to lash out in fury at an perceived injustice, he’s the one she recognizes herself in most.
“Don’t be hurt on my behalf,” she adds, gently shaking him, which has about the same effect as trying to shake an oak.

Or rather a sea troll.

There is nothing oaken about Boisrenard.

He is salt and water and things she only ever heard about but never saw in person.

And under it… the faint trace of sweetness, of warmth, of the scent that already throws her with Cahusac and that she never so far had noticed on Boisrenard or Bernajoux.

Because they never so far let her close enough.

Jeanne has to follow it, has to try and sniff it out.

She knows she shouldn’t; it’s impolite on so many levels.

“That scent!” she exclaims anyways and Boisrenard laughs.

“Finally caught on, Squirrel, did ya?” His shining coal eyes sparkle and his lips draw into a lazy grin.

“That smell… what is it? Cahusac has it too, but the main scent is different. Do you all smell like that?” Jeanne bounces on the soles of her feet, excitement and a youthful curiosity inside her, like she hasn’t felt in weeks, perhaps even years.

It is an innocent joy, safe in the confinements of this courtyard, a freedom none of her family ever had in a world that hated them.

Boisrenard laughs at her antics, wrapping an arm around her shoulder to squish her to his side with warm affection.

“Oh, I´m not telling, Squirrel,” he chuckles. “But yes, it’s… a pack thing.”

He pauses, thinks.

“Actually, it’s more like a family thing. But what it is you’ll have to find out on your own. ‘m not dishing.” His gaze lingers on her, lips still drawn into an impish smile.

Jeanne stares up at him, the excitement bubbling in her chest turning her into a younger version of herself, one that is still fascinated by the vast world around her and all the wonders it holds. One that is able to see them as wonders instead of threats.

“But is it more like something that someone brings into the group, or is it something that develops between all of you?”

Boisrenard, for all his fun-loving, easy-going ways, is nothing if not a reliable source on anything concerning throwbacks, and never some overblown myths or high-handed philosophy. It is everyday facts and knowledge of everyday people. Her people.

Now though he stares at her, mouth hanging open as he grapples for a reply.

“What?”

“Is it,” Jeanne tries to explain. “…this smell component, that you share… is that something that
developed out of you three, what you are together. Or is that something that one of you brings into it and that the others take on, for example.”

“I know exactly what you mean, I just can’t figure out how you don’t know that. Your family is….”

“But I am not. Boisrenard, I have no sense of smell like you do.” Her finger jabs his side. “I smell you and usually I recognize it, because I know what to look for. But you all are wearing some kind of perfume. And I need to be really close even without that.”

Their eyes meet and his thoughtful hum vibrates between them.

“Cahusac was just as confused... “ she murmurs and jabs his ribs again, just for sport. “Be nice to the scent blind person.”

Boisrenard laughs and it echoes back from the walls surrounding the courtyard like a bright echo in the misty October light.

“Not blind.” Chuckling, he drops a kiss to her hair. “Only short sighted, Squirrel. Tell you what…” He points at a wooden post, disfigured by numerous cuts and slashes.

“You be an attentive student and I’ll explain how it works. And maybe, if you’re a good girl, we’ll tell you what it is. Deal?”

She takes it, of course. If anything, she is too curious not to. And it’s not hard to be attentive. In addition to being a beautiful human being, Boisrenard is a good and patient teacher with a talent to break down the movements into scrutable segments.

Contrary to Cahusac, as Boisrenard tells her. The other Alpha is a great fighter, especially unarmed and in close quarters, but wholly instinct driven and too immersed in what he does to explain.

Bernajoux is better, he adds, but he has no patience for mistakes. Which is funny, because usually Boisrenard is the one with the unforgiving temper.

Jeanne can’t help but feel a jab, the guilt about her own temper only ever a word away. It abates as Boisrenard steps close, a solid wall in her back, to gently correct her stance.

He isn’t shying away from physical contact anymore. No longer shying away from getting close to her scent.

***

As Cahusac rides back into the courtyard by late afternoon, Boisrenard has already driven her through a dozen movements with a knife in hand. He has had her repeat each one several dozen times, always spurring her on with the promise to finally reveal what she wants to know.

Only when she had barely been able to lift her arms anymore had he finally given away that the sweetness was something that had originally been unique to Bernajoux and that their scents had grown closer as the two Alphas had, by now so similar as to be indistinguishable.

Cahusac’s had taken on notes as they had raised him from ‘scrawny pup to something resembling an
Alpha’, a side effect of them spending almost every waking hour and a few sleeping ones in close proximity.

The salt that was Boisrenard’s scent blended seamlessly into Cahusac’s stronger fir tones and was a lot harder to detect. He swore it was there and Jeanne promised to look for it, to his laughing delight.

Jeanne equates it to the way she recognizes her sibling’s voices in the middle of every crowd, their forms from hundreds of meters away by the mix of colors and posture and movement that is uniquely them.

As she still distinctly remembers her father’s deep, booming voice or her mother’s gentle playful laugh. The habit, Philippe Durand had had, of leaning against any vertical surface, head lowered and turned to the side as he listened. His wife’s soft dancing steps, head held high and free.

Boisrenard had turned her then, with gentle hands, to face the wooden post again, pushing her until her body protested, pushing her thoughts away until the grief retreated once again.

He only had let her up once.

Bernajoux had called down that he was going to cut Simon’s hair and Jeanne had had to take a break to convince her Odem that this was necessary and his hair would grow out soon enough.

She had neglected to mention that they would just have to cut the silky black strands skull short again.

Bernajoux was right, as fine-boned as Simon was, the fact that he had such nice hair didn’t help to conceal he was not a boy, no matter how much they lied about his age. Her baby odem’s vanity would just have to take that hit.

Now Simon’s haircut bears a striking resemblance to Boisrenard’s.

That’s the first thing that makes Cahusac pause as he sees him sitting on the steps to the balcony, the second is the knife in her hand, that by now molds comfortably into her grip.

He glares at Boisrenard at her side and Boisrenard answers with a daring and wholly unconcerned grin.

Jeanne’s gaze wanders between the two of them, taking in their stances, their expressions, only to decide in the end, it’s of no consequence.

It was, after all, Cahusac who had asked his packmate to teach her.

She is not the canvas for them to take out on their little dominance displays.

Which is why she steps out from under his arm, as Boisrenard tries to hug her to him again in response to Cahusac’s unhappiness.

A move Jeanne wants to correct right away, when Cahusac’s full lips draw into a smug little smile. Jeanne finds herself between them, a smile on her lips and fondness in her heart.

She is sure they are not serious about it. Boisrenard is Bernajoux’s with every fiber of his being and
Cahusac knows it. Even if he should doubt her.

It’s Cahusac who drops the pretense first, stepping up to them with a dire expression and the words “We need to talk.”

It’s the same expression he had had when he asked her to hide out in the safe rooms in the burnt out convent.

Just like that Boisrenard drops his smile, the curse he hisses between his teeth bordering on blasphemous. He sprints up the stairs, already calling for Bernajoux.

Jeanne is stopped from following by Cahusac’s hand on her arm and his smile, carving out a few seconds of respite before the world’s problems catch up with them.

The gravity on his face is not gone, but for a moment, as he looks at her and steps close to bring their bodies together, it fades behind a spark of happiness in his eyes.

She reaches up and brushes over the faint lines that fan out next to his eyes.

Her heart stumbles as her mind dives into the crystal clarity of his gaze and all the things she could do to him.

Cahusac bends his head and steals a kiss, just a soft, sweet tangle of their lips and tongues, a soft sigh on his lips with closed eyes and a smile.

She can’t resist the temptation of his scent, burrying her face against his neck with her lips caressing his skin.

Breathing deeply she catches it, the dark woodland scent of firs and a spicy sweet scent of something like burning resin. And woven into it a fine thread of salt, a memory of the sea.

It paints a picture before her minds eye of tales she heard, but never saw herself.

It’s as if the men who shaped him, who raised him to the Alpha he is now, are truly etched into his essence. It’s beautiful and a bit terrifying. Just like him. Like that irrational need to scream with an overabundance of happiness when he looks at her as he does now.

“Did Jean give you a dressing down?” She murmurs to his chuckle.

“Maybe? If so, I won’t tell you. I don’t need the two of you allying against me.”

“I do,” Jeanne whispers against his lips and smiles.

“We might have to agree to disagree there, mon coeur.”

Up on the balcony Bernajoux yells Cahusac’s name.

Jeanne jumps at the annoyance in his voice. Cahusac just smirks.

“We are calling,” he murmurs.

She wants to tell him they should go and not let Bernajoux wait. She needs to be responsible, be a
good example to her siblings. Be an adult.

Instead she smiles back and nips at his lower lip, tasting faint traces of wine and his smile.

“On the other hand...we could abscond,” he murmurs after a moment of deliberation.

Jeanne is tempted to say yes in the second before she remembers that “work” likely means saving someone’s life. So, she sighs and touches a last gentle kiss to his lips and smiles, as he tries to catch hers with his teeth.

“You explain that to him,” she laughs as she tugs him along and up the stairs like a reluctant puppy.

***

“We need to extract someone from the clutches of the Musketeers,” is Cahusac’s opening statement and below the levity lies a tone of worry.

They have congregated around the kitchen table, Simon tasked with keeping Etienne and the cat busy outside.

“Marc de Vernantes,” Cahusac adds. “One of their latest additions, not even out of the training squad yet and already caught the attention of the wrong people.”

“What happened?” Boisrenard asks. He sounds neither surprised nor overly concerned by the prospect and Jeanne’s speeding heart slows a few beats.

For a moment there had been dread, still all too eager to flare up at the slightest provocation.

While she is only too aware of the danger out on the streets of Paris, having the reminder here, in this kitchen, causes a twang of pain in her heart. She can’t keep up the illusion of safety, no matter how much she wants to.

It was a nice reprieve. It’s over.

“Madame Delorme….” Cahusac says and Bernajoux groans in annoyance, while Boisrenard growls under his breath.

“I hate that stupid rutting excuse for a goat!”

“Oy!” Cahusac calls, only to be pelted with a hulled hazelnut.

“And the Gascon is defending the goats. How original….” They glare at each other until Bernajoux drops his left hand on Boisrenard’s neck, squeezing slowly and Boisrenard takes a deep drag of air.

“What's it with her?” Jeanne asks into the silence finding Cahusac’s gaze.

“Marion Delorme is a rich widow, moving in the Queen’s inner circle,” he says, dislike coloring his voice.

“She has a thing for...soldiers. Young soldiers, with little social standing and support… and she
doesn’t take no for an answer.” Cahusac rubs his left over the edge of the table, casting her a grin that seems just a little off.

“She usually threatens to spread rumours about them. Her favorite seems to be making people believe her targets must be throwbacks, because that’s the only reason they would refuse her.” His face twitches into an uncomfortable expression.

“After Richelieu threatened retaliation should she ever come after one of his guards again, she has been pillaging the ranks of the palace guards, courtiers, palace employees, the royal huntsmen… and now she set her sights on the Musketeers.” He pushes back his hair and sighs deeply.

“Cahusac?” Jeanne murmurs, reaching for his right hand, curled against his chest in the sling. “Did she ever go after you?”

He snorts and it sounds not the least bit amused. “Funnily not. She’s probably the only one.” He jerks his head toward the other two.

“She went after Bernajoux; actually tried to blackmail him. Boisrenard almost killed her.”

Boisrenard smiles as he looks over his shoulder, away from Bernajoux, and his eyes land on her. There is not the slightest bit of remorse, only the deep need to hurt anybody who dared hurt his mate.

“Richelieu banned me from court for three months just to keep me from going after her.” He is still smiling as he turns his head, rubbing his neck against the dark hand clutching it. “Wise decision.”

Her eyes meet Cahusac and his lips twitch in a soft warning.

“What a lovely person...,” is all she says.

On the other side of the table Bernajoux distracts his partner, focussing the other Alpha on himself.

Cahusac just shakes his head at her, rolling his eyes at his packmates with an indulgent smile.

“Jussac and Tréville think…”

With another eyeroll and a loud clearing of his throat he repeats once more: “Jussac and Tréville think…,” that catches the attention of Bernajoux and Boisrenard and Jeanne has to look away to hide her smirk. “...we should wait her out.

She has started to threaten him and he basically told her to go ahead and try. So, we wait ‘til rumours appear. If she doesn’t start them, we will. We uncover him. Then we execute him.”

“You...WHAT?!” Jeanne cries.

Boisrenard reaches over and clamps his hand on her arm effectively preventing her from jumping up.

“Publicly. To give Vernantes a new identity and then Richelieu wants to pull him into the Resistance.” Cahusac dismissively waves his hand.

“Jean says he’s too headstrong, too hellbent on action against the Inquisition to not endanger the Musketeers in the long run.”
“But you can’t just...,” she speaks up and falters, because three Alphas around her look at her with eyes that say they can and they have. They probably have so many times that for them it’s not even unusual anymore.

They wouldn’t care to uproot a life to save it, to burn all the bridges just to make sure someone has the chance to go on.

Jeanne, in that one moment, misses the smell of the Rhône like a piece of her heart. She wants to hear Michel’s sunshine laugh and his careless drawl as he tells lewd stories of the harbor district’s inhabitants, a big pot of fish soup on the stove.

She wants home.

“How?” she asks.

It’s Bernajoux who answers, though none of them meet her eyes.

“Public arrest. Drag them through the streets naked. Unpublic torture. And then either bring them to the hunting grounds to kill them or they die under torture. That of course never happens. We don’t actually torture them.” His face is blank and still she sees the pain underneath.

“Why would you punish him for her crimes?”

“It’s no punishment and she commits no crime.”

“Then why is Boisrenard ready to go out there and rip her head off?” she hisses, leaning across the table towards Bernajoux, getting dangerously close to Boisrenard.

“Because Bernajoux would have had no choice if Richelieu hadn’t intervened and he had enough of that already!” Boisrenard yells at her and she just yells back.

“Exactly!”

Silence falls.

Within her the meaning of Boisrenard’s words settled and adds yet another layer of pain to just about everything. She does not know what exactly happened to Bernajoux, but she doesn’t need to. The possibilities are endless.

Cahusac carefully tugs her back by her belt. Bernajoux just as carefully settles his hand on Boisrenard’s neck again.

They stare at each other over the table top and in the end it’s Jeanne who releases a slow and careful breath.

“Why don’t you just kill her?” She asks into the silence, calm and collected, presenting a terrible, but logical conclusion.

“She won’t stop. If those were young women instead of young men, if more of those were throwbacks, you would all be up in arms.” Jeanne takes great care to look into each of their eyes.

“I know, you don’t care about young Beta males. I understand that you have enough on your plates already. But from what I hear, and please correct me if I’m wrong, she always chooses those who can’t defend themselves. Who are too young, who have no choice but to comply. Right?”
All three nod.

“She made a mistake with Bernajoux, probably because she saw him as isolated or as someone less who is easier to subdue... He is neither, but just imagine some of them being Beta but having throwbacks in their families. They can’t refuse her! And now she set sights on the Musketeers… I mean, how powerful is she if she’s in the Queen’s inner circle?”

“How likely is it that the threat to out anybody will have an effect on the Musketeers?”

Three pairs of eyes tell her more than she needs to know, a silent warning, a hint of fear at the thought alone that anybody might connect the word “throwback” with the Musketeers.

She doesn’t want to know how many there are. Their Captain is an Omega, that alone says enough. She doesn’t need to know more. Not knowing is a blessing she will hold onto for as long as possible.

“How likely is it that she will actually stop?” she now asks and Cahusac at her side grumbles.

“Jeanne, we can’t just kill her…”

“Why not? She is a danger. She is a predator who deliberately goes after the weakest. She endangers throwbacks, so what could possibly hold you back?! Is it so hard? Her security? Is she that important to France? What?!” Her cry echoes through the kitchen and fades into silence.

Boisrenard looks at her, one corner of his mouth curled up. He nods slowly, leaning back in his chair, one hand resting on Bernajoux’s thigh.

Bernajoux and Cahusac on the other hand, deliberately look anywhere, but her.

It takes a long time for Cahusac to answer.

“She’s a carrier….”

“What?” Jeanne repeats, staring at Boisrenard, her only ally in that discussion, as if the Alpha had any answer.

He shrugs, leaving it to Cahusac to speak.

“We can’t just kill a woman who has never held anything but a butter knife in her life. It’s not right.”

“Let me rephrase that... you have a little brother. He’s... how old were you when you came to Paris? Simon’s age?”

She fully turns to Cahusac now, leaning in to stare right at his face.

“He finds a place with the Musketeers or another regiment, perhaps as safe a place as he can get. Maybe he can finally start making a life.” Around the table the Alphas nod, they relate.

“He doesn’t know anybody with power, because if he did, she wouldn’t come after him. He has nobody to support him, nobody to back him up.

You are the Inquisition. You are safe, but do you have any idea how prevalent that is? How often people are accused; their lives turned upside down?” Pushing back her hair, Jeanne slams her hand on the table top, to accentuate her words.
Of course, it’s not their fault. They are safe in their daily lives and with the permanent danger they put themselves in, she is the last person to begrudge them.

Still, how would they know how it feels to always tether on the edge of not drawing attention, positive or negative, because it courts jealousy and greed and someone trying to get rid of a rival or to blackmail another into submission?

“He has to share her bed or else he will find himself with the Inquisition or in a lynch mob or in the company of someone looking for a good time faster than he can leave the city.” She breaks off and turns as Bernajoux sucks in a sharp breath, too acute a reaction for her to not have hit a nerve.

“You wanna know how fast that is?” Jeanne’s words cut. “Ask my parents. No, even better. Ask Simon! Because he’s the only one who can still answer!”

She waves Bernajoux off, when he wants to interject. Jeanne is not done yet.

“She may not be holding a knife, but words are nonetheless a weapon she uses. And she uses it against people unarmed and too weak to defend themselves. They might be Betas, or else they probably wouldn’t have shared her bed, right?”

All three make a face at that and Jeanne whips her head around to stare at Cahusac, dread sinking in her stomach. “No!”

“No. Never. Not me. I killed everybody who tried.” He smiles. Somewhat. It’s still wrong the way his lips pull into what should be a smile, but it’s honest enough to make her believe it.

“But there were others, weren’t there? Who were helpless to people like her? Cahusac… at some point she will pick another throwback. If only by chance. I don’t know how many there are at court… and after I found out about you and Jean I’m not taking chances, but….” Jeanne trails off and looks at them.

"We could try and get the King to banish her from court," Cahusac murmurs.

"Would he do something against the Queen's wishes?" Boisrenard counters, speaking up for the first time.

It’s the right thing to say, as the other two Alphas grumble to an unhappy negative.

“It does give us more leeway in handling his extraction,” Cahusac adds with careful optimism coloring his voice. “We can keep his cover intact.”

Bernajoux sighs, rubbing his hands together. He only needs to take one look at the unhidden smugness in his mate’s expression to give in.

“Alright, we need to lay it out to Jussac. If we can convince him….”

Jeanne nods, eyes on Boisrenard, accepting the gentle dip of his head with a smile.

***

The Palais Cardinal is huge, it is gigantic. Lurking over the city and the Louvre like a hungry toad,
waiting to pounce.

Or maybe that is just the reputation of its inhabitant coloring each and every perception.

It’s hard not to cower, not to try and hide as they come closer than she had ever dared.

One beat of Jeanne’s heart wishes Simon were here, just to see it this close. The sculpting on the facade is beautiful. The other is glad, he and Etienne are at home, safe and protected by everything this building stands for.

She is glad the only things she has to hope for is that Etienne will not destroy something irreplaceable and set nothing on fire.

Inside the Palais it’s even worse.

Long, echoing corridors, framed by endless lines of floor length windows. Every step, the sound of every breath is magnified by the empty spaces around them, layering one over another to create a hollow symphony. It even smells empty, nothing but cold stone.

It makes the fact that Cahusac is there, but barely audible even more eerie.

“You must have been one hell of a burglar,” she whispers to the Alpha on her right, getting a lopsided grin in return.

“Why, Mademoiselle, do you want me to plunder your premises?”

He speaks low it enough that it doesn’t carry, but even though Boisrenard cannot possibly have heard that, one look at her horrified, garishly red face, tells him everything she never wanted him to know, judging from his suppressed laughing fit.

He is still snickering when Bernajoux knocks at a door and walks in.

Jussac looks up as they enter, placing his quill on his desk with a measured motion.

In that moment he looks nothing like the seasoned and dangerous soldier she met on the road to the estates, more like a slightly annoyed bureaucrat.

“I can’t help but be worried about you showing up like this, Bernajoux. It’s not your fault, but you dragging those two in here,” he points to Boisrenard and Cahusac with put upon patience. “usually spells trouble. So, what is it?” He pauses and points to a setée that sits freely in front of a wall of bookcases, noble, but not new. “Cahusac sit.”

“I can….”

“Sit down!”

“Yessir,” Cahusac grumbles and Jeanne has to look twice, but he truly sits and rests his arm against his stomach like a well-behaved young soldier.

Jeanne can feel Jussac’s eyes on her back as she follows to stand behind the couch and slightly to Cahusac's right, shielding his injury from the world.
It’s something she doesn’t think about when they’re out of the house. It’s just the knowledge that this is his vulnerable spot. The rest is the same instinct that her mother lovingly teased her about all her life.

The fact that Cahusac doesn’t actually need someone to protect him doesn’t quell her need to do just that.

When she looks up, she finds a pair of dark eyes measuring her from a pale face.

Even though Jussac is not in full uniform, seemingly relaxed, leather overcoat shunned, the doublet open, she can’t see him being Beta.

Even though she knows, there is something about him, something forceful, that commands respect instead of requesting it.

The fact that Bernajoux defers to him only adds to it.

Jussac leans back, arms crossed and gaze fixed on the dark Alpha with narrowed eyes. The lines cutting into his face that are too pronounced for his age.

Bernajoux stops in front of the desk, hands clasped behind his back, shoulders and back straight, his eyes fixed on the other side of the building visible through the window.

“We have come to the conclusion, after taking into account all known parameters, that letting Madame Delorme live is the least desirable course of action, Commander.” The overly stilted formality throws her for a moment.

Though Bernajoux has the subdued demeanor found in the upper echelons of society, he usually doesn't act on it.

It is a subtle misalignment that rights itself when his shoulders relax and he levels his gaze onto his Commander.

“With all respect, Jussac. That women needs to go.”

Boisrenard at Bernajoux’s side looks like a long nursed dream is suddenly within reach. Jeanne reaches out to gently run the back of her fingers up Cahusac’s neck, to his shuddering delight, and directs a smile at Boisrenard's back.

It's hard to begrudge him his joy.

She doesn’t quite understand where the “we” is suddenly coming from and how she came to be included in that, but Boisrenard smirks as he looks over his shoulder, a spark of evil in his eyes at the thought of ridding the world of a person who wanted to hurt his love.

That she understands just fine.

“We?” Jussac pushes away from his desk and stands.

“We had outside input,” responds Bernajoux, redirecting all of Jussac’s attention to himself.

He still looks past him and at her.

There is no use in Jeanne staying silent.
“She won’t stop. She is a predator that hunts helpless victims. She uses them up, ruins them and discards them. And on the way she uncovers a throwback or two. Something that a clever person might very well encourage and use to their own ends.” It is a logical follow through, making far too much sense to assume nobody else has come to the conclusion.

“Omegas are vulnerable because of their heats. Alphas, if they possess the least bit of self control, can only be found out by detecting their knots… which requires some very personal fondling.” Boisrenard in the background wheezes subtly.

“So, the fact that Madame Delorme is going after the strongest soldiers is in itself a blessing in disguise for whoever is after information like that. Either they sleep with her, and they’re found out. Or they refuse and are found out just the same.

The Queen is Spanish. Madame Delorme belongs to the Queen’s inner circle.”

Jeanne, her fingers still carding through Cahuasac hair, looks squarely at Jussac. “Don't be blinded by the fact she is a woman. She is as dangerous as any man, she just fights with a different arsenal at her disposal.”

The Commander of the Red Guards rubs his forehead and stares first at Bernajoux then at her with the expression of a headache boiling behind his eyes.

"Very well," he says. "I see it."

Looking around the room it's hard not to see the same satisfaction Jeanne feels on Boisrenard’s face. Cahusac is more worried, the tendons in his neck tightly coiled. Bernajoux looks plain worried.

“Say we kill her…” he says, his words rumbling slowly.

“We still need to get the little one out of the Musketeers and into the Resistance. Suggestions? Jeanne?” He turns to the whole room, but it’s she he fixes with his gaze. And suddenly they all look at her.

“Don’t tell me you have never done that before, Bernajoux.” Jeanne shoots back, to Bernajoux’s smirk.

“That’s not the point, I want to know how you would go about it.”

A test then.

Looking down at Cahuasac, she finds his head tilted back and a pair of bright blue eyes staring at her, a wry smile on full lips.

“Don’t look at me like you need help with that,” he teases. "Though maybe forgo setting fire to anything for the time being."

It feels natural. The way they banter back and forth, sometimes more amused than at others.

It reminds her of Beuvray, before everything went to hell, and the way he plucks food off his hunting knife.

The way he made her prove her proficiency with a weapon. And the way his impressed whistle had sounded in the early morning mist. The feeling of pride.

The way they had talked in the dark, how he had wrapped his arms around her from behind and
professed his belief in a caring, loving God.

Jeanne isn’t stupid. She knows he jerked awake at least twice last night and in the early morning hours.

But he had invited her nonetheless. Fearless. She wishes she were like that, not just faking it.

But she can fake it just fine for now.

It’s his decision, Tréville had said.

_He’s an adult. He and he alone can decide which risks to take. Don’t try. It never ends well._

_Be sensible, slap him if necessary, but in the end… it is his decision._

“Jeanne?” Bernajoux’s voice pulls her from her reverie, her gaze still lingering on Cahusac’s face.

“ You can still use those rumours.” She pushes the thoughts away and straightens, only her fingertip lingering on Cahusac’s neck.

”Either she spreads them, or you do. You will still arrest him, but he will be cleared. If anyone can do that...” Looking around, she finds a faint smile on Bernajoux’s face as well as careful appreciation on Jussac’s.

“I don’t know all the background, so I need to go out on a limb here and just assume the worst… well, probably best case scenario, but also the one that makes it more difficult: the Musketeers are at least half full with throwbacks.

If his comrades don’t know about his sex, you can pass him off as Beta. Just recruit him. The Musketeers will probably hate him, but well, one death you gotta die, right?” Jeanne shrugs.

It’s all theoretical anyways. She lacks facts to actually put together something reliable.

But she can guess and assume.

And build from there.

“Jean knows about Vernantes of course…,”Jeanne ponders aloud, words that have Jussac raise an eyebrow at her intimate usage of the Captain’s name.

Bernajoux casts a dark look at his mate, before he directs this tiny smile back at her when she goes on.

“Question is: how much do the Musketeers know, about Tréville, about their unit?

Depending on that, there are different outcomes.

They can either try to kill Vernantes, because he is a liability and a traitor. Or they assume - helped by the right persons - that he is a double agent within the Inquisition.

That should keep him pretty safe from them and still keep an avenue open, should he need to get in contact at some point.

As for why a Musketeer would let himself be recruited by the Red Guards… don’t answer that question. Rumor mill will make up an answer for you.” Jeanne flourishes her hand, presenting her conclusion as basic as it is with a wry smile.
"I’ll bet my only pair of good shoes, that it won’t take more than two weeks for everybody to believe he has been Richelieu’s agent all along."

She expects something serious from Bernajoux, something teasing from Boisrenard, maybe something scathing from Jussac, with the way he still watches her and Cahusac.

The last thing she expects is the slow clap from the door.

The man who stands there, effectively shielding Jean in the doorway behind him with his body, is surprisingly tall and thin with an angular face that seems at first glance to consist of nothing but sharp cut planes. His deep set blue eyes have locked on her, lips twisted into a sardonic smirk, that speaks of a brutally low opinion of her, or maybe just humanity in general.

“That was a nice summary of the general situation, lacking in details, but with interesting assumptions. Would you care to explain on which basis they were made?”

“Armand…” Trévillé places a hand on the arm of the person in front of him. For a moment it looks as though he were trying to move him, but abandons that idea.

Jeanne doesn’t have to guess, the finely made tunic in intricately crafted black and red leather, the heavy rings on his fingers and the silver cross hanging low on his chest, give him away.

She wants to ask him how he manages to hide his horns when going out, but a last shred of common sense keeps her silent.

Until the Bloody Cardinal takes a step into the room, to Trévillé’s lowly hissed “Armand!” and levels the force of his unforgiving stare on her.

“Who are you?” he grates and Jeanne manages to hold onto that shred of common sense by her fingertips.

“Jeanne de Boisrenard.”

"No, you are not.” is his snarling answers and she can’t help the amused look past him where Trévillé smirks at her, despite the worry in his eyes.

"You are that woman Cahusac dragged to Paris. What are you doing here?” Richelieu takes another step into the room and Jean walks past him, rolling his eyes as he goes.

He stops next to Boisrenard with a friendly and familiar nod.

If Jeanne didn’t know better, she’d think he positions himself in an interception path to the foul mooded Alpha that has his eyes on her.

Jeanne turns then, shoulders squared, chin raised in defiance as she steps closer.

"I am exorcising my demons, Cardinal." Screw put upon courtesy. She doesn’t care what has him in this mood, she is not here to be abused.

Richelieu recoils slightly, a subtle reminder that he is not, indeed, the monster throwback children are raised on. "Excuse me!?”

Jeanne can easily see, however, how he so effortlessly keeps up the myth. Apart from the stories about how he tore apart his Odem and all the other, no less bloody disappearances that surround his person, his presence makes it believable.
He seems harsh, abrasive, unconcerned by human notions. A perfect canvas for people to project sick urges and fears alike.

"Your Eminence?" Jeanne takes refuge in her most innocent smile, the surprising knowledge that Bernajoux at the periphery of her line of sight has positioned himself to support her, that Cahusac just got up and that Jean looks more exasperated than worried.

He looks fond, as his eyes rest on Richelieu, indulgent, but willing to step in, should any of them overdo it.

The Cardinal glances at Tréville then, a wordless exchange, natural beyond mere camaraderie, then back at her.

Before he can open his mouth to speak, Jeanne does.

“I apologize for the uninvited intrusion. Finding a smooth solution to the present problem seemed paramount.” She hopes he will never find out that she learned her placating skills on violent husbands, who occasionally cross the path of every midwife. It is of no consequence anyways. No perfect curtsy makes up for lack of genuineness. “I’m afraid, in my worry, I forgot the rules of courtesy.”

She didn’t actually, since Jussac was well informed about her person, her intentions and her company. None of that matters. This is, in a way, Richelieu’s home. She is an intruder in his eyes.

Jeanne does her best to ignore the way the Cardinal eyes her with distrust that borders on disdain. He likely isn’t even aware of it. A face like his probably rarely ventures beyond a sneer.

Knowing he is an Alpha goes a long way to forgiving him the more territorial behaviours. It’s almost endearing, acutely reminding her of Anne.

Of all the Alphas she has known, in her own family, in Lyon, in Paris, those two are the most alike at first glance.

Boisrenard has a very narrow circle of people he defines as “his”. Cahusac is more mellow towards outsiders. And Bernajoux, though he rivals the worst of them, is much more subtle in his behavior, more grounded and calm, like a large predator waiting for the one moment to explode.

Anne and Richelieu, however, they are prickly like blackberry bushes.

The first time Jeanne had accompanied Michel to his “home”, Anne had hovered in the background, like a cat with raised hairs, never moving one eye off her.

It had taken a memorable event of Jeanne arguing how their humid hovel was the last place anybody should have pups to get Anne to warm to her. Unexpectedly the Alpha, instead of being offended, had sided with her into a united front that had overpowered Michel’s tendency towards sentimentality – “Me carra been raised me in ‘at ugly hov’l, ‘cuse me please!”

Anne had moved them into a much dryer, though no less disgusting, apartment within a week.

It takes a certain kind of neighbors to put up with a pair of unaligned throwbacks, she always said.

And neither Anne nor Michel had wanted to leave “their” people. They simply thrived in the world of secrecy and illegality. They were good at it. After that and once Anne understood that Jeanne didn’t judge them, she had welcomed her and the prickliness abated.
That had only taken half Michel’s pupping.

So no, she doesn’t begrudge Richelieu.

It doesn’t mean she will grovel.

The fact that she is a Beta is what helps her hold his gaze with a bland smile.

She may have had to actively learn to stare down a man, but growing up in a society that put less value on subtle displays of dominance and went straight for violence towards weaker members had given her an advantage.

Or, as Papa had said: A society that teaches women that an opinions equals a beating before their first communion, doesn’t teach men to deal with strong willed women.

So, Jeanne had unlearned to be afraid of a raised hand and instead learned to barrel on by pure force of will.

The downside? At some point she had unlearned to give in. Giving in turned her into prey and Papa Durand hadn’t raised a stupid girl.

“I approve of the change of plans.” It’s Tréville’s voice that has both of them jerk to alertness.

“Mademoiselle Durand has a refreshing, ruthlessly practical way of looking at things and I approve of that, too.”

Richelieu’s head swivels towards the Captain right away, his annoyed outrage softening a fraction as his eyes meet the Omega’s. A curious thing, but suspiciously in line with his earlier attempt to shield Tréville.

A shocking suspicion dawns in Jeanne, as she looks away from the Cardinal and turns back to Cahusac, something so outrageous that, with all the things this group of people has already staged, seems like the only logical conclusion.

Her head wants to explode.

In the background, Jean just keeps talking, words that don’t filter through to her.

She will just keep silent, let them have their privacy and the safety of her ignorance, however long they want to keep that up. She will just believe that she is wrong, that this caring, warm Omega is not the fitting piece to the ruthless politician and scheming manipulator.

That the Omega, so worried about his friends, isn’t mated to an Alpha who hones his bloody and murderous reputation to such perfection, it’s impossible that part of it is not true.

They say, he hunts people at the Hunting Grounds.

They say, it’s throwbacks he hunts. Jeanne knows that part to be false, unless… what actually is it, that the Resistance does with blood traitors? What about Betas who are guilty of crimes against the throwbacks...

Cahusac catches her gaze and very subtly shakes his head, patting the seat next to him. There will be time for questions later. When they’re alone, when she is safely curled up in his arms. And can muffle her screams of disbelief against his shoulder.

If she will ever leave this room again, because of course, Jeanne-Marie Durand had to challenge
Richelieu.

Of course she did, and of course she curses herself and her own stupidity now.

Whatever Jean had said, it had dispersed a lot of the tension, had turned their thoughts back on the task at hand and Richelieu’s away from her for the time being.

Jussac on the other hand, is still watching her with narrowed eyes, measuring her up.

“Let’s get back to business…,” he says and makes it sound like a threat to her ears.

“Marc-Michel de Jalesnes de Vernantes is few years older than Adèle. He’s the grandadam of Charles de Vernantes, who died along with my father and Richelieu’s sire in a failed Resistance mission.”

Jussac looks at them, letting the words sink in, before he goes on.

The throwbacks in the room, while they notice the significance, don’t seem surprised, but Jeanne can’t help ask herself for how long Richelieu’s family has been fighting against the Inquisition, killing the killers, while her mother’s family had still been busy hiding.

So, he is not just noble nobility and throwback nobility, he is Resistance nobility as well. It’s hard not to bow to such impressive pedigree and resumé.

Even more impressive: it extends to Jussac as well, having stepped into the same footprints his father had left.

Richelieu looks up and sideways, catching her eye again. This time it is no hardship at all to incline her head.

It doesn’t matter if he hits each of her dislikes.

His actions speaks for themselves.

She doesn’t have to like him to respect what he does.

Jussac’s gaze moves slowly between them and finally settles on Bernajoux in another mute conversation, no less meaningful.

For a moment, Jeanne ponders what they’re reading in each other’s scent, before she remembers Jussac is just as “short sighted” as her.

A weirdly reassuring thought, that has her listen, calmer and more at rest, as the Commander goes on.

“Marc-Michel came to Paris six months ago after the death of his Sire. Due to a childhood illness Louis was never suitable to active Resistance work, but he knew and he supported us passively. As his mate still does. Marc is still clueless, but we have a vested interest in his welfare.” He pauses and makes sure to look at each of his subordinates until they nod in understanding. Then he looks at her and bar any alternative, Jeanne nods as well.

It feels strange but somewhat right at the same time.

Jussac barely stops speaking, before Tréville takes over in a seamless transition.

“Vernantes is headstrong, opinionated and while he is a good soldier, his drive to fight for our people
surpasses his willingness to just passively survive, safe within the Regiment. He’s also young and
stupid…” at those words everybody’s gaze lands on Cahusac with barely veiled affection and then,
without pause, Tréville’s roves to Jeanne with a smile.

“Marc is also very intelligent and exceedingly good at passing. None of his fellow Musketeers know
he’s not a Beta.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard then, we’ve done that,” Boisrenard murmurs and looks at his mate. “If we
can just make people look the other way and we pull him in, not because he’s throwback and gets
killed, but because he’s beyond any doubt and we just publicly recruit him? Cardinal could put ‘im
wherever he wanted.”

Cahusac looks at Jeanne with a raised eyebrow and a fond curl of his lips and turns to Richelieu, his
left hand wrapping around her right in a subtle move.

“I know you want to place him at Troisville for the time being, but we need someone with higher
class standing in Lyon… Anne and Michel are great at what they do, but they’re from the harbor
district…”

Richelieu takes that information in and gives a clipped nod, without voicing his agreement just yet.

“So.. are we going to do this before or after we got rid of the rutting excuse for a bad copy of good
Gascon goats?” Boisrenard says.

It is as if on cue that everybody in the room looks to Tréville with dawning horror. Tréville in turn
looks to Cahusac who just shakes his head with a roll of his eyes.

“You should all be glad for Gascons. What else would you make jokes about, if we weren’t
around?”

Jussac rubs his forehead, but it’s Richelieu who, with a deep Alpha growl, cuts off Boisrenard’s
likely very inappropriate answer, to give Jussac a chance to continue.

Everybody keeps their mouths shut after that.

“Vernantes will be with the contingent that accompanies his Majesty on a hunting trip three days
from now. Madame Delorme will sadly go and meet the maker while he’s out of town. You three
will arrest him as soon as they get back.” Looking around he takes them all in.

“Don’t even try to be subtle, but expect a fight. Marc de Vernantes is not someone to go down
easily. Just keep it between the four of you. Everybody needs to believe he’s a Beta. Bring him in,
we’ll do the rest.”

Nodding he refers to Tréville and the Cardinal. They have ended up close together again. It’s subtle
but being alert to it, she notices.

In their own safe sphere, among their own people, they are maybe not as cautious as they would be
anywhere else. If she isn’t reading this totally wrong.

“We will try to make as much political capital out of this as possible and have a very public fight that
will establish the mutual dislike between Red Guards and Musketeers.”

Everybody nods to that.

Jeanne files away the information, another one of those throwaway bits that everybody just assumes,
she knows about.

“And then we will present little Vernantes to Beaumont with a sad story of an innocent victim of blackmail and the request to take him on, when the Inquisitor comes to visit the Cardinal, because someone promised him a way into the Cardinal’s good graces.”

Cahusac doesn’t even have the decorum to look chastised as he waves at Jussac with a broad grin. “C’mon, Jussac, for how long have we tried to find a way into Lyon?”

Jussac shakes his head and turns to the other Alphas.

“Questions?”

“Only one…” says Bernajoux. “Who will take care of Madame Delorme? Usually that’d be Cahusac’s part, but Chiot had to get himself hurt…” The “puppy” makes a face in his Alpha’s direction like an actually five year old. It distracts all of them laughingly as the man behind the desk gets up and walks around it, joining them in the middle of the room.

“I will.” says Jussac, as calm and collected as any man ever spoke. Though around him three of the four Alphas cry out in unison, each a different declaration of disbelief, loudest among them Bernajoux who bellows above his packmates.

“You are the second in command, Jussac. Firstly, you are more valuable than any of us. Second, that’s what we are here for.

If anybody catches the slightest whiff of anything and if you suddenly start trying to flirt with her, people will notice… Neither can you just grab her at court and kill her without anybody getting suspicious!”

“ENOUGH!” Jussac drowns out the commotion for one deafeningly loud moment, and silence falls.

“I will,” he states, calm once more. “She’s a threat, yes. But she also is a personal threat. Vernantes is my responsibility.”

“Don’t be stubborn, Jussac. You already took on everyone in this room as your personal responsibility. Let us help. Should it be necessary I can charm my way into her bedroom just fine, as can Boisrenard. One armed or not.” It’s a statement by Cahusac, far more personal than just a subordinate to his commander and a sentiment echoed by BB. “But a lot of people will use the chance to connect this to a throwback threat and the more suspicious it is, the more trouble-”

Jeanne swivels her head, and stares, an idea just blooming in her mind that, as unrefined as it is, might just solve most of their problems with Madame Delorme at once.

Jeanne usually doesn’t move on that level of complexity, at such high stakes, but in the end when it’s broken down, these problems too come down to making the right people look away at the right moment. It’s nothing but making people believe what they want to see and the redirection of their attention.

“Let him do it,” she talks over Cahusac. “This is brilliant.”

She doesn’t notice how literally everyone in the room turns to her.

“Nobody in this room knows if she is after Alphas, or if she just chooses the occasional Alpha, simply because they are swimming in the same pond as her usual victims, right? Maybe somebody out there knows the answer, but actually, it doesn’t matter. You only need to make everybody
believe that she is actively seeking out Alphas.

Imagine a throwback hater takes the rumours she spreads at face value and makes an example of her.”

Jeanne takes three blind steps, eyes fixed on the ground. She needs to not see right now.

She needs to listen, the stream of thoughts filing through her head like an endless litany.

Until she almost bumps into Richelieu.

Only in the last second does she recognize the shoes that come into view and turns away, moving toward Bernajoux instead.

Stopping in front of him, she looks up into his face, latching onto the thoughtful expression and his slow nod.

“Secrecy or subtlety is the last thing you want to be going for. Make it public. Leave a warning. Maybe an accusation, to not get involved with throwbacks, or else: Madame Delorme.”

She turns away again, speaking as the thoughts get sorted in her head, her hands punctuating each.

“Even if someone suspects the Red Guards… seriously… it’s neither surprising nor unusual. You don’t become the most feared group of people in France by being subtle. They will ascribe it to you anyways, trust me. Do you have any idea….” Jeanne looks up and turns, to her Alphas mostly, but no one in the room is exempt, except Tréville. Tréville is definitely exempt from being evil.

“...do you have any idea how incredibly scared people are of you? How much they actually hate you? Throwback youths go to bed at night dreaming of tearing any of you apart with their bare hands. Betas are scared of you!“

“Not everybody is you, Squirrel.” Boisrenard reaches for her in the same way she sometimes tries to grab Simon just to cuddle him.

“Oh, few will act on it. They’re too scared. But Michel would love to dump a few bodies in the Sâone, given the chance. Actually, I suspect, he already got rid of a few Inquisition members that way. Sorry.”

“I recruited he and Anne, if you might remember,” comes the reminder from the settée and Jeanne can’t resist casting a narrow eyed glance in the direction of Cahusac’s knowing smirk.

“Anyways,” she takes up the thread. “People will assume it was you anyway, so no harm done there. If anything, it reinforces your masquerade.

What it does en passant is to discredit anybody who belongs to Madame Delorme’s circle. And some of those WILL be throwback haters and no matter what they say, it will appear they are just trying to appease anybody asking, right? It won’t work forever, scandals pass, but for a while….“

Jeanne ends up in front of Jussac’s desk and finds herself looking at the man. His approving nod is not unexpected. The approval in Richelieu’s voice is.

“While we usually try not to get rid of God fearing citizens of France…,” he says and Jeanne has to correct her earlier assessment. That was not disdain he turned on her. Richelieu’s disdain is a force of nature. “...it is a good course of action and might enable us to get access to a few people beyond our reach. On the other hand His Majesty will be very unhappy that his beloved wife’s reputation might
be tarnished by this, even if only by association.”
“IT might give Louis a chance to get rid of some doubtful elements in her circles though,” Tréville
counters. “His trusty first minister should have a few suggestions prepared.”

Jeanne turns, finding first Cahusac’s smile and then Tréville and Richelieu facing each other in
intimate familiarity. Each of their words carries a wealth of meaning, each response lacks the slightest
doubt. They have led this discussion in a hundred ways already.

They know exactly what the other thinks and any explanation would only hamper their
understanding.

“I doubt it,” says Richelieu now. “The Queen didn’t pick them for nothing.”

“Let him surprise you, Armand. Trust me.”

They do not even discuss it as a suggestion anymore, bypassed that step and went right to discussing
the effects.

Cahusac again shakes his head, patting the seat next to him and Jeanne goes.

She leans into his side, finding his arm around her shoulder and his lips against her ear, whispering
softly. “Watch it like you would a good theatre production. Enjoy it. They will take it from here.”

She doesn’t believe him, but smiles anyways. It falters as she looks up and finds Jussac watching
them, eyes narrowed still, before he slowly nods and turns towards the discussion.

It’s only then that, weirdly, she finds a thought that is new, a lack she didn’t think was one. “I have
never been to the theatre, Cahusac.”

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“Cahusac?” In the darkness of his room her whisper sounds unnaturally loud.

His left arm tightens around her shoulders in gentle warning, before his unhappy, sleepy grumble
reverberates through his shoulder under her ear.

“Jean and Richelieu…?” her fingers shape his chest, brushing through the hair in fascinated
abandon.

Cahusac’s sigh holds a world of meaning, first and foremost his longing for sleep.

‘ave no idea what you’re talking ’bout.”

“You know exactly…” She tries to sit, but the arm around her shoulder flexes once and short of
using violence there is no budging it.

“have no idea what you’re talking ‘bout, ‘moiselle Durand,” he mumbles into her hair and brushes a
kiss over her forehead. “an’ you shouldn’t either…”

“Oh…of course,” Jeanne settles against him once more, biting gently, just once, into his bare
shoulder in reprimand. “But if Jean had, hypothetically speaking…”

Cahusac groans and turns towards her, his bright eyes shimmering in the darkness, not half as sleepy
as he wants to let her believe.

“I mean, “ Jeanne surmises. “Hypothetically… if he had someone who was special to him... That someone would be good to him, right?” It’s not that she suspects Richelieu of being abusive. She very much does not suspect Tréville of putting up with it. It’s just that Richelieu is so abrasive. Intentionally abrasive. And cold.

Cahusac grumbles again and squishes her against his body with a fake annoyed huff.

“Yes. He would hypothetically probably… conquer the world for him. Set things on fire. Be unbelievably stupid about it. Buy silly gifts. Stuff like that. Theoretically… if Jean had someone like that,“ Cahusac’s gruff words hold a wealth of stories, a wealth of history and fond memories.

“Which we have no idea about,” Jeanne adds with a low laugh. Relief and excitement warring in her heart with the image of Richelieu the Grumpy.

“Exactly. Can we sleep now? Please?”

“How silly?”

“Very!” Cahusac mutters and pushes his body above hers, pinning her to the bed on her back, only to drag his tongue up her cheek, like a half grown pup, with a playful growl. “Very, very silly.”

Jeanne laughs into his skin, holding on with delight as Cahusac proceeds to tell her about something hypothetical involving smuggling sugar candy while on a mission to Italy.

She insists that this is not a bedtime story and she doesn’t fall asleep in his arms to the sound of his sonorous voice in her ear.
Bernajoux and Boisrenard can be the most caring people in the world. They can be the warmest and sweetest Alephs a pup can dream of.

But they’re still Alphas; sometimes temperamental to a fault, getting lost in their pain and worry for each other.

Cahusac knows them.

He knows that Boisrenard is likely to murder people with his bare hands if they belittle and threaten Bernajoux.

He knows, too, that Bernajoux breaks a little each time Boisrenard bleeds.

He can feel the simmering anger in Bernajoux from a mile away, the relief and satisfaction in Boisrenard possibly from the other side of the country.

Cahusac can see that clash coming.

On the first day of their wait, after the king has left for his hunting grounds, taking with him the Captain of his personal guard and his first minister, Cahusac takes Simon into the kitchen and teaches him how to hide and to cope.

He teaches him to cook.

They barricade behind the sturdy door and mountains of vegetables and meat.

Nobody wants to be anywhere near BB when they explode at each other.

“Why cooking?” asks Simon as Cahusac hands him a knife.

“Because someone always needs to eat, little Odem.” Cahusac looks up and for just a second it’s not Simon’s eyes looking back at him, but his Carrier’s.

There is a flash of guilt when Cahusac remembers, before the knowledge that the promise he gave her held true settles as a warm, gentle weight against his heart.
Simon smiles.

Jeanne joins them a little later, curling up on the cushioned windowsill, the one with the natural light and the view on the street below.

Etienne is sleeping against her shoulder and Felix at her feet.

This spot has been Cahusac’s for as long as he has been living in this house, right after BB had left their rooms in the Palais Cardinal, relegating them to stand by quarters.

And though nobody had ever expressively stated it, Cahusac had always known they had rearranged their, and by extend the Resistance’s, housing for him.

A week after Richelieu had found him hiding under his bed with a tray of food, Jussac had dropped him off with his lieutenants. Had handed him a wrapped package that held a uniform coat, far too large for his adolescent shoulders yet, with the words “Earn it!”

 Stranger’s company had not sat well with Cahusac back then, yet still he had found himself safely crowded that night by two Alphas who spend their resting hours teaching him how to cheat at dice instead of sleeping.

Now Jeanne has curled around Etienne, blanket pulled around her and the pup to keep the glass’ chill away.

She doesn’t quite sleep, only blinks lazily at their chopping and cooking.

As he impales a piece of carrot on his knife and walks over, as he dangles it in front of her lips to catch with her teeth, she blinks up at him and reaches out, rests her hand against his thigh a moment, before she smiles.

***

Jussac shows up the next day, the smell of blood on his hands and the shadow of war in his eyes.

Cahusac sits him down with a bowl of red wine stew and the knowledge that nobody will bother him until he is ready.

It’s Jeanne, walking in not half an hour later with a smug smirk on her lips, who fills Boisrenard in on all the gory details.

“They say she was eviscerated,” she tells him. “... the walls of her bedroom coated in blood! And someone had left a message in that blood!”

“Oh, what’s the message?” They stick their heads together like two market wives with too much time on their hands, unified in glee and inappropriate excitement.

“Something from the bible... ‘If there is a woman who approaches any animal to mate with it...’ and so on...” she responds with grave satisfaction and it has Boisrenard’s eyebrow both pop upwards as he turns to Jussac and continues her words.
“... you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall surely be put to death. Their blood is upon them…”

“The scene is greatly exaggerated,” says Jussac and holds up his bowl for another portion of stew. “The message is true, though. It’s from Leviticus.”

Jussac carefully doesn’t look at either of them.

The relief, the joy that suddenly spikes in Boisrenard’s scent, followed by faint guilt on Bernajoux’s part, has Cahusac lean in close and regard his mentor with worry.

“Do you think that we should have gotten rid of her sooner?”

Jussac looks up and shoves a piece of fine white bread into his mouth.

Then he shrugs.

“We won’t make the same mistake again.” Nothing in Jussac’s voice gives away any trouble, though still his eyes have a brittle touch to them and his normally so calm and mellow scent carries a sharp edge.

Cahusac has often enough found the same look staring back at him from the mirror, when the water just didn’t want to wash away the blood and the scent clung to everything.

Sometimes it just is like that.

That’s when you let pack crowd you a bit and wait until the mind settles again.

“Is there dessert?” This time as their eyes meet, Cahusac finds humor in his mentor’s gaze.

Because, of course there is dessert.

There always is.

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“We will grab Vernantes when they return from the Louvre,” Jussac says one hour later, sitting on the windowsill Jeanne occupied earlier. There is a cup of Bernajoux’s favorite wine in his hand and Felix a content, purring ball in his lap.

They have gathered around the kitchen table, cloths spread out to protect the already scarred wood, as they clean their weapons.

Bringing it all together in one fixed time and spot had been the first, and most important, change after they had brought Jeanne and the pups here. A desperate necessity.

It’s Etienne’s nap time. The only chance to do this without the little monster either trying to eat the small parts, drinking the oil or trying to get his hands on every sharp object he could possibly stab himself with.

“How many Musketeers are we expecting?” Cahusac asks and trades weapons to clean with Simon.
An arrest with half the garrison present, including Tréville’s Lieutenants will make this unequivocally more difficult.

But Jussac shakes his head.

“Jean will send the recruits ahead while the main troupe will stay with the king at court after they return from the King’s forest,” Jussac says. “So, three, no more than four including Demaret. Two Alphas and at least one Omega.”

“Doable,” rumbles Bernajoux from across the table. “The Garrison should be practically deserted except for the cook and the stable hands.”

It is as safe a set up as any.

With the distance between the Louvre and the Garrison and the fact that the Palais Cardinal is situated between them, Vernantes should be safely in the dungeons before the court even catches a wiff.

“We’ll grab him outside,” Cahusac says. “The Garrison is their safe place and we shouldn’t sully it for them.”

The others nod and Jussac adds: “The square is better for maneuvering anyways. And it gives Demaret a good opening to retreat inside to safety.”

“Don’t underestimate the townsfolk. Depending on much they like the Musketeers they might interfere.” Jeanne speaks softly from Cahusac’s right, wiping her fingers from oil.

It’s oddly timid for her. She usually doesn’t tend to speak quietly, when she thinks she needs to be heard.

“We can’t deploy the whole regiment, if we want to do this quietly. They’ll have their stand off at Court. It’s Bernajoux, Boisrenard and me.” He shrugs, barely noticing Bernajoux at the periphery of his field of vision rolling his eyes. “I’ll do my best to keep them complacent though.”

Jeanne leans forward and crosses her arms, until her shoulder ever so gently touches his right arm.

“You are an exceptional soldier, Cahusac. Exceptionally dangerous, too, but there is a serious lack that just can’t be denied….” she pauses for dramatic effect and then smiles as sweetly as a cat before it claws a man’s face off. “... you have no eyes in the back of your head.”

“Too dangerous!” Cahusac doesn’t think before he shoots her down.

It’s only when he hears Boisrenard groan in the background, he notices his mistake.

“Stop talking, chiot…,” his packmates murmurs.

It’s too late.

Jeanne’s eyes catch on his, blazing bright like the sun, her lips drawn into an angry line.

“What?” is Jeanne’s acidic question. “Can’t trust the stupid Beta woman with standing in a public square?”

“You are too inexperienced, Jeanne! This is not like shooting stationary target from the safety of a fortified church.”
It’s not that he doesn’t trust her. But trying to subdue an Alpha, if Vernantes or the other recruit lose their temper, can be so much of a bloody mess.

Cahusac more than anyone else knows what Jeanne can put up against an Alpha’s strength: Nothing. Absolutely exactly nothing.

He can span her upper arms with one hand. Same with her neck.

She is a healer. She doesn’t belong on a battlefield.

The thought alone of her fragile body, made for life, hands made to heal, not to kill…

“She won’t gather experience in the kitchen, Cahusac,” Jussac says.

Cahusac drowns him out. Nothing matters but the woman in front of him, angry red blotches on her cheeks, dangerously narrowed eyes and all.

“Do you remember what happened to the man who shot you? Or de la Barre?” Jeanne’s voice drips with contempt.

There is a memory of soft footsteps scratching over grass, hazy and washed out, yet vivid.

Cahusac remembers the shot, red blooming on a soldier’s forehead.

The silence.

The hem of her skirts soaking up blood.

It must show on his face, because now she smiles.

“If you weren’t injured, Cahusac, I would slap you now,” Jeanne whispers and Boisrenard in the background flinches.

Jeanne casts him a glance, then looks back at Cahusac and closes her fingers over his right hand, resting on the table, finally free of the sling, but still too weak to be of use.

It is a stark reminder of what she is capable of, but also her strength, her ability to walk in blood and come out the victor.

It is the knowledge that the moment he fell for her was when she defied him and all of the Inquisition of France and lit a firebomb with her eyes locked on his.

It’s so easy to forget, once you know how soft her body is.

“They won’t attack me, Cahusac. I’m a woman, remember? I am weak and frail and no enemy,” she says. Cahusac has to remind himself how much of a mistake it would be to think that her mind and will are, too.

It’s a struggle. His instincts don’t care for the strength of her will or her tactical mind. They care for the fact that she is a carrier and as stupid as it is, since earliest childhood a traditional upbringing left its mark.

But even Jussac is on her side in this.

Bernajoux and Boisrenard don’t care for the nobility’s traditions. Across the table Simon looks up, unhappy strain to his lips, maybe even a trace of anger on his sister’s behalf.
“Stay in the background. Please?” Cahusac turns his hand and folds his fingers into hers, accepting her superior position in this, just between them.

“Don’t let yourself be distracted by me, Cahusac,” she shoots back, the triumph in her eyes tempered by understanding, but no less victorious for it.

***

It is an odd troupe meeting one last time in the courtyard of their hotel.

A woman, slender and feminine in simple clothing, barely worth of a housemaid.

Her skirt is dust flecked, too short to hide her boots and instead of an expensive corset she wears a leather vest, old and worn.

There is only a woolen shawl wrapped around her shoulders to keep her warm in the cold and wet October weather.

“Why this one,” Cahusac had asked.

“The skirts won’t hamper me running,” she had answered with a bright smile, sharp on the edges and not for the first time he had wondered if the fire had been the first one she had set.

With her stand three Red Guards.

It’s inappropriate to be smiling, it is not right to let the hunting instinct slip.

It is not right to see it in her eyes and to yearn…

Cahusac grabs her chin and captures her lips. He expects a bite or a slap, not that Jeanne wraps her arm around his neck and aligns her body flush with his.

“Be careful,” she whispers against his mouth and waits until he nods before she lets go.

“You, too,” he says and she smiles, eyes bright and green in the overcast light, sparking fire from within.

The she is gone, the shawl pulled over her hair, a hurried figure like there are a thousand in Paris, none any more important than the other.

Except this one carries a knife Boisrenard swears she can use to survive the ten seconds until one of them is with her, a pistol under the skirts and her wit.

And Cahusac’s prayers. Silent screams of fear he directs aimlessly towards the heavens.

God will hear, or he won’t.

He doesn’t care to tell anybody why when he tortures them.

He never will.

Boisrenard’s hand lands heavily on Cahusac’s shoulder.
“Come on, Chiot. Let’s go fuck up that pup’s life.”

***

The end of Marc-Michel de Vernantes’ old life starts ominous yet remarkably mellow.

They wait for him outside the Garrison. Bernajoux and Boisrenard in full glory and bad mood right in front of the gate. Cahusac on horse a few meters to the side.

It’s only Vernantes, old Demaret, a young dandy by the name of Havet who has been with the Musketeers for only a month, and, because God likes to test them, Adèle’s Odem who ride up in the milky October light.

He looks so much younger than his Aleph, so much more frail.

It’s a lie. It must be.

They’re the same age, the same mold. Yet light and shadow of the same coin.

Because he is yet fragile, scared, lost where she is brutal in her courage, cutting and ripping and wailing against the injustice, often enough cutting herself and sometimes still those around her.

He will settle into his skin, Adèle will calm. Or neither will survive for long.

“Marc-Michel de Jalesnes de Vernantes,” Boisrenard pushes his horse forward, patronizing sneer and everything and four Musketeers reach for their weapons, moves that are aborted when Cahusac and Bernajoux to Boisrenard’s left raise theirs, already drawn.

Demaret pushes his horse forward, shielding his young charges and Adèle’s brother and the dandy fan out.

The move is advisable from a defensive position, but leaves gaps in their front that an experienced fighter can use.

Not wrong per se, but a sign of their inexperience.

Or their arrogance.

The Red Guards usually do their best to not appear like the most dangerous and most ruthless fighting force in France.

“In the name of His Grand Eminence Armand-Jean du Plessis, Cardinal-Duc de Richelieu, First Minister to His Most Christian Majesty Louis XIII King of France and Navarre, and by the grace of God and his Holiness Pope Urban VIII, Grand Inquisitor of France and Defender of the Faith...” Boisrenard takes a deep breath, for dramatic effect as much as for air.

“You are hereby under arrest, to be conducted to the Palais-Cardinal for investigation and
interrogation until such time as your guilt or innocence has been proven.”

Cahusac adjusts his pistol slightly, aiming for the dandy to Vernantes’ right.

On the other side of the square Jeanne reaches out to a man in warning and shakes her head. Cahusac can only guess that she is starting a discussion among the onlookers to distract them.

“What is he charged with?” Demaret turns his horse, blocking Boisrenard’s sight and hampering Bernajoux’s path, but not Cahusac’s.

To his credit, Vernantes manages to not look guilty, though he has considerably paled, even under the healthy soldier’s tan he wears.

“Well, I’d let you guess, since it’s we three who are picking him up. But that’d be too easy, even for you lot, Demaret.”

Bernajoux laughs. He does that well. Mocking.

Demaret rolls his eyes and nudges his horse forward yet another step.

Cahusac waits.

“The kid isn’t a throwback, Boisrenard, no matter what that bitch Delorme says.”

“Then the Cardinal will confirm that and we all will be home for dinner. How’s that, old man?”

The lines around the old Musketeer’s eyes deepen and his mouth is bracketed by unhappy grooves. Being called a man, by Red Guards of all people must grate, even with someone as even tempered as Demaret.

“Aramis, inform Captain Tréville of the situation, please.”

Adèle’s Odem turns his horse around and gallops back into the direction they came from, while Demaret eyes Boisrenard with a slow shake of his head.

“I don’t think so,” the old Musketeer states calmly and just as calmly sets his hand on his rapier.

“I do!” Vernantes calls. His voice is still grating with the last remnants of the unbalanced tones of youth and his eyes are still marked by adolescent temper.

Cahusac’s face twitches into a smile and he sees Boisrenard’s threatening to do the same.

There are two reasons that pup would hand himself over willingly.

Protect his peers. Attack the Inquisition.

Likely both.

That’s the reason Jussac is not here.

Vernantes could actually throw him around and, though extremely unlikely, overpower him with his Alphaic strength. And that would be the end of the tale of Vernantes the little Beta.

He can try that with the three of them, but he’s in for one hell of a surprise.

“Well, looks like we found the only man with half a pair of balls among the Musketeers!” Boisrenard
Bernajoux claps his hands. “Miracles, me ol’ grandma always said, come at the most unexpected of times”

Bernajoux dismounts and steps forward to reach for the reins of Vernantes’ horse.

He’s strong enough to pull the beast under control, should the need arise and the animal’s body provides protection from Vernantes’ weapons.

To everybody’s surprise he hands those over without complained. Pistol, rapier and his offhand dagger. Boisrenard collects them calmly and throws them to Cahusac, never actually leaving his mate’s side.

Demaret seems just as surprised as anyone else, but Vernantes truly doesn’t put up a fuss until he is free from his comrades’ protection.

The moment Cahusac sees the movement to another, hidden, weapon, it is too late.

Bernajoux ducks out of the way of the knife that slashes at his head, as Vernantes’ horse slams into his body.

It’s a miss, no scent of blood in the air. Nevertheless, Bernajoux falls and far too close to the hooves of Vernantes’ gelding.

His head makes a dull thudding sound as it hits the pavement.

Braise barrels forward at a tip of Cahusac’s heels, one last command before he untangles his feet from the stirrups.

Jeanne will have his hide for this. They all will.

Yet it’s so easy.

If Vernantes brings his horse down on Bernajoux, his packmate is dead.

Vernantes knows. His horse is far too attuned to his commands to not have been trained to his hand.

In the background Boisrenard’s yell echoes, far away, drowned out by the noise of Cahusac’s own rushing blood.

Pushing up to stand is a gamble with the forces of the earth and God’s mercy.

It’s one heartbeat, two, trusting Braise to follow what he taught her.

She is not a great warhorse because she is fast or enduring. She is perfect for him because she takes to his commands with natural grace and anticipates the movement of their opponents. And she anticipates his needs, with or without reins to guide her.

Now, as she jumps into Vernantes’ gelding, she gives Cahusac the opportunity to step onto the other man’s horse, to savor his dumbfounded expression for the blink of an eye, before Cahusac’s left arm finds Vernantes’ shoulder and rips him off the horse with the force of both their bodies.
Falling is silent. Always.

For a moment everything stills with the knowledge that there is nothing more to do but slam into the ground.

A freedom like little else, a moment of perfect peace.

In the background, Boisrenard cuts the dandy’s saddle strap with hairbreadth precision and pushes him off the horse.

Turning is difficult. Vernantes is the dead weight that will land first. All Cahusac can do is shift his arm to not accidentally break the pup’s neck and to push all air from his own lungs.

The impact is a white hot blaze of pain, a moment of complete blankness.

Of struggling for control, of fighting against the blessed darkness that awaits him.

“Don’t you dare!” yells a memory of pain and it jolts him back.

Jeanne will be livid.

Vernantes is strong. He wheezes for air, but still tries to push up and back to dislodge Cahusac.

The growl he wastes his breath on is low, but unmistakable, as is the distress in his scent, the fury that builds up on years of anger, of waiting to finally explode.

Cahusac uses the novice’s momentary weakness to shift his arm, still neatly lodged around his shoulder, until the inside of the elbow wraps around Vernantes’ neck.

Short of killing him or knocking him out there are not many options left to still the rage.

Knocking out an Alpha in that state with one arm and almost blinded by pain needs a miracle.

None of them have no time for miracles.

Cahusac tightens his arm, pulls the pup’s head back against his left shoulder and the pup’s body under the weight of his own and then he squeezes.

His knees in the pup’s back will leave deep bruises, his arm will leave worse around his neck. But nobody will die.

None will know that this is not a Beta subduing another, their almost equal strength the blessing of Vernantes’ disguise.

Out of the corner of his eye, Cahusac sees Bernajoux roll to his knees. Wobbly, but alive.

And furious.

Vernantes is the cause of Cahusac’s pain.
In the hindbrain of Bernajoux’s brilliant mind that reduces Vernantes to a threat that needs to be eliminated. It’s a problem with Bernajoux that his pack mates are very aware of.

Boisrenard or Cahusac in pain push his instincts out of control faster than most people can react.

Which is why Cahusac doesn’t let Vernantes go.

Doesn’t let up as the pup struggles, the low growls turning into pathetic chokes, into weak bats with a clumsy arm. Into mute pleas for air. For life.

Listening to a man suffocate is the stuff of nightmares, feeling the frantic stuttering of a heart that fights so valiantly against the knowledge that his last seconds have fallen, feeling the twitches of a body that needs to fight, until there is no fight left…

It doesn’t help to let him go the moment he falls unconscious.

It doesn’t help to stare into Demaret’s shocked eyes, when Cahusac finally slowly drops onto his good side with a pained curse.

Scent, he wants to yell. Catch his scent, he’s not dead.

Bernajoux is on him in a moment, a bleeding head wound gushing blood down his ear and neck.

They need to go. With blood and that much exertion their scent is all around them, flaming, treacherous beacons of their secrets.

“Well… he tried…” Boisrenard mumbles and leads his and Bernajoux’s horse around. Outwardly he is unfazed, slightly bored by the attack.

Under it, his scent boils as he helps first Bernajoux and then Cahusac to their feet.

Steadying his packmates with his big, reliable hands.

As Cahusac looks around, left hand clamped onto Boisrenard’s shoulder, he find Braise standing a little to the side, looking miffed and irritated.

Beautiful, temperamental Spanish princess.

She hasn’t yet quite forgiven him that Jussac and Richelieu had to take her through the paces in the last weeks and she hadn’t been showered with attention as is her due.

Still, when Cahusac calls, she comes.

When he taps her chest twice, she bows her knees, sparing him the worst agony of climbing into the saddle.

Let them laugh. She is perfect.

Nevertheless the pain is enough to almost bring him right back onto the cobblestones of place Saint-Sulpice.
Almost.

Boisrenard and Demaret trade unpleasantries. Bernajoux ties Vernantes’ body to his saddle, the blood of Bernajoux’s wound brilliant on the red of his uniform coat.

It almost fades into the blackness of his doublet.

He looks in pain.

Behind Demaret the remaining novice stares at Cahusac, his perfectly combed hair out of place, his well-kept, on-point-shaven face drawn in fury.

Alpha, screech Cahusac’s instincts, far too loud for the blaring of pain that radiates from his shoulder.

There is something in those eyes…

Too close to fitting together to many puzzle pieces. Too clever for his own good.

“Boisrenard…,” Cahusac croaks, the sound foreign even to his own ears.

His packmates stops next to Braise, touching Cahusac’s leg to build a connection that can assess his younger Aleph’s state.

“Will you make it, you lunatic?” The finger dig into the flesh of Cahusac’s leg once.

“As long as needed. We need to go,” Cahusac says to Boisrenard’s nod.

“Hold on,” the older Alpha mouths and mounts his horse Trot.

Only Boisrenard would name the gigantic black beast Trot. Because he’s Boisrenard and according to him, trotting is what his horse does best.

It doesn’t make sense, except is does, because it’s Boisrenard and Cahusac’s swimming thoughts agree.

Demaret hates them mutely, knowing he can’t do anything now, with a novice, the cook and the stable hands his only support.

It hurts to make him look bad like this. They all respect the hell out of Demaret, contrary to… say.. Laflèche, who is just an obnoxious little asshole.

He doesn’t deserve this.

It’s Bernajoux that tips his nonexistent hat to him, as a last mocking salute, before they ride away, Vernantes draped across Bernajoux’s saddle.

Jeanne is nowhere to be seen. She will be angry.

Yesterday she had been sitting in their kitchen and filled oils, infused with increasingly arcane plants into small bottles. She had filled small bags with herbs.

Cahusac had reminded her to watch how freely she shared her medicinal skills.

She had looked at him deadpan and asked what he expected to happen, someone calling the Inquisition?
She will be so very angry.

***

In the darkness the wolves howl in the woods.
The feeling of breath down his neck.
The feeling of teeth against his shoulder.
He falls. He struggles.
Runs deeper into the dark, fighting to reach a light that never comes. A hope that will forever be false.
He cries out as the earth closes around him, as it pushes down on his body, suffocates him, as it-
“Shhh…” Her voice is soft like water caressing over stones. “You are safe.”
Earth and herbs twine around his senses, a sharp undertone in the remembered scents of safety and family that will forever be broken.
“Nobody will hurt you.”
There are fingers in the darkness, gently touching his face.
He can’t see, but he knows. He knows these fingers bring relief.
They can break through the pain. The desperation. The fear.
“Just breathe, Cahusac,” she whispers and guides him. “Relax. You are safe.”
The wolves still howl.
Through the darkness a shimmering green, like daylight filtering through the leaves, catches his eye.
Bright spots, framed by blackest lashes slowly blink in the twilight. A smile gently stretches.
“There you are,” her words fade softly between them, wisps of dew stretching between covered trees on a chilly morning. They take his fear with him, falling away like cobwebs of a dark dream.
So powerful and strong. Beautiful fairy creature.
“Thank you,” she whispers, as if he said it aloud, and brushes back his hair, only to caress her fingertips down his temple and cheek to his lips.
“In how much pain are you?” Jeanne adds, slowly rubbing her thumb over his lower lip in the rhythm of languid heartbeats.
“A lot.” There is no need to move for Cahusac to know that, the dull thudding in his shoulder only the drums of war that herald a full on attack.

Above him roughly hewn stone stretches in the low arch of a dungeon ceiling. Under him coats pad the cold floor.

They smell of pack and safety. Of Bernajoux’s blood.

Heavy and sweet and salty, hot burning sun and the sea filling the air.

Far away from the wet, cold woods and the hills of Gascony.

It’s rich iron. Power. Strength. Not a smell to fear. He’s strong. They won’t get him.

If Bernajoux bleeds then only to get close enough to their enemies to kill them.

A flask is maneuvered against Cahusac’s lips to his smile, a small hand pushed under his head. The flask is Boisrenard’s and that on the other hand is alarming.

The second of preparation is not enough to brace against the insult against Cahusac’s senses of taste and smell, but as utterly disgusting as Boisrenard’s brew is, for a moment, it drowns out everything else.

Jeanne’s eyes never leave his face and that makes it bearable, even as the muscles in his shoulders lock.

“You are less angry than expected…,” he murmurs and she snorts.

“I was. I voiced my displeasure. I’m too worried now.”

Her fingers rub slow circles against his cold, clammy skin and as his eyes adjust to the low light and his sense of smell to the underground humidity, he finds the edges in her features, the distress in her scent.

“I’m fine,” he wants to calm her and only as her eyes spark, does he actually here how rough and pained his voice sounds.

There is two fine lines that groove the papery thin skin right under her lower lashes, a faint flare of her nostrils, a tightness to her lips that would go unnoticed, if she weren’t the only thing he is seeing at that moment.

She says nothing.

“Do I need to apologize?” Cahusac tries again, keeping his voice to a whisper.

Somewhere in the background Bernajoux and Boisrenard keep watch over Vernantes.

The cells below the Palais-Cardinal are tiny. Not even whispering grants much privacy.

“She already verbally skinned Bernajoux, Chiot. Don’t bother. She loves you and secretly she thinks, you fancy dancing on horse backs like an Omega with too much time on their hands, is wonderful,” Boisrenard’s voice booms through the room like a trumpet, undeterred by Bernajoux’s horrified hush.
At once the skin drains from Jeanne’s pale skin, only to come rushing back right away and douse her face in red, setting apart her just slightly too big eyes in the look of a deer caught.

“Let me beat him up for you?” Cahusac still whispers.

The way her eyes spark, with rather uncalled for joy, is his reward. Her lips are thinned, the corners though twitch dangerously, even as a bright sheen threatens to spill from her eyes.

It doesn’t. Jeanne shakes her head and clears her throat and says, with a cutting edge to her voice.

“I just saw you make stupid kissy faces at that big black Alpha over there, Boisrenard. You are in no position to talk.”

She loves you…. a voice whispers in the back of his head and it has a distinct Boisrenard tone to it.

Cahusac wants to rip his packmate apart for embarrassing her so. And then he wants to kiss him.

Instead he slowly curls the fingers of his left around hers and lifts both to his lips for the faintest of touches. A promise rather than a suggestion.

“Did you really like it?”

“It was something else,” Jeanne says, drawing out the words as if she is still pondering to not speak. “But please,” she adds with a lot more surety. “...never do that again.”

Her lips lift slowly, as her shoulders sink and she leans back, fingers clutching tightly to his.

Past the frame of her body Cahusac can see his packmates. Boisrenard stands in front of his mate’s seated form, with Bernajoux’s head pressed against his stomach.

Boisrenard is holding a cloth pressed to Bernajoux’s head.

Beyond them, a body has been chained to the wall, arms, legs and neck in shackles, though a wet cloth has been layered between Vernantes’ abused throat and the iron.

It’s the only way to keep a panicking Alpha from tearing someone apart, scared and in unfamiliar surroundings.

As barbaric as it is, it’s effective.

And nobody who walks this room has time for anything but effectiveness.

“I’m all right,” Cahusac tells her with his voice catching at the flicker in her eyes, how the skin instantly draws tight again.

Cahusac squeezes her hand and struggles to sit to her unhappy face, while Bernajoux’s deep voice in the background rumbles against the leather of his mate’s uniform.

“Cardinal’s on ‘is way, Chiant. We got time. So let her help you.”

Boisrenard mutely points to the lone, wobbly table in the corner.
Jeanne touches him with gentle, albeit softly shaking fingers, always telling him what he can’t see over his shoulder. Never moving too quickly.

She spreads salve over sprained and painfully taut muscles, circling over oversensitized skin with cool fingertips until Cahusac can’t help but relax, until he is enveloped by a sense of care, of safety that has to do as much with his packmates watching them, as it has with her gentleness.

Cahusac wants to tell her, he’s not a skittish horse. That pain won’t make him bolt.

But he knows it for a lie with this particular pain.

So does she.

He just closes his eyes and drops his head on his arms, murmuring low encouragements to keep her going, while his fingers clench around the horrible willow bark concoction she makes him drink and which he promptly forgets.

Opening his eyes again is a chore.

Whatever Jeanne puts into that oil, it’s heavenly.

Warmth and relief that slowly seep into pulled muscles, guided by her fingertips that he frankly would love to have massaging something else.

He wants to tell her, wants to apologize for doubting her arcane mixtures, but all those thoughts flee when he finds a pair of pale grey eyes staring at him with an expression that is beyond raw.

It’s the expression of a man who is about to do something extremely heroic and very stupid.

Not that Vernantes can. That is exactly the reason why there is an immovable shackle around his neck. He wouldn’t be the first to bash his head in against the wall.

Richelieu’s dungeon is one truly built for Alphas, with enough expertise and money to get what they need.

Before Cahusac can jump up, Jeanne has run past him.

“Jeanne stop! You’re Betan!” She stumbles to a halt immediately, turning with wide eyed shock to let him move past.

Scenting a Beta now, when he is already terrified, would only confirm Vernantes’ worst fears.

Bernajoux catches Jeanne with an arm around her shoulder and draws her against him, leaving the terrified musketeer to Cahusac and Boisrenard.

Cahusac clamps his hand around the pup’s jaw, forcing back his head, forcing room between his throat - black and blue already - and the wet, herb drenched cloth that protects the injured skin from the iron.

It’s doubtful if he really wanted to suffocate himself like that. Even more if he could have gone through. Still...
“Easy there…,” Cahusac croons. “We won’t hurt you, puppy.”

Vernantes as an answer starts to thrash, broken growl emerging from his throat, rendered useless for now by Cahusac’s attack.

For a moment he seems to almost manage to pull free from Cahusac’s left.

That is before Boisrenard clamps his right against his forehead and pushes him back against the wall.

“He said easy, Vernantes.” Boisrenard makes no effort to hide the growl in his voice, a deep rolling rumble Cahusac knows from years past, from nights spent curled up between them, listening to his packmate tell one of his endless stories.

Now Boisrenard bolsters his words with his scent and shoves the inside of his wrist against Vernantes nose.

The young Alpha can’t really fight, this position meant to render him helpless. That he still tries honors his spirit, though it’s stupid.

For one or two heartbeats nothing happens. The thoughts need time to filter through the instinct to survive, desperation needs to be overthrown by hope. That is the most difficult part.

It had been for Cahusac.

This is not just Vernantes looking forward to hours and days of torture before castration and public death.

This is his Carrier, his siblings. Any family, close and extended.

The Musketeers.

This is maybe whatever Underground secrets and operatives he is privy to as the scion of one of the most influential Resistance families in France.

This is the conviction that his death is so much more preferable than his survival.

And then there is the thought of an Alpha in Richelieu’s services.

All of this, doubt, pain, grief, terror, plays in the young Alpha’s shell shocked eyes, before they flicker first to Boisrenard as Vernantes catches his scent, then to Cahusac in wide eyed wonder.

“Yes, I’m stronger than you,” Cahusac smirks and nods in encouragement.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but no one here will hurt you.”

He lets go of Vernantes’ jaw after an encouraging nod from Boisrenard, smoothing the cooling wrap safely over the Alpha’s throat as he does.

“We will not be asking you questions about anything but your own well-being. We will not harm you, your family or the regiment,” Cahusac speaks slowly, tracking the pups eyes and how they flicker to Bernajoux and Jeanne for a moment, to gauge his reaction.

“Understood, Vernantes?” Only after the Musketeer nods, does Boisrenard let go and step back.
“Good. Now Jeanne here will look after your injuries,” Cahusac says, leaning his back against one of the support pillars that run in long lines through the Palais’ cellars.

He just needs a moment and a bit of support to catch his breath. Under no circumstances will he fall unconscious again.

“You will be at your best behaviour. You will not dare spit at her, growl at her or insult her for being Betan. If you do, you will answer to me.”

Jeanne brushes past him, a fresh, herb water doused cloth in hand.

“Don’t scare the pup, Cahusac. That’s mean. What do you expect him to do? Glare? Whisper threats that will scare me and make me faint?”

The smile though, that she casts over her shoulder at Cahusac is painfully open, her eyes sparkling wounds in the dim light with the shadows accentuating every hollow, every rise of her face to sharp cut perfection.

Cahusac wants to go to her and hold her.

He feels a sting of faint and worrying jealousy when she turns to the blond Musketeer chained to the wall. He knows she is smiling at him, too.

“Hello, I’m Jeanne. I’m a midwife and healer. I am now going to change the wrap around your throat and give you some honeyed cider with some plantain and sage to ease your throat.

Ignore the growly Alphas in my back. They are just grumbly because you managed to bump two of them.”

Jeanne untangles the cloth from Vernantes neck while she speaks and by the time, she is finished, the deep lines of terror have smoothed, lips lax as his eyes have become soft, locked on her smiling face like a life line.

Cahusac doesn’t miss the little smile Boisrenard sends his mate, or Bernajoux’s appreciative nod in return.

He still wants to slap the little Alpha for looking at his woman like that.

It’s not even jealousy…

Oh, who is he kidding…

“What?!” is the broken croak Vernantes manages when they seat him at the table and Boisrenard pushes the flask with the rotgut into his hands. “How?!?”

They answer that by giving him more alcohol and by the time Richelieu sweeps into the dungeon cell, still in full Court attire, Jussac and Tréville in tow, Vernantes doesn’t even question it anymore.

Not the fact that the Resistance basically kidnapped him.

Not the fact that his late Sire he had always assumed to be a weak politician, had been one of the Resistance’s most important supporters.
He only looks past Richelieu, past all of them, to Tréville and croaks pitifully “Is it true?”

“Welcome to the Resistance,” the Musketeer Captain states with compassion coloring his voice and hands the young Alpha a letter, penned by a female hand in neat writing.

“Welcome to being one of the bad guys,” adds Boisrenard and carefully pats the young Alpha’s back. “You’ll get used to it.”

Vernantes drops his head to his arms and screams, the letter, likely written by his carrier, crumpled in his fingers.

It’s triumph and pain he yells with a hoarse, broken voice.

Maybe it’s grief for all the things he will never again have and the Sire he will never be able to look at with pride.

Maybe it’s for the friends who will hate him.

But mostly it’s in triumph.

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Richelieu declares Vernantes Betan not quite twenty-four hours later and forces yet another public spat with Tréville in declaring to the ears of the King the young noble’s wish to join the forces of the Inquisition.

It’s a good fight. Loud and mean and brutally cutting.

The stir is considerable, the Court and the upper echelons of Paris ablaze with the scandal of an accused Musketeer joining the Cardinal’s forces.

They snicker about Tréville.

They fear Richelieu who accepts it all as his due with a court nod and a condescending smile.

They eye the Red Guards with suspicion and whisper about Madame Delorme behind their hands.

Boisrenard smirks and stares ahead, never uttering a syllable.

The Musketeers on the other side of the Throne room, first among them Laflèche, ooze disdain and hatred enough for a whole town with forks and torches.

Bernajoux just smiles.

One or two young noblewomen flutter their eyelashes at Cahusac, whispering how much they missed his presence at court, how worried they were.

He smiles, bowing courtly and with perfect étiquette, reassuring them how good it is to be back in such beautiful company.

Boisrenard’s smirk widens.
And if, under the guise of that minor upheaval, one or two people of questionable background are employed in noble households and bring their families to Paris, the harpies at Court are too busy to notice…

Improvisation is an inevitable and sometimes very fascinating fact of the Resistance.

Jussac himself carries a letter to Lyon, inviting Beaumont for All Saints’ Mass and a trip to the Richelieu estates.

Chapter End Notes

A side note on how BB solve their little disagreement:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/4405229
Blood of the Martyrs

Chapter Notes

I have gone and done something unspeakable: I have completely rewritten a whole chapter, a year after I published it.

Why?

Because in hindsight and with the distance of a few months, I recognize how the chapter - as lovely as it was - slowed the stories momentum to a snail's pace crawl, only to lurch it back into some semi tempo with the next. But you know what?

That didn't work.

I adored and still adore all the little ceremonial details of the All soul's service, but they were simply not necessary for the story. What happened in Lyon, what got Cahusac so on edge that he... oh well, read it for yourselves

If life were fair, Marc-Michel de Vernantes would be given a few days of rest, a chance to find his equilibrium within his drastically changed circumstances.

But life is never fair. Life is messy and for them it is nothing but an endless series of almost misses, it seems. A dance on the edge of a blade, constantly shifting stances to not slip and fall and bring it all down.

Beaumont will take Richelieu’s invitation, there is no doubt about it, and All Saints is barely a month away, so if there is any way to build a believable backstory about Vernantes and the Red Guards, they need to start building it immediately.

They can give him two nights of sleep before they drag him to his new unit and push him back into the fray.

"Here is a thought:" Cahusac voice is brimming with self-ironic humor, “half the time, a soldier waits for naught."

That is the other side of it. While Vernantes is paraded around with Bernajoux’s unit, showed off to the court and, most importantly, the fuming Musketeer regiment, the rest of them have nothing to do but wait for the explosion.

"Boisrenard?" Jeanne smiles over the rim of the book, taking the moment to appreciate Cahusac playing tug’o war with a furious Etienne, getting the little Alpha tired enough to sleep.

"Jussac," Bernajoux answers, stretched out on Cahusac's recliner with a glass of wine in his hand and a rare, peaceful smile on his face.

He at least isn't minding the times when nothing happens.

Out in the courtyard Simon takes care of the horses, a duty usually shared by the three Alphas.

For the time being Simon has taken Cahusac’s spot and only too easily lets himself be talked into covering for BB as well.
It does him a world of good. Around humans he still hides, insecure in his behavior, painfully shy around strangers.

Around the horses he is a different person, showering each with loving care.

Bernajoux used the opening that they should pay Simon anyways to negotiate a pack allowance for Jeanne. The predictable stand-off ended after Bernajoux resorted to not speaking to Jeanne for three days. She had suggested that living with them was payment enough.

It’s been two weeks since they’d snatched Vernantes and so far, everything has gone surprisingly well.

The placement with Boisrenard’s squad is a gamble on Vernantes’ loyalty, with Boisrenard’s men the first line of defense.

They’re “just” Red Guards, but none of them get into one of the elite squads without possessing a lot of skill and even more trustworthiness.

It’s inevitable to catch a whiff of the Resistance when you are this close to the top. It’s inevitable to be drawn into the fight when you prove your worth.

Although nobody in the Resistance expects Vernantes to do anything stupid, they still would rather be safe than sorry. Richelieu has developed paranoia to an artform and they all are working off the example that got both the fathers of Richelieu and Jussac killed and with them the bulk of the Resistance in France. One false piece of information not vetted thoroughly enough, the wrong person trusted only once…

But Vernantes takes to the demands and dangers of the Resistance with the speed and cunning of a natural and the passion of a man who has ‘shit to make up’ as Boisrenard supplied so eloquently. The Red Guards don’t know that, though. To them Vernantes is not yet an asset or a comrade, he is a walking security risk.

Not trusted yet to stay silent when his old friends demand answers. Not yet trusted to not accidentally give himself away.

It is about as fair as anything in their lives.

Yet another layer of deception and yet another reason, why there are so few of them. The pack had only seen the end of it, the order to extract him, but before that, the endless discussions, the nights spent turning opinions, information… that was a burden Tréville, Richelieu and Jussac share among themselves.

Yet another layer….

As if his languid thoughts summoned it, the sound of heavy hands hammering against the front gate sends them all to their feet. Etienne starts to cry.
Outside the gate to their courtyard stand Paquet and Séverin, the youngest of Boisrenard’s squad, both just old enough to take up the mantle of the red guards and inseparable as twins, holding a bloody and beaten Vernantes between them.

“Boisrenard said to drop him off,” Paquet says for an introduction and shoulders his way inside at Bernajoux’s nod.

“We found him outside the barracks when he didn’t show up for shift.”

Once inside Séverin picks Vernantes up, while Paquet casually pushes the door close behind them.

It’s how they work. Paquet, as a Beta, covers for Séverin, who occasionally adds violence as needed.

“There’s no telling how long he lay there,” he now supplies.

They came to Paris from the coast, like Boisrenard, and like him, Séverin bears the scars of the hatred on his body and at much too young an age. Neither talk much about what exactly happened, except that Paquet one day walked into their barn and found a boy hiding there, beaten bloody, terrified of everyone with no family left for him to claim. So Paquet, twelve and already too brave for his own good, decided to adopt him as his brother and convinced his family. Only when it became too dangerous to stay, the village became suspicious, did Séverin go. Paquet, of course, went with him.

That is one reason, Boisrenard likes them and dotes on them. The other being of course, that they are even younger than Vernantes, Adèle’s age, and they soak up his care.

Now they drag Vernantes inside, ignoring his wet assurances, that it was just a scuffle.

Bernajoux relieves them of their burden, grabs Vernantes’ face to take a good look at him and drags him towards the kitchen. Upstairs in Cahusac’s room, Etienne screams bloody murder. Cahusac can smell Simon at the stable entrance, watching them.

And this is what a plan gone well looks like.

Jeanne needs a while as she patches Vernantes up to coax the confirmation out of him that that wasn’t just a scuffle. Paquet and Séverin have long since returned to duty.

“I didn’t say anything,” Vernantes says first thing and it goes straight onto the pile of things they need to train out of him.

Nothing arouses suspicion like someone trying to disperse suspicion first thing.

But when he looks up, Cahusac shoves the whole pile to the back of his mind. Vernantes is miserable.

These Musketeers were supposed to be his friends and some maybe were.

“They didn’t ask. Didn’t care. It was just Laflèche bein’ pissed at me and he’s just….”

While Cahusac doesn’t per se need a reason to get into a fight with Laflèche and beat up his stinking little Beta ass, having one is of course so much more…
Bernajoux takes one look at him, the toddler in his arms and raises an eyebrow.

… reason for one’s pack Alpha to look disapproving.

They retaliate swiftly and three days later the whole court talks about it.

The King calls Richelieu and Tréville in to demand Vernantes not be a problem any longer. It is decided that the best should be moved to Lyon, if not by orders of Richelieu then by the King’s.

It is as clean a solution as any and exactly what the end result should have looked like. It’s also a first lesson about the sacrifices they make. At night Vernantes often sits with Bernajoux, a bottle of wine between them and listens. During the day, he often sits with Jeanne when not on duty and listens, too.

“He’ll know Lyon better than any of us by the time we get there,” Boisrenard grumps for no clear reason one night, only to be gently reprimanded by his mate.

“That’s the plan, isn’t it? To install him with Beaumont et voilà, we have a well positioned cell in Lyon.” They sit around the kitchen table, a full bowl of stew in front of each of them and sugar roasted brioche still in the oven. It’s precious times when they are all home with time to spare. With Richelieu at court the whole evening he had sent Bernajoux home ahead of time, leaving his second in command to guard an empty Palais Cardinal.

“He’s so goddamn young, I swear, Bernajoux…” Boisrenard trails off with a lost shake of his head and his gaze trailing to the window, searching the darkness outside.

Jeanne at Cahusac’s side watches him in turn with worry etched into her face. Although in temperament much, much closer to Bernajoux, she possesses a natural rapport with Boisrenard’s moods and worries that sometimes even eludes Bernajoux.

As proven when he says: “Cahusac was even younger.”

“Leave me out of it.” Cahusac bows deeper over his bowl, his right hand tugging carefully at Jeanne’s skirt, once, then once more with more emphasis, until she releases the deep breath she had already drawn to speak.

“Yeah, leave him out of it. Because look how it worked for him, Bernajoux.” The tone in Boisrenard’s voice was sharp enough to cut.

“He’s fucking alive! Boisrenard.” Under the table, Cahusac gripped Jeanne’s hand before she could jump up. He’d been here before and getting between BB when they cut each other to bleed out the anger was a mistake someone made only once. “That’s more than many can say! How old were you? Eighteen? Nineteen? And look how it damn it to hell worked out for you! What the hell do you want?” Bernajoux doesn’t yet yell, barely.

With a cloud of deafening silence, Boisrenard pushes his chair back and walks out, leaving on his mate’s face an expression that speaks, more than his wine consumption, of the burdens he shoulders. This time as Jeanne attempts to rise, Cahusac lets her.

It takes her three steps to round the table and a heartbeat to wrap her arms around Bernajoux’s shoulders, holding on as if her life depended on it.
After a moment’s hesitation, Bernajoux accepts the hug with one of his own and a barely audible “Thank you.”

“Boisrenard never takes well to All Saint’s,” Cahusac offers as way of an explanation. “He lost someone and….”

“His best friend sacrificed himself to keep the people Boisrenard had saved from torturing him to death.” Bernajoux, contrary to Cahusac, doesn’t even try to sugarcoat the truth or the bitterness in his voice. “Boisrenard doesn’t like sacrifices.”

Jeanne hugs him tighter at his words, but her eyes linger on Cahusac’s face with an almost mocking expression.

“Oh really…,” she drawls, then quickly pulled herself together for Bernajoux’s sake. Though no way in hell has the Alpha not noticed. “But it worked, didn’t it?”

“Barely… but yeah. Maybe.”

“Some things are just worth it,” Cahusac cuts in, leaning back and only barely suppresses a smile when both his Alpha and his lover respond with the exact same snort. “Vernantes knows this, too. We all do; Boisrenard included. He just needs to get through All Saints mass.”

“And then what?” The worry lies thick in her voice and it touches on all of Cahusac’s instincts at once, the need to soothe her an almost physical thing.

“And then he will go on like he always does, because nothing can break Boisrenard.” Cahusac’s trust in this reflects in the smile that blooms on Jeanne’s face as she hears his words.

“Alright….” Bernajoux looks up at the tone in her voice, tightens his arms around her waist with a tiny smile, she can’t see. “Well, Boisrenard wears his scars on his body.” Her fingers scratch over the back of Bernajoux’s head and now it’s her, who smiles at his low sigh. “I think you need to let him get you a haircut. It’s getting long again.”

His head drops back against her shoulder, mirth dancing in his eyes. “Soon it will be hanging in my eyes?”

In Cahusac’s chest, something like laughter bubbles at their gentle banter. He has never fully understood that weird little joke Bernajoux shares with his mate, except for the fact, of course, that Bernajoux’s hair just doesn’t grow longer, it curls tighter.

It’s one of those things that mated pairs do and that are beyond questioning.

Now Bernajoux shrugs and reaches for his bowl. “Later. It’s two weeks to All Saints still and I don’t wanna use up my whole repertoire just yet.”

Peace settles again with Jeanne, only disturbed by the sounds of someone chopping wood in the courtyard.

“If I ask,” Simon asks, as they watch Beaumont’s entourage ride into town, the citizens of Paris cheering around them or muttering with anger. Some in the back stand silently with worry etched into their faces. Cahusac memorizes them. He’s not a Red Guard here, but a young craftsman not on the good side of clean and recently washed. Simon by his side is dressed in an apprentice’s clothes, not truly clean either. His face is too recognizable normally, but the soot does a good job. “Would
you kill him?” Softly, carefully spoken among a swell in the noise around them.

Cahusac starts, though he shouldn’t have. Jussac and BB ride past just in that moment and for a second their eyes meet.

Somewhere in that crowd stands Jeanne, she insisted on watching, to see the man who murdered her family and the crowd that greets him both. She knows she might be called to save him should anything go wrong. A member of the Cardinal’s web of secrets as much as she is a member of the Resistance. She understands. She knows they need Beaumont, need to see this through to the end because they need Vernantes in Lyon along with Anne and Michel. Still, she had cried last night, curled up in Cahusac’s arms with her face buried against his shoulder and asked almost the same question.

“If I tried to kill him… would you let me?”

So, Cahusac gives her little odem the same answer. It would be hell of an inconvenience, but some things….

Around them the crowd roars and Beaumont’s carriage rolls by, the man’s face a jovial shadow in the window, waving like he were some royalty accepting his due. He’s exactly as unpleasant as Cahusac remembers.

“Yes,” he smiles at Simon. “I would. Would you ask?”

The pup thinks and his eyes linger a long moment on the carriage before he shakes his head. “We can’t….”

Silence spreads through Cahusac’s memory and drowns out the ruckus around them, two heartbeats and the sound of a head bouncing of a wooden tabletop.

“...yet,” he murmurs with a wink and Simon smiles.

What follows is an intricate ballet of invitations, dinners, introductions. Everything they have seen before and it is as boring as it is dangerous.

The only ray of light is All Saints. Not the big mass the Cardinal holds for king, court and Beaumont, but the intimate, silent ceremony in the privacy of the Palais’ chapel. Simon’s eyes linger on Cahusac as he lights a candle for his carrier, as if he wanted to make sure that the promise stands. Jeanne stares into nothing as she lights a candle for her father, as if she were making a promise herself. Which she most likely is.

“Remember,” Cahusac whispers into her ear that night. “We need him alive still.”

“A girl can dream, mon cher,” is her acerbic answer and Cahusac is laughing still when she crawls on top of him and shuts him up with a kiss.

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After the festivities are over, after all the solemn dinners and masses have been held and fake respects
They have been paid, they leave.

They take a young prisoner who sat in the Bastille for four months, lock him into a cage and ride south, towards Richelieu.

The Alpha had been a soldier in one of the regular regiments, just a soldier who got found out by accident. Caught bathing by a novice.

His revelation had caused quite a riot, with half his regiment trying to lynch him, the other trying to defend him. Bernajoux and Boisrenard had had to wade in themselves, pushing people away to reach him and pull him out.

Since then he’d sat in a solitary cell, awaiting sentencing. To he and all involved it had been under the threat of the Cardinal examining him. In truth, he had been kept away from Bonacieux with tales of a deeper conspiracy needing the involvement of the Grand Inquisitor. And now he will die, a convenient victim for a hunt staged to the honors of Beaumont, Inquisitor of Lyon.

He is gaunt and emaciated, his ribs clearly visible as he cowers naked in the cage. He doesn't yet know that his ordeal is over.

Jeanne gives Cahusac a bag full of herbs, three different ones for tea to strengthen the prisoner, a small bag for a poultice for a festering wound on his leg and instructions to feed him, for Heaven’s sake. Let him have a bath, let him become human again.

Cahusac agrees to everything she says. There is no convincing her that this is exactly what they plan to do. Deep down she knows. But each of them has already been the one left behind, to guard the premises and the Inquisition and Richelieu’s ring, while their comrades rode into danger. So close to the All Saints masses that is even worse of a thought than usual.

So, Cahusac lets her talk and bombard him with orders on how to treat the Alpha and only adds that they will also give him a haircut and dress him as a stable hand to take him to Lyon when they escort Beaumont and hopefully his new guard Vernantes.

Sometimes the only proof they have that God is on their side is the fact that they actually come through with plans like that.

She stands in the courtyard, a woolen shawl - a new woolen shawl - wrapped around her slim shoulders, while Etienne in the background uses his wooden sword to try and injure the training post and Simon watches them both and the Alphas about to leave.

Bernajoux is already at the Palais with Vernantes making sure that the young Alpha is familiar to their target.

Cahusac tries to find a reason to delay their departure, but even Jeanne has run out of things to hand them and short of coming with them….

But she is a woman. A woman with two pups to take care of and there is no excuse in the world that could explain her presence.

Boisrenard in the background whistles sharply, Braise’s hooves clanging with impatience against the cobble stone.

“Go,” Jeanne laughs, stepping away, as if she didn’t want to kiss him. Her hands though linger on his uniform coat with a tight hold and worried eyes. “Be careful. Say hello to Michel and Anne for me, yes?”
Cahusac pulls her closer again and plants a kiss on her lips, a loud smacking, wet monstrosity without finesse or subtlety, but a lot of laughter.

And laughing is her response as she pushes him away, eyes alight with mirth.

“Go! You are a menace, Cahusac!” she cries and he turns with laughter bubbling in his chest, to get on Braise’s back and take the reins from Boisrenard.

“Try not to kill anyone in the meantime, Mademoiselle,” Cahusac calls his goodbye

“Take care, Squirrel. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Boisrenard follows.

Jeanne’s waves, her smile sees them out the gate, Simon slipping his slim shoulders shyly under her arm.

She is still standing there, hand raised as if forgotten, when Cahusac looks back.

***

Lyon in late summer had been beautiful. The stones had radiated the day’s warmth deep into the night and the wide expanse of the Saône had swiftly carried away the smell that tended to make cities ugly. In the narrow street of the Vieux Lyon people had mingled late into the night and reveled in their own success, their importance, or maybe just their desperate dreams. It had been a promise of wine, of ideas and grand thoughts, past and present. It had been pleasure.

Lyon in autumn carries a mysticism deep within its bones that no church man in his right mind would ever dare acknowledge.

With mist pooling at the foot of the Fourvière’s steep slope, like whispered secrets carried through the centuries, it’s far too easy to imagine blood dripping down the hills from the heathen places where the first Christians had been martyred.

Cahusac’s boots pound a heavy rhythm into the misty early November air, a preemptive warning to whoever might think about his belongings, that they can’t afford to try. BB had excused themselves to go and ‘get a feel for the city’. Which meant, Boisrenard was going to find the most heathen place up on the hill and do something very heathen to it and Bernajoux would tag along, carrying his peculiar relationship to God like a shield against his own fear.

Unlike Jussac, who prefers to be far away when Boisrenard does it, Cahusac wishes nothing more in that moment, than to be with his packmates. He hears the waves of the Saône gently lapping against the shore or maybe he only imagines it, like he oftentimes had imagined in Bordeaux, as if the river were his friend where his friends had not been invited. No Fisherman and no former slave are allowed in the household of Beaumont, Inquisitor of Lyon. Cahusac, though? Cahusac doesn’t even have a choice. It is not a question whether he’ll show up and neither is it a question that Richelieu and BB would have found a way to get him out of this, should he truly not be able to make it.

As it stands… the food will be exquisite. That makes up for a lot.
Vernantes’ laughter greets him, long before Cahusac steps through the narrow doorway into the courtyard of Beaumont’s townhouse. It may not be as big as the Primate’s and with only a road down from the Primatiale and the Inquisition headquarters, the inquisitor is probably constantly reminded of that fact, but may it be little… Cahusac turns as he steps inside, not being awarded that honor on his last visit to Lyon, and stops. The marble gleaming walls are adorned on two sides by connected archways of actual marble columns, hewn in intricate form accentuated by fine murals that run along the ceilings of those balconies. On the other side of the courtyard, a well nestles into a corner and Cahusac could swear, it bears Beaumont’s crest. It’s stunning. Beaumont did well to keep it only to the inside of his house.

“I knew you’d love it.” Vernantes smile as he crosses is world’s away from the desperate and broken young man who had awoken in the Cardinal’s dungeon. He opens his arms in one fluid motion and hugs Cahusac like a long lost friend although it has only been two days.

“Fed up already?” Cahusac murmurs and earns himself a tightening of the other Alpha’s arms.

A few weeks in Paris where they had put him through some intensive training, a few days on the Estates, working through years of learned horror and defensive responses. A hunt. And then a few days on the road where the Red Guards had provided silent backup for their youngest.

That had been all they had been able to give him and even if it never could be enough to forge a bond of trust between them. He was a younger aleph and his unflinching bravery, his dedication made them all respect him far beyond his years.

Still… right now the soldier’s facade crumbles for a second and behind it lies the smell of a young Alpha who is fighting too hard, subtle as Cahusac’s own. Another reason Vernantes is so perfectly chosen for this. Highbred, highborn with all the advantages it brings.

“No matter how much I wash, I will never get clean again,” he murmurs in response and once more tightens his arms before he steps away. With a smile.

“It’s good to see you,” he says, loud enough to hear it up on the balconies where Beaumont has stepped out of his rooms.

“Thought we’d abandoned you already, huh?” Cahusac tucks the glove off his hands before he reaches out and lays his right against the side of Vernantes’ neck. He feels the younger Alpha’s pulse thud against his skin, furious at first but with each beat it gentles into a calmer rhythm.

“As if you would skip town without enjoying Lyon to its fullest.” This time, as Vernantes laughs, it sounds different.

“I happen to like excellent food.”

“Vicomte de Juliac,” Looking up, Cahusac finds Beaumont incline his head. A negligible gesture, seeing that he is still standing far above the two of them, “my cook is only too happy to oblige. We are honored by your visit.”

Still, after so many years, it is hard not to flinch at the title that is rightfully his, but that Cahusac had only ever connected to his father. He is still the vicomte, has let the title lie dormant in deference to his Ema’s management of their estates and his own inability to be who his people would need him to be. That Beaumont uses it now means that he checked into Cahusac’s background and that, while not trouble, means a distinctly unpleasant evening.

“The honor is mine.” Cahusac steps back to bow deeply, awarding his respect to a man of the church.
who outranks him, even though he might not outrank him in nobility.

“And we have much to talk about,” Beaumont counters as Cahusac’s stomach sinks. He hates to be right.

Next to him Vernantes stiffens, so Cahusac reaches over and claps him on the back, turning his most charming smile up to the Inquisitor, only bolstered by the tiniest bit of Alphaic charisma.

“I hope, whatever tales you choose to enlighten me with, they will contain only good words about this young man.” If Cahusac’s laughter sounds strained, Beaumont doesn’t know him well enough to find him out. “We are very fond of him and would be devastated to break his mother’s heart because he’s doing sub-par work.”

***

The warm sweetness of dessert still lingers on Cahusac’s lips, a gentler note to the prickling of the heavy red wine. Warmth, set off against the chill in his heart and the lick of frost touching over the suddenly hostile walls of a city he used to love so much.

“Well, Vicomte de Juliac, will you tell us how you caught this Omega that escaped and what became of him?”

“I’m afraid, this is a story not divulged in polite company. Let the work rest far from the table, my father always used to say.”

Alexandre de Cahusac had never said that. Alexandre de Cahusac though had no place at this table. Only a deliberate facsimile, a lie, to protect Vernantes, too young, too vulnerable for a horror story of made up torture, rape and dismemberment. He knew Simon, he had laughed with him and played with him, learned to cherish the young Omega in place of his own, absent odem.

“So will you regale us with this famous, heart warming story of your own resilience and strength?” Leaning over the table, Beaumont had smiled. He had already been too close and had Cahusac not been highborn and Beaumont less drunk, he might have caught a wiff of a spicy scent.

Beaumont had been a fighter as a young man, although he had left his youth behind years ago, exchanged it for a soft bed, pleasantries and drink. How much of a challenge could he possibly pose if Cahusac decided to reach over and rip out his throat?

Smiling Cahusac had raised his own glass, inhaled the rich, dark scent of Burgundy and saluted the man.

There were different way to beat an adversary, even temporarily. This evening it needed to be a full bottle, wasted on the Inquisitor’s favour. And five years down the line… Who knew?

“I do not know how to get clean…” Vernantes’ words still ring in Cahusac’s ears, hours later, the cobblestones once more under his feet and the younger Alpha’s footsteps quickly approaching behind him.

“You learn to live with the dirt,” Cahusac thinks, but he smiles.
“Did you really have to see him safely to bed, Vernante?”

“Yes, well… it makes a bad impression when your employer dies on the second day of your employment.” In Vernantes’ eyes the wine shines with youthful exuberance and pride. So Cahusac forgives him the arm that flings around his shoulders.

This night is too young still and their business too important to show up and the pup has a black eye. Not that he would have hit him to begin with…

Following his own thoughts as they meander through the mellowed softness of his wine addled mind, Cahusac rubs his eyes with a sigh.

“Let’s go. I need to walk that off.”

“You think they’ll mind?”

“Bernajoux will.”

At that Vernantes stop cold in his tracks. “Wait, Bernajoux in a typical week drinks more than all of you combined.”

“You think he has more self-control than me or you together, enough…” Finding a word safe enough for a public street is difficult. On the other hand, the pup has met Bernajoux and if he proves too stupid to fill in the blanks, he’s not worth it to understand. “..power, to just plow through it and enough character to make people believe he’s stone cold sober.”

“He isn’t?”

“If he isn’t you’ll never know.” Better to warn him in advance, since Vernantes obviously hasn’t clued himself in on that yet. “The only one who can keep up with Bernajoux in any regard, is the Cardinal himself.”

“But aren’t you….” And here, for a moment, Vernantes almost open his mouth too wide for the place and time, but he catches his runaway words at the last second. “You are not a direct part of the eh… the inner circle?”

Cahusac’s shaken head has him frown.

“Why?”

“Because the only person Bernajoux could ever trust to keep his “family” safe, is Bernajoux. And him and the Cardinal are erm… let’s say… both too strong of a personality to work that out without a major hassle. They work well, as it is.”

“Is he really? That strong?” Vernantes keeps Cahusac clean in the middle of the road and provides just the right kind of support to balance the occasional slightly straying step. It also keeps them close enough together to talk mostly privately.

“Let me tell you something… in other circumstances, in another time and another place, Bernajoux would have been a king.” Cahusac sighs. “Just don’t tell him I said that. Only treat him like it.”

He would have said more, but a familiar yell tears his attention in a wholly different direction and towards the hammering of a pair of heavy boots on a heavy staircase that runs down the Fouvrière. Pushing Vernantes back against the next wall, he reaches into his bloodred overcoat and draws his pistol.
They barrel around the corner with enough force to plow down a horse, yet come to a sudden stop when at the sight of Cahuasac and Vernantes.

An abrasion adorns the left side of Boisrenard’s face, with a sharply set off stripe running smack down the middle, as if he’d hit a corner.

“Have you seen a little rat, about that high?” Bernajoux draws air with whooping breaths, skin glistening with moisture, both from the fog and the run. As he now holds his right about waist high, Cahuasac notices Boisrenard’s knife in his hand. “Thin as a twig and with more rags than…”

“No way.” Before his wine addled brain can catch up, Cahuasac doubles over with laughter.

“Tell me, you didn’t get robbed by a half starved street rat!”

“Pickpocket.” Bernajoux grumbles and it only makes Cahuasac laugh harder, the air wheezing through his throat only to be stopped by yet another snorting attempt to speak.

“YOU…. YOU….” Only his hands on his knees prevent him from toppling over until Boisrenard’s huge paw grabs the scruff of his neck and drags him upright again.

“Now, have you seen him?”

“Here?” Cahuasac giggles. “Are you insane? The little shit’s been gone the moment you lost sight of him. Underground or five streets over.”

“Too many fucking tunnel, I tell you…” Boisrenard lets go and slams his hand into the wooden post that frames the archway they just came through. He notices too late what he’s about to do, when his fist has already connected with the wood and they all hear the unhealthy double crunch of both wood and skin on impact.

“Merde!”

And if the commotion had not yet drawn the attention of the tenants around, that yell will.

Boisrenard grinds his teeth, while they all wince in sympathy, but already Bernajoux has stepped up, his dark, all-seeing eyes sweeping up and down the street, looking for an escape.

“You really got pick pocketed?” Cahuasac narrows his eyes and scans the house fronts, digging deep into his brain for the things he knows, he knows...

“Yeah,” Bernajoux grumbles with no option to deny it.

“Anything important lost, like, you know…?” It feels wrong to ask Bernajoux of all people if he left his Underground token in his purse, but of all of them, he’s the one with the least experience in the despicable parts of town. But he’s not completely brain addled, his answering glare states in no uncertain terms.

“Right, great. Boisrenard, you good?” Boisrenard’s eyes are, for once, really and truly unhappy, as he cradles his hand, but he nods, his gaze sweeping over Vernantes to his mate who in turn looks to Cahuasac.

Someone a few houses down calls for them to shut up.

Cahuasac could lead them to their hotel, just down the street and to the right, a townhouse newly acquired by his eminence, Cardinal Richelieu. That was the plan, meet there and then move out again
for the nightly business. But since they have met up already they might just as well go right away.

The five of them walking into a house in the middle of the Vieux Lyon only to walk out again half an hour later draw attention they cannot afford. The last thing they need is someone following on their trail.

Cahusac turns, orients himself towards the river, towards the Primatiale and the direction they came from, walking a dozen or so steps until he reaches a heavy oaken door and saunters into the narrow passageway behind.

Boisrenard behind him curses. “Why am I not surprised?”

Cahusac could have told him how they had shuffled Simon through here, crossing the first road away from the depot to get to the river, but one look at his packmates tells him that Boisrenard already suspects and more, the anger in his eyes has given way to the usual twinkle. So, instead, he gets a wink.

“I’ll let you know whenever we need fish, alright? Now hush.”

An old man stares at them as they march past, his pale eyes set deeply behind wrinkled skin and as he bares his teeth to warn them off, or hurry them along he reveals a row of yellowed stumps, but whether he cannot give voice or doesn’t care… he stays silent.

Before they emerge on the other side to the subdued buzz of the Rue St. Jean, Cahusac and Vernantes turn their coats, hide the moisture slick red leather and bring out the more inconspicuous dark grey of the inner lining.

The street they step into had hummed with life in the mild summer months, but this time of year and in this weather, only few people are out and about.

That makes orientation much easier, the recess Cahusac looks for too subtle to be easily found in a crowd of people. And then they’re off again, down to the left, back towards the Primatiale and dangerously close to Beaumont’s house, fast asleep as he might be, the Inquisition never sleeps.

They mingle with ease with the streets and what few people are about, just soldiers on their way to drink, probably. The next entryway lies behind a tattered doorway in the shadow of a small inn, the sound of the hinges creaking drowned out by the roaring voices of singing workers.

Inside, there is silence.

The cool, dry air of yet another passage greets them and should somebody have taken exception to their presence, in here, with the narrow walls and farther down, the easily defensible stairways and narrow platforms, they’d have a hard time. Most of that is paranoia talking, this is not a chase after all, not this time. They only need to get unseen out of the Vieux Lyon, but then, paranoia never had hurt anybody. In the background Bernajoux murmurs softly to Boisrenard and Cahusac finds him checking the hand and the abrasion on Boisrenard’s cheek with careful hands.

“What happened there?” The words earn Cahusac a dark glance from Boisrenard.

“Passage too narrow, corner too tight, little weasel too weasly.”

“You ran into a wall.” Cahusac snorts and gets a good natured shrug in response.

“That little shit was fast.”
Bernajoux chuckles lowly into the darkness and raises his mate’s hand to press a gentle kiss to the knuckles. “Nothing broken.”

“Except your reputation.” Cahusac can’t help that gentle poke at his pakemate’s pride.

“Oh but Cahusac, who in here would be willing to tell? Vernantes? Remember… I know where your bed sleeps, chiot.”

Cahusac’s soft chuckle is the only sound as he moves them silently through the walled off courtyard, rising high enough to almost hide the sky, and under the curving stairways that run between an intersection and the next courtyard.

Someone heads their way from the front and within a blink, they have retreated into a dark recess that might or might not lead into the neighbouring house.

Of their little group, Vernantes is the one that scans their surroundings with deep interest. Bernajoux and Boisrenard are gladly deferring to Cahusac as the one who has been here before and moreover, as the one who gets surrounding like these. Vernantes on the other hand will stay here, he will have to live here and be able to move through the city with more understanding and knowledge than both Beaumont’s and the Primate’s men. Sure, there are people in place who have the underside of Lyon covered, but the willingness to step out of his natural comfort zone is what sets a good undercover rebel apart from a great one.

Watching him now, while they listen to a set of footsteps retreat down toward the Rue de St. Jean, Cahusac sees for the first time not just the resilience of an Alpha and the natural rage of youth, but the cunning and understanding of the man Vernantes will become.

They walk back out into the night two courtyards later, the far end of the rue du Boeuf deserted with no eyes following their path up the mountain on a more gentle slope than BB had tumbled down. Finding the small dead end street Adèle gave them to is not quite as easy. The entry nestles cleverly into a narrow passage between two buildings that leads to yet another courtyard, surrounded by houses that lack in height on this side, just enough for a door and an additional level, but on the other side, if one just walked out the door, they’d find themselves between two bridges and within spitting distance of the Vieux Lyon and the bridges to the Presqu’île.

It also looks much drier and warmer than their last abode.

Cahusac knocks once and finds himself face to face with a knife and, behind it, the ill-tempered face of a tired Alpha.

“Hello Anne.” Cahusac smiles when she just stepped back with an inaudible grump and waves them in.

In the awkward silence that follows, the Alphas eye each other wearily. Vernantes stands, like a silent shadow, against the wall, his gaze sweeping over the people he will be expected to work with. Anne scans the newcomers with detached interest, though her every move, every gaze, belies a wealth of experience in very dirty fights.

BB and Cahusac stand back deliberately, though even they are eyed suspiciously and sorted. The last time, Cahusac had blamed it on the stress of the situation, but, it seems, Anne simply lacks the ability to relax.
In the end Michel is the one to push away from the kitchen table he had been sitting at and saunters over to Vernantes, not in the slightest hiding the lighter step of an Omega and the very intentional sway of his hips.

His gaze wanders over Vernantes body once and his nod comes at no surprise to anyone who sees his face and his grin.

“Ya’ll do, puppy,” he laughs. “Ne’er mind my darling Anne. She’s shy of strangers.” He sticks out his hand and grabs Vernates’ when the young Alpha doesn’t react fast enough. “’m Michel. An’ ’m de sec’nd best thief in town.”

“Whose the first...best...,” comes Vernantes’ dumbfounded reply and even Anne smirks a little.

“Ah well, see... there’s a thing...”

Michel turns on his heels, eyes narrowed though it can’t hide the smile. Months back his sun warmed skin had carried a certain palor, a grey sheen that spoke of exhaustion, of too little food and sun, but today, despite the colder season, he carries a healthy golden shimmer. Cahusac can't help but wonder how the better circumstances had changed their pups and marvel at the improvement one horrible event had brought to half a dozen people. Fair? Hardly.

But as he watches Michel rummage through his layers of clothing that he still wears like armor, he finds, they made the best out of it.

“Ah would apologize, Mr Bernajoux, but ya know for that either of us needed te be sorry. Ye’r sure no poor man. Lil Matthieu says thanks.” As he follows his grand words with a grand gesture and produces Bernajoux's purse there is a moment when all eyes sit on Anne.

Except Bernajoux. Bernajoux, like the gracious, kingly creature he is, bellows a hearty laugh and snatches his expectedly empty purse from Michel’s hand.

“It is my pleasure, friend and I hope it will fill his belly warm and plenty.”

Whatever Boisrenard mumbles next to him is silent enough that it would take a Beta to hear.

Michel’s grin widens as he turns to Vernantes and reaches out his hand.

“’M pleasure.”

Vernantes’ eyebrows shoot up, fingers twitching and for a moment it looks like he’s about to refuse. Not yet a broiling storm, a twitch in Anne’s shoulder, a tightening in BB’s, then Vernantes reaches over and shakes it with an amiable nod.

“Marc-Michel de Vernantes. Looks like I’m set to become Beaumont’s new right hand man in a year or...”

“Whenever the current one has a sad, but unpredictable accident. Yes.” Anne’s voice cuts through the room with enough ice to freeze both rivers for a whole winter. “We’re counting the days, young friend.”

And like this, with a heavy swallow on Vernantes part and a slow standing motion on Anne, the currents in the room shift. The movement from the young Red Guard is miniscule a tipping of his head, a gentle breath, noble upbringing and aeon old instinct warring, but it’s enough.

She smiles as she stops in front of him and raises her hand to his shoulder. “Welcome to Lyon,
young Vernantes. You have met my mate.” The word vibrates through her voice like a clear warning, and then it dissolves, just like that “Let us take back our city, shan’t we?” And she turns, walks back to the table to fill another cup of wine before she motions for them all to sit.

“Cahusac, tell me about Jeanne. And whatever the fuck you did to piss off the Primate like that!” She drops heavily onto the recliner next to her mate and with the sudden tension dissipating, she smiles.

Cahusac waits out the moment until Bernajoux and Boisrenard have managed to squeeze onto the window and Vernantes occupies the only chair. Then he folds himself onto the floor and takes the cup of wine from Michel. The liquid is red and heavy with spices, though nothing could possibly cover up the sourness that permeates every drop of it. As far as wine goes, this one is especially vile. But compared to the sweet, gentle Bordeaux - Bordeaux of all things - Beaumont had served… Cahusac rather chugs down blood colored gutter water than spend one more minute with the Inquisitor. Not this year and hopefully not this decade. Through the fine mist of particles swirling in the liquid he can trace the age pattern on the bottom of his cup. He scoffs

“Yeah so… we killed five of his men, including one of his Lieutenants…” Anne’s smile turns into a grin and Cahusac lets his head drop back against Vernantes’ chair and releases a long breath. “They asked for it.”

***

They could have stopped in Luzy, could have bought in to a farmer’s barn or the lousy inn. Instead they ride on until Boisrenard almost slips off his horse and Bernajoux orders that the next commodity with a roof will be requisitioned. They still end up in a barn, a wobbly construction out on a hill that overlooks a wood covered valley, hours from the next village. Still, somebody is storing hay in it and it provides reasonable protection from the wind and the moisture that holds the air hostage like the like a jealous lover a girl’s attention. It crawls into every corner, creeps under their woolen overcoats until Cahusac’s shoulder creaks like the rusty hinge of the barn’s door. It moves with the same agility as well.

In hindsight there is no reason for skipping the villages, and he already turns to tell BB when Boisrenard’s look finds him over the saddle of Trot. Dusk has long since caught up with them and the only light is supplied by a measly fire Bernajoux has managed to coax from a fallen wooden beam, the only dry piece of wood within miles.

Still, even in the cold, with the pain that tears through his muscles, with the faint light… Cahusac knows this expression of worry too well to not recognize.

“I’m fine,” he answers and sounds fine.

“I know.” Boisrenard lifts a corner of his mouth to one of his signature crooked smiles. “You slept maybe 5 hours in the past three days and the idea alone that you think you’ll get away with it without us noticing warrants protective measures.” Cahusac doesn’t need that smug eyebrow wiggle, but there it is and Cahusac sighs wearily as he rubs down Braise and that weariness settles deep inside his bones, not tiredness, not quite pain, but a deep need to just be. To resettile.

His mare, bless her greedy heart, goads him into a game of search-the-apple that predictably ends with her getting the apple and him a small laugh before he settles at the fire - much more lively since Boisrenard tends to it. Bernajoux’s outdoor skills just are and probably always will be a little lacking.
He has other qualities.

Somehow he managed to find a cut of tree stump that now serves as a table. He also managed to produce three glasses - real glass - that he always drags along and that just somehow never break. “You just need to know how to pack them, really.” is what he always says to it and ends any curious questions before anybody dares to ask them.

And last but not least, he pulled out a bottle of wine. Not the horrible crime Anne and Michel had dug up, but one of his own that he jealously hoards in their cellar like one of Boisrenard’s mythical beasts.

He uncorks it in with the perfection that is his own, chasing away the fog-laden November air with the idea of a fine salon and them, like well respected men, on cushioned seats.

The glasses sit perfectly lined up as Bernajoux rolls the bottle between his hands, a perfect, parallel move along the label, before he pours a perfect amount into each glass with a perfect little twist at the last second to prevent a running drop to mar the perfection.

Boisrenard’s eyes linger on his mate’s every move, warm with affection and his lips tight in a smile. He couldn’t look more smitten if he tried. But it’s not for him, this display.

Bernajoux hands the first glass to Cahusac and only the second to his mate before he sits on a left-over of the beam feeding the fire and maneuvers Boisrenard on the blanket in front of him to drape his arms around his mate’s shoulders.

“Tell me about Beaumont.”

Between Cahusac’s fingers the surprisingly fragile glass turns, the bloodred wine swirling in the faint rhythm of a mocking children’s song. Didn’t you know it? Didn’t you?

“ He and Vernantes get along very well. Beaumont loves the thought of having a direct connection to Richelieu, but moreover, Vernantes mother has a certain weight at court. The pup carries just the right amount of admiration and independence to make it genuine. Eloise trained him well. Vernantes is right. He’ll be Beaumont’s right hand man within the year. If Anne doesn’t stage an accident, then Beaumont will.”

He takes a sip of the wine just to escape their eyes. The wine is excellent because Bernajoux does not possess subpar ones, yet it tastes like dust. Cahusac knows what the next question will be. He knows them.

“And what did he do to you?” Boisrenard’s voice is painfully gentle, the voice of a man who spends his life traipsing around nightmares, if not Cahusac’s then Bernajoux’s. Jeanne was right, Boisrenard carries most of his scars on his skin and as horrific as they are, he has a beautifully unblemished soul. It forces him to deal with other’s pain far too often.

“Nothing, really,” Cahusac said and huffed half a laugh. “We talked about my family so I didn’t have to lie about Jeanne’s and risk Vernantes giving something away…” Bernajoux made a face and buried it in his mate’s hair with a sigh. “Which was about as pleasant as you’d think.”

“But not the first time you had to do it…” Bernajoux cuts in and lifts his head. “You hate it, yes, but Cahusac…” His voice softens to a note he rarely ever displays unless someone lays dying. A gentle care in every syllable, the other side of the Alpha he is, not just a warrior, not just a General in his own right, but someone who cares. So much, sometimes, that he suffocates on the terror of losing what family he has. Cahusac never asked, what happened to Bernajoux’s real family. “Matthieu…”
Cahusac’s eyes snap up at the use of his real name and he growls, not meaning to, it just happens in the shock, the fear, the… as it crashes around him and he curls closer to the fire, glass with perfectly poured wine still safely in his hand.

“Merde…” He shakes his head and as he looks up, he finds his rather smug packmates watching him. Bernajoux knows exactly what he is doing and which pressure points to push.

“Beaumont knows about Jeanne,” Cahusac says, dimly aware of Boisrenard cursing. “No specifics, but he knows that the Durand’s had another child and that she lived in Lyon and is a midwife. He knows her name...her married name at least. His people are looking for her, assuming she must be around somewhere since I ‘caught the Omega and we put it down’” Shuddering Cahusac takes a sip, then another. The wine still tastes like dust but at least it’s something to hold onto.

“Shit…,” Boisrenard whispers and Bernajoux hums in agreement.

“And when were you planning on telling us?” Anger swings in Bernajoux’s voice, soft and deadly. Cahusac looks up, but his Alpha stares into the flames, so whoever he is angry at - and Cahusac has a good idea - it’s not him.

“Soon. When I managed to not panic at the thought alone…,” Cahusac says and sits straighter. “Nothing we do right now will make it worse or make it better. We cannot jump in again and steal a possible throwback from Beaumont and responding to it will only turn the attention to us and that is the last thing we should do… so…”

“We do nothing…” Boisrenard finishes the sentence and turns his head to plant a kiss on Bernajoux’s jaw. “It will be fine. The last place Beaumont will look for her is Paris. He wouldn’t dare poach in Richelieu’s territory.”

Bernajoux nods, his eyes closed and heaves a deep breath. Even across the fire the sound of leather creaking as he digs his fingers into Boisrenard’s doublet is unmistakable.

“It will be fine. We can protect her.” His eyes open again and find Cahusac. “How about you, can you deal with it?”

Can he? Cahusac has seen her shoot, he has seen her fight, but knowing is so far from knowing sometimes...If she were alone, he would probably bang his head bloody in desperation and fear. As it is… “Yes. I’m fine. She can handle herself. I just need to… “

He shakes his head and eyes his packmates, sitting back to chest and as close as they possibly can get. “I would murder someone just to hear her say my name. Is that stupid?”

Bernajoux snorts a laugh and once more buries his face in Boisrenard’s hair, drawing a breath so deep his shoulders strain against the confines of his coat.

“Very,” Boisrenard says and lifts his mate’s hand to press a kiss to its knuckles.
And the darkness kept me safely

Chapter Notes

Additional trigger warnings:
Difficult birth
Possible miscarriage
Possible death of children
Possible death in childbirth.

The silence in the house is deafening without the three Alphas.

No one there to rumble an ill natured “good morning” as she walks into the kitchen before dawn, prying, none too subtly, for a cup of breakfast.

Nobody stealing her book from her hand to replace it with a knife. Nobody that throws her over their shoulder if she refuses and smacks her backside with a good natured “Shut up, Squirrel, it’s time for training.”

And no one to follow her movements with his eyes, thinking he is subtle in the way he imagines her body unclothed, unburdened by duties and the door to his rooms locked.

On the first two days Jeanne simply enjoys it.

Of course there is Etienne, but even her rambunctious little Aleph can't compare to three fullgrown Alphas, each blessed with an overboarding personality.

She reads. She cooks with Simon and gives all her attention to the Omega, finally able to listen to his silence.

She forgoes training in favor of simply sleeping.

On the third day she leaves Etienne in Simon’s care to go to the market, after a neighbour told her that the milking problems of Sophie’s daughter still haven’t cleared up. She should be able to breastfeed with the tea and the salve she got, but she doesn’t.

Jeanne tries to convince her friend to let her check on her daughter in person. She is refused.

Sophie hands her a bag of late autumn herbs from their farm anyways. It’s not much, but with three and a half Alphas, plantain suddenly is worth it’s weight in gold.

On the fourth day, Jeanne wakes up and walks into the kitchen, house coat tightly wrapped around her shoulders.
“G’morning, Bernajoux,” she mumbles, but it’s only Felix’s pathetic mewl that greets her.

She too misses her masters.

So she finds herself standing in the drizzling rain, lobbing knives at the stable door in angry determination.

“They will be back soon,” Simon says, as he steps up to her, wrapped in Bernajoux’s heavy woolen raincoat.

“I know,” Jeanne grumbles and picks up the next knife, stolen like the others from Boirenard’s stash.

“They are safe,” he adds gently and it only ignites her anger.

“I know!” Jeanne hisses and throws the knife, hitting the improvised chalk circle with barely a finger width error.

“Then why?” Simon folds the blanket over her shoulder and with the smallest of smiles to her, walks to retrieve the knives.

“Because we are locked in here, unable to do anything. Unable to help, while they….”

She reaches out to take the knives from her Odem’s hand, but he has already turned and throws the first knife. It hits center mass.

“You’re not making it better,” Jeanne says and then words fail her as her Odem turns around and hands over the other knives with a brilliant impish grin.

“Sorry?” he smirks and runs off, laughing wildly while Jeanne chases after him, yelling empty threats.

That night Jeanne wakes up, her siblings curled tightly against her, and her first thought is “What if Sophie doesn’t have a daughter?”

Jeanne is out of bed and in the kitchen without even throwing on her housecoat.

It’s just one herb switched, a small change, that makes it an effective medicine for Omegas.

There is information that must always only be dealt in secret. Dangerous information dealt within family clans. Little remedies that no man can know.

It’s information that will never appear in any book and will be lost when it’s no longer handed over.

For women it is the knowledge of how to avoid conceiving children. For Omegas it’s the herbs to switch.

That is what makes midwives so dangerous to men and Omegas alike.

To men it threatens the freedom for their wives, to Omegas possible detection.
But then… some women just have trouble with their milk. Sometimes herbs don’t work with some.

“My aunt came from the north and for her my mother’s medicine just didn’t work. But this one? Worked wonders,” Jeanne tells Sophie the next morning with a resigned shrug. “What can you do? Tell her to try this tea, three times a day. If it’s not better within a week…”

Sophie nods and hugs her. She doesn’t suspect that her friend is about to out her daughter, if she is indeed an Omega. She also can’t know that Jeanne would rather die with that knowledge.

Just more secrets to bury.

The high feeling doesn’t last long.

On the evening of this fifth day Jeanne finds herself sit in the kitchen, a cup of tea in front of her, painting Cahusac’s name on the wood with her finger.

With nobody there to witness it, the embarrassment is a small price to pay.

It’s not like she snuck into his room earlier and retrieved the scarf he left hanging over the back of his hideous recliner.

She hasn’t her nose buried in the fabric as her head rests on her arms on the table top and her eyes stare sightlessly out the window into the sliver of overcast greyish sky she can divine somewhere up there. She is simply using it as a pillow. Because the fabric is soft and smells of firs and woods and all the opposites of dirty Parisian life. It smells of Cahusac’s laughter as they had come back from a tavern more than a week earlier. A low provocation to the Musketeers, just to establish needlessly how horrendous Red Guards were.

Not funny, or honorable or brave beyond imagination, wading back into the fray time and time again, despite nights wrecked with nightmares.

Did they sit with Anne and Michel now, Boisrenard with the Omega twins on his knees, listening intently to the little ones as he does with Etienne?

Jeanne is shaken from her reverie by the sound of dice on wood.

Simon stands in front of her, one of the dice still between his fingers.

“Let’s play,” he says and sits.

Jeanne wants to decline. Wants to be alone with that distant ache in her heart.

“You cheat,” she says and is rewarded with her Odem’s laugh.
“Yes! I’m gonna show you!”

On the sixth evening someone knocks on the front door, but as she opens, there is only a sheet of paper on the ground, a butcher shop’s recipe, drawn on, written over, notes filling every blank space.

On the lower left corner a dark circle is cut by a brighter line and around it, there are words.

Back door.

J.

Simon up on the balcony watches her with serious eyes as she bolts the front door behind her.

He hasn’t been a child anymore since they left Lyon and now he vanishes into the house, only to come back with a pistol in each hand. One for her, one he keeps himself.

A person slips inside as Jeanne opens the secret door that nestles behind the stable. It’s hidden on the other side by the narrow passage between two back alley houses, barely wide enough to allow grown man through.

He is not surprised to be met with the barrel of Jeannes pistol and the ominous click of Simon’s being cocked. Even dressed in a simple grey woolcoat, the seams often mended and discolored patches covering holes, Jean de Tréville is an unmistakable figure to her.

Not because he is especially imposing or battle ready. Simon’s eyes light up even before the Captain pulls down the hood of his coat.

Her Odem’s weapon falls, hanging only limply in his hand, all but forgotten in favor of a quick hug.

Jean fixes her with his gaze.

“This is an emergency. I need a midwife.”

Jeanne can’t help her eyes scanning over his midriff in confusion

“Not me,” he says, a faint smirk creasing his cheeks, though in his bright eyes a faint touch of bitterness draws the skin taut. “I apologize, I didn’t think…”

Jeanne waves it off. “I’m a midwife, Jean. I always think someone’s pregnant.”

She already turns back towards the kitchen to get her bag, but Simon already races past her.

“I’ll get it,” he yells over his shoulder and tumbles up the stairway, all gangly limbs and overflowing energy. All the things he hadn’t been in the last months.

Jeanne sees the smile on Jean’s face as he watches her baby odem run off. A shared moment of precious joy, before he turns to her.

“Adele found another enslaved Omega. She’s two years older than Simo at most… and she’s about to whelp.” He need not say more.
“That’s too young.” Jeanne has her eyes steadfastly fixed on the entrance to their living quarters, silently praying for Simon to just take a minute longer.

She needs this minute to clamp down on her emotions. It’s the thought of the monsters out there, that does it.

“What about her ‘owner’?” Her voice is frigid, as the words finally make it past her lips.

Jean stares ahead as he answers; anger cuts deep grooves around his mouth, his eyes alight with grim satisfaction.

“Richelieu and Jussac are taking care of him,” he says lowly and cuts a quick glance to her, their eyes meeting in shared fury. “If he knows anything we will know soon enough.”

“Good.” Jeanne nods just as Simon comes running down the stairs, her medicine bag in one hand, coat slung over his shoulder.

Jeanne slips the coat on, with Simon’s eyes never leaving her. At first anxiously, but soon annoyed, as she rattles down a barrage of orders on how to deal with the three year old monster that is asleep upstairs.

“I don’t know when I will be back. So you might need to cook.”

“I know how cooking works….”

“…and bathe him…” “I know, Jeanne.” “And yourself.” “Yes.”

“The others should be back soon, should this take longer. But if something goes severely wrong, see if you can find Sophie. I don’t think she’ll rat you out, should she find out, but be careful in any case and…”

“Jeanne!”

Her head whips around towards the slim Omega that, even if he is his usual lively self, is never loud.

“I know. And don’t feed him raw onions, it will upset his tummy. Right?”

“Yes,” Jeanne answers weakly and draws her baby Odem into her arms.

“Be careful,” Jeanne says and drops a kiss to his cheek.

She can feel Jean’s gaze lingering on them, his barely contained impatience.

“I love you, big sister. We will be alright. I got a gun, three knifes and Bernajoux’s old rapier. If someone comes, we will hide out in the secret room.”

“We have a secret room?” it’s news to her, but not really surprising. Neither is it surprising that Simon found it. He had always been an inquisitive little bugger.

“Behind the wine rack in the cellar. Boisrenard says that it was a smuggler’s stash. He knows stuff like that.”

“I bet he does. Stop listening to Boisrenard, Simi.”
Her declaration is met with a smirk from Jean as he leads her out the door.

The alley behind the hotel is empty as usual, nothing out here but outhouses and sheds and the occasional stray cat. Still Jean checks thoroughly before he leads her out, both their faces obscured by hoods pulled low over their heads.

It’s raining again and the darkness is settling deeply over the city. Very few people are still out, but it takes only one wrong person recognizing them to set into motion a catastrophic cascade that might endanger them all.

Likely it would only some minor inconvenience, a few weird question why the Captain of the Musketeers is walking the streets at night, a strange woman at his arm, but none of them can ever be cautious enough.

The house he leads her to blends into a wide row of big townhouses. It’s close enough to the cathedral to be of importance, but far enough from court and king to not cause too much interest.

On one of the rare afternoons when the both of them were free, Cahusac had taken her on a long leisurely stroll and explained all of the pitfalls of Parisian court life with a certain smugness and an air of naturality that had made her wonder just how much of a natural he was.

His answer had been a shock, even more so for the blasé way it was delivered.

“De Cahusac is a direct side line of de Foix and d’Albert line” his smile had been the picture of innocence as he had linked his arm with hers. “Not that they would admit it, not even under torture. Evil, bad traitor that I am….” His whisper had turned into a purr next to her ear, a touch of pain that tinged his voice covered by a lot of misbehaving Alpha, delighted by her shock.

“Wait you said those were connected to the Bourbon line!”

At that he had outright snickered.

Now, as Jean leads her around the back to the servant’s entrance, Jeanne misses him with all the yearning her heart is capable of.

His smile, his stupid laugh when he manages to pull one on either of his packmates, his hands.

It’s only been little more than a week, but maybe it gets better with longer separation.

Because in the event that he one day decides he wants a cute little Omega that can mate him and give him cute little pups…

Jean’s head turns sharply towards her as her sadness spikes at that thought.

Jeanne just waves him off. It’s nothing.
She has to repeat it aloud and mouth Cahusac’s name, before he nods in sad understanding and with a gentle yearning creeping into his own eyes, before he knocks.

The person opening the door shouldn’t come as a surprise, after all Jeanne was in Autun, had seen the convent, yet still, these people continue to surprise her.

“Mother superior,” Jean says and bows in deep respect.

“Little Odem,” is the smiling whisper of the woman – woman? – in the habit that stands, framed by a heavy stone cast doorway. “Please come in.”

Her eyes extend the invitation to Jeanne and she has only time to cast Jean a confused look before he ushers her inside.

“I am Nicol,” says Mother Superior. “Sister Marie Celine,” she adds as she sets a brisk stride through the modest stone floor interior that belies its outward appearance.

“The girl,” the pause she makes before designating a gender to the patient is significant, though the nun garnishes it with an apologetic smile. These wall may be comparably safe, it says, but they’re still in the middle of Paris. “She was entrusted into our care by a friend of the convent. It is rare for me to travel to Paris in person, but a fortunate coincidence. Under God’s guidance, I am sure.”

There is nothing for Jeanne to say under the Mother superior’s expectant gaze, so she just nods.

Somehow, she is being tested. And somehow she is failing miserably if Nicol’s face is anything to go by.

“Where did you say, was Agathe?” Nicol intentionally looks past Jeanne and addresses the Musketeer at her side with the question.

He turns to look at Jeanne with a smile and links his arm through the crook of her elbow, a protective gesture, she is not quite sure she appreciates.

“Not here. Jeanne is.” Jean stops the Mother Superior with a gentle hand to her arm, unheard of for anybody not a relative or a close friend.

“Jeanne’s been working for us, with or without her knowledge for more than six years.” He casts a quick glance about, even though they are as open here, as they ever are in any of the safe spaces - the Guard’s townhouse, the Palais - he still makes sure, no one is around.

“She is clan. She belongs to Bernajoux’s pack. Trust me, please.”

“You might want to consult Bernajoux about that, Jean…,” Jeanne tries to interject.

It earns her a lopsided smile that carries a wealth of knowledge. She hates it when they do that, knowing things closed to her because she doesn’t share their keen sense of smell.

Which means, she will be the one to ask Bernajoux. Or she might ask Simon. Her little Odem has always been proficient in translating these intricacies.

“Bernajoux’s, huh?” The Mother Superior eyes her up and down, her face with sharply slashed eyebrows and a just as sharp mouth screaming nobility, though she would be little older than Jean,
her habit gives her an overly strict appearance, almost ascetic.

This time Jean answers with a chuckle. “My guess would be, they forgot to mention some of the more obscure words of passage. I expected my word to be enough, Nicol.” The levity of the chuckle still colors his words. If Jean is hurt by the nun’s distrust, he hides it admirably.

“Spoiled. That is what they are. What we all are, safe in our little enclaves.” She shakes her head and eyes Jeanne up and down once more, with much less animosity this time. “Come along, child.”

She finds a young woman behind the door to silent room at the end of a long corridor.

Jean and the nun have stayed outside, engrossed in deep talk that had them only nod when Jeanne excused herself to see her patient.

The first thing evident is the sickly pallor of her skin, not the warm glow of Bernajoux's healthy tone, but the cold grayish tint of ashes.

Despite how heavily pregnant she is and how narrow the bed she rests on, her diminutive stature is crowded by the weight of the stone walls around the room.

As Jeanne touches the Omega’s sweat dotted forehead a pair of heavy brown eyes look up at her.

Sad. Resigned.

A doe’s, seeing the hunter and knows she can’t ever escape.

Her skin is clammy and dry. Feverish already.

“Hello.” Jeanne smiles and brushes back her close cropped curls. “I am Jeanne. I am a midwife and will help your little ones into the world.”

There is no story to this girl. No place she came from.

No knowledge of route she travelled to get to this townhouse in Paris.

Bernajoux might know something, but no matter how many times the two of them spend talking or silent over breakfast, Jeanne doesn’t think any questions would be welcome.

There is a Bernajoux that the world sees. A Bernajoux the throwbacks see.

And a Bernajoux that is so intensely private, Jeanne wonders if any of them have ever caught more than a glimpse. Except Boisrenard, of course.

For some odd reason he of all people lives inside this armor, privy to all the Alpha’s soft spots.

But this little Omega, she is here now. The rest doesn’t matter.

“Will you kill them?” she asks with a foreign lilt to her voice and Jeanne has to lift her hand to hide how she jerks away.

The Omega is too addled by fever to notice, still Jeanne sits with the faint guilt of having caused distress.
“Not ever,” she says. “I promise. I have a little one myself. A little Alpha.”

It comes naturally to take the Omega’s hand, to fold hers around her patient’s. To watch her relax and her eyes fall shut within seconds. Not without a small distressed whimper of pain that so far is only a slight discomfort.

There are a thousand thoughts, barely formed and already aborted, none helpful.

Only one in between sparks brighter for a moment.

Jeanne doesn’t even know her name.

Jean looks up as she steps outside. His face, relaxed in animated discussion up until that point, drawing with worry at once.

“She is asleep,” Jeanne says and it’s the most obvious and the easiest thing to say.

Two faces turn to her, one pale and nobly cast, the other sun-touched and handsome.

“Two pups. Both, I think alive.”

Her words should be a hopeful assumption of life. A conviction that this might have a good ending. The face shown to fathers and grandmothers to be…

“Let me be frank. The pups are smaller than they should be. I can’t say for sure by how much, but it’s noticeable. The mother is weak as a babe, malnourished and running a high fever.”

Both faces fall, but it’s Jean’s, the sadness that swamps his eyes, that threatens to break her heart.

Jeanne would love to give him hope for a miracle.

“I will try my best, but I can’t promise to save all of them. I can’t even promise to save any of them.”

The Mother Superior nods and squares her shoulders in a gesture that is somehow very familiar and yet solely her own.

“What do you need?”

Jeanne hasn’t yet finished saying ‘water’ when a heart rending scream echoes through the room’s closed door.

There is a panicked second when she fears that the Omega heard her, then the sound of pain filters through. Not normal, uncomfortable pain. Pain!

"Too soon,” is all Nicol can gasp, before Jeanne barks orders for warm water, clean cloth, water for tea, hot stones and, for heaven’s sake, laudanum.

Too soon, echoes Jeanne’s mind, but it doesn’t matter, it’s not for her to decide. Not a human’s place to wish for such power.
Jean watches her with bright blue eyes that maybe look a little taken aback.

"That's Armand's...Richelieu's sister you just ordered about."

That explains the familiarity and her nose. The sister is unexpected though, highborn blueblood silver powdered bottoms as Richelieu shouldn't have "sisters"

She knows her mind is chasing phantoms, trying to avoid entering that room again. That battlefield.

The fear is an old acquaintance. It hasn't abated in all the years she has tried to keep carriers and pups alive.

Too soon.

"Well, thank God, she will be efficient then," she states to Jean's almost smile and softening expression and walks inside.

Push, Amara, you need to at least try!"

“I can’t.” Twelve hours later they both are on the verge of breakdown. “I’m sorry, Mistress, I can’t.”

The Omega’s voice is barely audible, a hoarse and broken whisper.

The contractions are coming closer. The Omega’s body wants to, just…

“Alright,” Jeanne takes a deep breath. “No reason to apologize. If we could predict how and when a birth will happen, I would be out of work.”

It’s not true, but there is no reason to scare the girl even more.

“I will make you some tea. It will strengthen you, let you breathe a little easier. Ease the contractions for the moment. Not for long, though.” The smile is hard to come by, but it’s all Jeanne has to offer, so she at least can give it a try. “You rest, then we get your pups. Big babies sometimes take a little longer. That’s normal.”

Dark eyes scan Jeanne’s face, seem to search for the lie, but the young Omega is too exhausted to find her out, too fever ridden despite the teas and the cold wraps, to notice anything is off.

“Thank you.” The grateful, tired smile is a hot glowing knife that cuts right through any armor Jeanne might have had.

“Not for this.” Another smile, another lie, before Jeanne can grab her bag of herbs and flee the barren room, a nun’s empty cell.

For some these rooms are a lifelong punishment, for some they are liberation.

Richelieu’s sister. Unbelievable.

And of course she runs a place that gives Omega’s a safe haven, just as Jean does with the Musketeers and Jussac does with the Red Guards.

As the door falls shut behind Jeanne, anger wells up from somewhere deep inside, where it resides safely, calmly, waiting to erupt.

Usually, when it does, things happen to people, like that time when she shot a man in cold blood on
a deserted mountain, to save another. Only to torture him when that fury blinded her.

It’s all too little, too late.

What they do, it’s nothing but patchwork, to repair what was already broken. They were saving exactly no one, because this, this was no life.

The fear, the hiding, the constant threats, they poison who they are supposed to be. They had almost broken Simon, they had destroyed her parents.

And now…

“Sancta Maria, Mater Dei….”

Jean’s hand shocks her out of the spiral she is falling into.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, “I shouldn’t pray to Mary here. It’s just…”

He says nothing, envelopes her into his arms and his scent, warm and sweet, for a moment truly reminds her of her mother.

“What are we even doing here, Jean? What are we achieving? They are monsters and we are stemming a cascade with our bare hands.”

There is silence. And it stretches. The first few seconds are filled with waiting, but when no answer comes Jeanne looks up and finds the Captain of the Musketeers stare at a wall.

Then he shrugs.

“We survive. And sometimes we even live a little. Whenever we can, however much we are able to.” The hug tightens for a second before he lets go and Jeanne can breathe again.

“I just need to kill something, sometimes,” she murmurs and Jean’s raised eyebrow says more about that than any wealth of words.

“It’s difficult?” He nods towards the door behind which a young Omega lies that never had a real chance.

“More than,” Jeanne answers and squares her shoulders.

“Didn’t you say the pups were smaller, than expected?”

He falls in step with her, as Jeanne makes her way towards the kitchen, his voice calm, his whole posture attentive, the blue eyes never quite leaving her and the lack of doubt in his voice is the only thing that keeps her from snarling.

“They are. It’s her… she…” Jeanne stops dead in her tracks in an empty corridor that seems longer than it actually is, barren and devoid of color and softness.

“…she's too weak, too young, too sick and too God damn broken and short of a miracle there is nothing I can do.”

He nods once and walks on.
“We do the best we can. We save whoever we can save and kill whoever falls to our swords. If not for us, then for the pups and the children yet to come,” he says, with the solemnity of a recital; words once said to him, to be repeated whenever the cold harsh reality overwhelms.

“Richelieu?” Jeanne murmurs at his shoulder and his smile is her reward.

“Who else?” The name alone is enough to make his eyes sparkle, here, in safety, preciously unguarded and that alone is enough to lift her spirits. Reminds her of her Alphas, viciously protective and sometimes so playfully stupid.

“Very well,” she says. “I need hot water. Maybe the tea will help her.”

For a few hours Jeanne dares to hope, dares to believe in a merciful God.

For a few hours after giving the Omega first tea, then warm, drugged wine, she dares to let herself hope that they can make it.

Now, into the sixteenth hour of their ordeal the young Omega looks up at her with velvet soft, dark eyes brimming with tears and Jeanne wants to take up arms and battle fate itself.

“I can’t,” Amara whispers and Jeanne swallows the lump in her throat.

Too young, too malnourished, too exhausted and weak.

You can, is what Jeanne should yell, try harder, push, fight, don’t give up.

Instead, she walks around the bed to brush her fingers over her charge’s hair.

Fighting isn’t hard. Fighting to her last drop of blood is Jeanne’s natural state.

“It’s alright,” she whispers and crouches to grab the Omega’s hand when a new wave of ineffective contractions wreck her body, tearing a weak whimper from her lips. “I got you.”

“I wanted better for them,” Amara chokes as the wave ebbs, “I swore.”

In the empty room her words hang heavily and Jeanne is glad that Jean is outside, talking in low tones with the mother superior. He is not stupid, but he need not shoulder this pain too.

It’s hers to bear, the false smile is hers to give.

“You did your best.”

“Can you save them?”

At at this Jeanne closes her eyes, drops her head, because the tears well up. There was a book that Adèle had given her, a sacred tome of knowledge withheld and destroyed by the church. Words that could have saved some mother or child, had Jeanne only had it at her disposal sooner.

They were killing women to hurt the throwbacks, masking it as God’s will, as a sacrifice to atone for Eve’s sin. The original sin.
But she wasn’t Eve, soft and giving. She was Jael, lying, yet honest in the most brutal of tasks, saving her people by driving a stake through a man’s head.

“Yes,” Jeanne says, raising her head to show the Omega not only her tears, the deep grief that wrecks her, but also the resolve, the promise.

“Will they be slaves?” Amara cries, too, pain and fragile hope warring on her features.

“No,” Jeanne answers. “Jean won’t let them. We will protect them.”

Jeanne doesn’t know how, though she can imagine so many ways, but she knows that Jean de Tréville would move heaven and earth for these pups.

Maybe it’s some minute shift on Jeanne’s face that brings it on, some of her conviction bleeding through, that makes Amara smile.

Even as her body curls inward with yet another wave of pain, she pushes the words of her own death sentence through her teeth, laying the unsurmountable task at Jeanne’s feet.

“Do it.”

Behind them the door opens silently, perfectly fit into its frame, with the hinges not making a sound. It’s a rich man’s door in a rich man’s house.

Jeanne sits straight with a nod.

“Jean, I need your knife.”

It is dark already, fog blanketing the city with cold finger’s death touch. Soon there will be snow. Soft, white innocence to be trampled into the mud.

There is no shaking the morbidity of her thoughts tonight. Not without a hot bath and a cup of a special blend of tea she rarely uses, because it makes her slow.

But she will not get either.

First, she has to take care of her siblings, of Simon at least, then she can curl up and cry.

The alley behind the hotel is empty. A shaggy cat crosses her path, ignoring Jeanne’s presence like a queen does a servant’s.

It’s the only living thing she sees.

Jeanne almost wishes for someone to wait for her, someone to take her into his arms, someone to lean on just this once.

But of course there is no one behind the hidden backdoor, no one waiting for her at the end of the narrow passage that lies behind.
Except…

It’s the sound of horses that echoing from the stables that tips her off and she hasn’t yet stopped debating with herself whether to sneak past them straight to bed or not, when the first story door flies open with a thunderous crack.

Jeanne opens her mouth to speak…

“Where the hell have you been?” Cahusac’s voice booms down the stairway, anger clipping his vowels short, grate the usual melodic lilt of Gascony into a nasty tone.

It shudders through Jeanne, the accusation, the anger that hit on every chord string of pain already tight within her.

For one second, joy had sparked, hope to find some reprieve, to find warmth.

It evaporates at that voice and leaves Jeanne with the wish to just turn around and walk away.

She doesn’t of course.

There is duty that chains her and pure stubbornness that keeps her going. There is pain that settles around her shoulder like an old and warm cloak, welcome and familiar. It pushes down the faint traces of melancholy and tears that weigh on her and leaves only resolution in its wake.

Jeanne closes her mouth and climbs the stairs without looking up.

Each step is a plate of armor, each dull thud of boots on wood a fortification.

There is hoping that he will just let her pass, but of course, he doesn’t.

Because Cahusac is a Gascon and doing anything he doesn't want to is unfathomable in his world and thus he simply stands there, a bulk of rock hard Alpha half blocking the path to the rest of the house.

Her path to rest and a chance to escape this day.

Jeanne should probably look at him, tell him something, work past the stone weight of fatigue in her brain to tell him anything that makes him understand.

Find the strength to explain.

Cahusac perhaps shouldn’t wrap his hand around her arm to keep her from walking to her room.

He is strong enough to bruise, strong enough to break it should he truly want to keep her in his grip.

“Let me go, Cahusac.” Finally looking up Jeanne finds his eyes, sparking with anger in the bleak light. Behind him stands Bernajoux, lips pressed tight.
“You can’t just go and vanish to God knows where, Jeanne.” It’s Cahusac, she hears his teeth grind, anger etched into each line of his face.

It makes him ugly.

Cahusac should never be ugly.

“I am not your property,” Jeanne says, the same moment she decides to trust the instincts that tell her Cahusac, no matter how violently angry he might think he is, would still rather cut of his own hands than bruise her. She twists her arm once, pushing past him and for a second there she fears she is wrong, before his hand falls away.

“Jeanne!”

Jeanne’s steps echo hollowly on the wooden planks, echo painfully behind her eyes.

There are two pairs of footsteps behind her now and should Bernajoux really….

“Let her go, Cahusac,” the pack Alpha's calm, deep voice rumbles.

“What? We come home and she’s nowhere to be seen, the pups all on their own and we do not even get an explanation? Just like that? What happened to honesty in the house, Bernajoux?” Cahusac’s voice grows louder and louder and Jeanne already turns to tell him to stuff his self-righteousness where it really, really hurts.

It is in time to see him being slammed into the wall by Bernajoux.

The older Alpha’s hands curl tightly around the lapels of the uniform jacket Cahusac is still wearing. They can’t be home long.

“Listen, you ungrateful little prick…,” Bernajoux growls and breaks Jeanne’s aimless thoughts with a stunning facsimile of the voice as she heard it the first time on the mountain. She’d been tired then, too.

“Think! For God’s sake, Cahusac! Look at her. Yes, she comes carrying blood, but it’s not her own.” Cahusac struggles against Bernajoux’s grip with grim determination, lips peeled back over his teeth, even as he turns his head his head to her with flaring nostrils.

“Look at her you blabbering moron, she is ready to keel over! What happened to ‘We take care of each other’? Huh, Cahusac? What happened to pack, that you attack her the first time you should truly prove worthy to her.”

The slap, less forceful than the shove, nevertheless whips Cahusac’s head to the side.

It takes Jeanne a moment to notice that his feet barely touch the ground anymore.

Bernajoux holds him with one hand.

“Had that been me or Boisrenard you would have asked what we need, if we were alright and you would have trusted our answer. But it’s Jeanne who stepped fresh of a battlefield and suddenly she owes you an explanation why she dares to do what we do? What happened to trust, you idiot?”
Bernajoux shakes Cahusac with yet another, barely suppressed growl, uncaring that his head thuds against the wall behind him.

Jeanne retreats. One step. Another. It’s not flight, she tells herself, she just needs… she needs…

For Cahusac to stop hitting his head against the wall. It’s not Bernajoux’s movements, hasn’t been the first time either.

Tock. Tock. Tock. As if he is now trying to beat sense into himself.

Bernajoux curses violently in a language, she doesn’t know, and moves his hand to cushion the younger Alpha’s head.

“Stop that, pup, you’re not making it better!”

Cahusac’s head falls forward without a sound, like a doll’s when the strings are cut.

This time as her lover turns to look at her, Jeanne finds him again.

Cahusac.

Bernajoux pulls his hands away, only to slam one against Cahusac’s chest when the Alpha tries to move towards Jeanne.

“Don’t you dare, puppy,” Bernajoux grumbles before he turns to her.

“Are you alright?”

“Tired,” she answers with tears prickling behind her eyes.

“Take mine and Boisrenard’s room, we’ll take care of the pups. Get some rest, Jeanne. However much you need.”

Jeanne nods and slowly turns. Theirs is the last room on this floor. It’s the most silent

“Do you need something else?” he adds and Jeanne’s eyes flit to Cahusac, before she shakes her head.

She might have, five minutes ago.

“I’m sorry,” Cahusac says, looking as miserable as he possibly can and everything in Jeanne shuts down.

“Too late, Cahusac.” It’s not up to her to make him feel better. Not today. She can barely bring herself to care about anything anymore.

“Jeanne!” he cries. “I worry! Because I love you!”

It’s impossible not to hear the desperation in his voice, but right away it’s drowned out by the pain in her own heart.

‘No, you don’t,’ is the first thing that comes to her mind. ‘You don’t even know me.’

She almost says it, although she knows it’s unfair.
Cahusac knows her well enough, he just decided to forget it and instead make her into a tame little lap cat in his head, safe, warm, willing and in need of protection.

Jeanne could turn into one if she put her mind to it.

She could forget, too, where she comes from and who she is supposed to be.

Forget the smell of flames and the pleasure of fire flickering; the smell of blood and the soft wails of helpless creatures, begging for her protection.

She could forever ignore the phantom pain of lives cut off, the memory etched like invisible scars into her skin.

Jeanne doesn’t care that he moves again to reach her and again is held back by hands stronger than him...

Bernajoux’s eyes on her are a benediction as she turns to face that last drop of pain that almost brings her to her knees tonight.

The doorknob under her fingers, the soft click as it opens, are sweet promises of refuge. Not from herself, but the scrutiny that forces her to keep it together.

“You know what, Cahusac? I don’t care. Good night.”
and here it is. 
has been done since December actually, but Mag7 happened, Overwatch happened and 
life happened and ... yeah, I needed to slow down a little with the wild writing frenzy I 
had dropped into with Star Wars TFA.

For those who don't know... this story changed my life quite a bit. When I started to 
write it I pulled most of the information from google. The descriptions of Lyon literally 
came from pouring over old maps and google maps and what not.

Some time around chapter three though, someone offered to beta for me and help me out 
with the Frenchisms and my writing and she both made the story so much better and 
made me a better writer.

Last October I stepped onto a train and drove ten hours to Lyon to see everything for 
myself.
I walked through the Primatiale and strolled to the traboule in the Vieux Lyon and ate 
Croisant and French cheese :D All because I decided to write a fanfiction to Ye Heirs of 
Glory.

Insane!
It makes everything so much more real and alive and if you ever have a chance to visit 
it, I can only recommend it! Go there. Lyon is stunningly beautiful. (and the people are 
great)

Cahusac finds himself taken aside by one Jean de Tréville almost as soon as the Red Guards  enter 
the Palais Cardinal.

He is not really surprised. Between the constant low grade hum of Bernajoux’s anger and the 
security distance between them that consists of one neutral faced Boisrenard, it is probably not hard 
to figure out that something is wrong.

From there, the assumption that it has to do with Jeanne is an easy one.

Still, as Jean maneuvers Cahusac into one of the empty guest rooms and asks “What happened?” 
with that caring worry etched into his far too tired face, Cahusac finds himself swamped by a heavy 
wave of guilt.

So heavy in fact that his Omegan friend can simply push him backwards, tripping him where 
necessary, until Cahusac sits onto the bed that dominates the room.

He starts the confession even before Jean pulls up one of those dainty chairs for himself to sit on.

“I fucked up, Jean,” he murmurs on a heavy sigh, his hands forcefully pushing through his hair. 
When they come to rest, his fingers are entwined behind his bowed head, gaze fixed studiously on 
the floor. “I fucked up so bad.”
Tréville does not ask. He leans forward, his hands clasped in front of him and stares at Cahusac.

“Did you hurt her?”

“I yelled at her,” Cahusac says to Jean’s question.

“That wasn’t my question, Alex. Did you hurt her?” Impatience creeps into Jean’s voice and it finally has Cahusac look up.

He knows there is no good way to answer that. Or avoid the answer. Not with the Captain of the Musketeers resorting to first names already.

Outside the rain has given way to a few tentative sunrays that flirt over the inner courtyard of the Palais-Cardinal, setting alight the windows and gold framed stucco.

“Probably…”

Cahusac rubs his hand over his face, calluses on his hands chafing over his skin, getting caught in days’-old stubble. He needs to shave. But for that he would have to be calm enough. He would have to look into a mirror.

He needs to look at the friend whose breath hitches angrily at Cahusac’s admission, but he doesn’t need another piece of justified anger.

“Why?” Jean’s question is deceptively soft, enough emotions swimming in his voice that Cahusac doesn’t even need his scent to discern his displeasure.

“Elaborate. ‘I fucked up because I lost my damn Gascon temper’ will not be enough.”

“I…” Cahusac looks up and finds his friend’s eyes on him, intently, just a touch angry, but so worried. “I got scared. We came home and she wasn’t there…”

Shaking his head doesn’t clear his thoughts enough to wrap it into a clear rhetoric sequence. Jean’s eyes narrow and Cahusac can hear him judge his life choices.

“I know she was with you! But not where or… or how to find you if something was wrong. It was just…”

“Cahusac,” Jean cuts in and stands. “You know that I can defend myself. Jeanne can defend herself. You are not a scared youngster anymore, so what in God’s name happened?”

“Lyon went well. Beaumont adopted Vernantes like his own nephew,” Cahusac’s laughs bitterly, belying the levity in his words. “That man is such a tool! He invited me to dinner as planned. We talked about… my ‘father’.” Cahusac curled his fingers around the word. “Simon. He wanted a detailed account of… everything. Literally everything…”

“Your sire…”

“Yeah.”

“And?” Guilt threatens to drown him when Jean’s crouches in front of him and wraps warm hands around Cahusac’s icy fingers.

“We went to the house of Jeanne’s family to see if we could salvage anything, see if any relatives of their were in danger.”
Guilt. Again. By now a familiar jab. Just as it had been back in Lyon and the small village outside where once a carpenter’s shop had stood, a small farm for a family of four, now empty and barren. To Cahusac’s relief the anger lines on Jean’s face have vanished, only to be replaced by sadness.

“Because they have nothing of their family left.”

“So you took it upon yourself to sift through a murdered family’s possessions.” There is a million unsaid things hanging between them.

Tréville never knew him at his worst, but sometimes in the long hours they spend over a bottle of wine or three, they talk.

Cahusac’s face twists into a guilty expression before he catches himself and looks away with a shrug and a sigh.

Some people were shaped by the horrors and hardships they had faced, the fault lines of their personalities blended so well into the rest that they could manage them with a bottle of wine here and there and copious amounts of work and occasional violence.

Bernajoux and Richelieu both have their quirks, but all around they are well adjusted.

Some people had come out on the other side of the worst horrors with their backs straight, their eyes clear and steel threading their still beating and living hearts. Now, as he looks at his best friend and thinks of Boisrenard, Cahusac once again wonders how that is even possible, because he knows himself to fall squarely in the third category.

Maybe it had been the fact that he had still been so young; maybe the suddenness of catastrophe that had broken his life and thrown him to the wolves, but something within him had irrevocably shattered in the days his uncle had murdered his father and then set up Matthieu-Alexandre to die.

He had survived. He had eaten rotting apples off of dirty streets, he had stolen - and had been good at it - he had struggled and somehow made it. And dug himself up from the flesh and bones that the wolves had not gotten, and had risen as Cahusac, Red Guard of the Bloody Cardinal, Lieutenant in the Resistance.

But not whole.

And there are things…

Like the thought of losing someone he loves, like the thought of trusting someone who is not BB, JJ or Richelieu…

“I fucked up so bad, Jean.”

The Omega’s hand lands warm and heavy on Cahusac’s head, Jean’s fingers slowly carding through his hair. Small comfort, welcome and permitted.

“I’d suggest you swear to her on your knees that it will never happen again and make sure it doesn’t, but then…” At Jean’s crooked smile Cahusac’s head drops forward until it comes to a rest against the Musketeer Captain’s shoulder.

“Chances are it will happen again… It’s not like I try to be an idiot…”

“It just happens?”
Cahusac simply grunts at that.

It's only then that Tréville notices the half hidden bruise on Cahusac’s neck that is accompanied by a shallow cut. Nothing dangerous. The kind of thing one picked up on a brawl.

“You got in a fight,” he asks, head tilted with curiosity, and his fingertips skim over the sensitive flesh with a relative’s easy worry. “Why did you get in a fight?”

“Because I needed to get in a fight.” Cahusac answers and looks away. He would frankly have been happier had Tréville not noticed that bruise.

“You know,” his friend laughs now. “she is not going to be more forgiving if you hurt yourself.”

“I know, but I will be.” Cahusac searches Tréville’s gaze again and shrugs, moving that shoulder with intent. It hurts. A stark reminder. “Banging my head against a wall achieves nothing. Banging my fist in that pretentious idiot of Laflèche's face at least gives me pleasure.”

At this Jean sits back and narrows his eyes until Cahusac answers with a wry grin just as guilty as he is.

“He’s fine. A black eye, perhaps a broken rib. Wanted it, too.”

“Cahusac…”

He shrugs again and finds himself forgiven and his transgression deliberately forgotten when Tréville shakes his head and admonishes him with the annoyed huff of a man who has been in the exact same situation far too many times.

“I am just going to ignore this and pretend both of you did it for the good of France.”

“We did,” Cahusac pipes in and dares to wink. “My mental balance is important for the good of France. Laflèche doesn’t know it, but he was serving his King. Well, the Cardinal, but that’s not that much difference.”

“He’s a Musketeer, Cahusac.”

“Just don’t tell him.”

Tréville shakes his head and settles a heavy hand on Cahusac’s shoulder, patting it just so that he, of course, pokes the border of the bruise.

“Where was I... Oh yes, Cahusac, there is not much you can do, but be honest and hope that Jeanne won’t shoot you.”

“Again.”

“She didn’t shoot you, Cahusac.”

“Barely.”

“What was that about you and your inability to trust? She is the aggrieved party here.”

Cahusac can’t help the wet laugh that wrenches from his chest.

“Be honest with her, Cahusac. She deserves as much. Trust her good heart,” Jean says and wraps a hand around Cahusac’s neck. A dominant gesture or a maternal one, depending on who it comes from.
From the carrier of their clan’s head pair it is something no one even dares to utter outside these rooms.

If the Musketeers knew… heck, if the Red Guards knew that one of their Lieutenants sometimes needs to be mothered….

“Do you care to make me truly miserable and tell me what you were doing that had her in the state she was in?”

Jean stands and extends a hand.

“I need to fill in the others anyways. Let’s go.”

At least Jean’s voice is free from resentment now.

“You don’t have a Gascon temperament, Jean. Not as bad as I,” Cahusac throws in as they make their way towards Richelieu’s rooms.

“Courtship,” is the only thing the Omega says to that and it has Cahusac laugh, a low sound, a barely daring expression of glee.

“No,” he cuts in. “That was not temper, that was justified comeback.”

***

Bernajoux stands in the corner, arms crossed and his eyes promising bloody murder when they arrive. Boisrenard still positions himself between his packmates.

In the end Jean updates them on the situation with the Omega and as promised, it makes Cahusac feel even more miserable. At least Bernajoux has something positive to report about Lyon, where for once everything went well. For the Resistance at least. For them personally Lyon is a raw wound centered around the Durand children and their loss. They manage well when it is all distant and their losses are strangers. It keeps the hurt at bay. Jeanne and the pups are too close to them to just view Lyon as yet another job they did.

Richelieu and Jussac want to go back the ‘owner’ of the Omega, the knowledge that somewhere out there are more of them breathing down all their necks.

Adéle is just pissed off. So at least something is normal.

Cahusac requests to have a go at the man chained in one of the cells in the lowest levels of the Palais Cardinal.

They all do. They all are denied. No one dares defy the brutally cutting gleam in Richelieu’s eyes and the terrible calm in Jussac’s.

There is a part in Cahusac that knows he should find their collective reactions disturbing.

It is the part that finds the intrinsic beauty in a flower growing, a story well told. The part that loves wine and is plain happy at breathing Jeanne’s scent.

The part that still reacts to the name Matthieu and that had recoiled in horror last night.
It is the part that only too gladly hides behind the armor and weapon that is Cahusac. The part that is silently glad that none of them actually recoils now.

Matthieu may not be bloodthirsty, but he is scared.

***

It is Simon that greets them with an absent minded gaze upon their return.

Though his eyes sharpen immediately as they land on Cahusac.

It is impossible to think of that youngster as dangerous. He is too fragile still and utterly nonviolent. Not counting the fact his head barely reaches Cahusac’s breastbone.

But watching the razor sharp knife Simon holds slicing with slow precise strokes through a piece of wood, all the while his usually so gentle fairy eyes never waver off the Alpha, is unnerving.

Cahusac has seen this look on Jeanne’s face as she executed a man.

There is a way to solve this by solving it with Jeanne first, by treating Simon as her extension, weaker somehow and following her lead in all things.

Chances are good it will work. But it won’t repair the trust of the little Omega.

When they had freed him in Lyon, despite his obvious distrust, Simon had looked at Cahusac with something close to admiration and that has only grown as time progressed. Hero’s adoration, perhaps, and Cahusac does not want to lose this. More importantly, though, he does not want to disappoint Simon.

And so he walks over, peripherally aware that somewhere in the background Boisrenard picks up and distracts Etienne.

Simon never looks away, a feat for an Omega this young, though Cahusac makes himself smaller, makes himself seem less, until he crouches in front of the youngster.

“Hey,” he says, trying for levity, “what are you working on?”

Simon cocks his head and a fine strand of his now short hair slides over his forehead, giving him an impish air. He does not move his carving knife, resting lightly on the wood, out of the way. Lets it linger, incidentally, just the same height as Cahusac’s throat.

“Christmas present for Jeanne. The Virgin Mary. She left hers behind,” Simon answers and lifts his chin in something close to defiance.

I know, Cahusac wants to say. He had been the one who convinced her to leave the cubit length figurine.

Her father had crafted it for her, she had said, and Cahusac had countered how displeased he would have been to know she died for it.

She had never once mentioned it again.
I know, he wants to tell Simon, but even though he does know more than he wants to, in the end, he does not.

He never knew Philippe Durand. He had only watched Catherine die. Cahusac doesn’t know how their voices sounded or their hands felt. He doesn’t feel the gaps they left.

But his own father’s knife at his back is a constant comforting weight, always one swift motion away, and sometimes when a man calls his son in the streets he turns.

‘Matthieu.’ and he recognizes too late that the voice is wrong and turns away with something amiss in his life that can never be replaced.

“What do you need,” he says.

“For my sister to stop crying, Cahusac.” Simon’s rebuff is short and sharp and Cahusac knows he deserves it, but it stings nonetheless.

“Yes, I… planned on fixing this. Immediately.” Cahusac takes a deep breath. “I will fix this. But this is between Jeanne and me and she is strong enough to murder me herself, should she so wish.” He looks up, aware of the knife that still is vaguely pointed at his jugular.

“This…” he points between himself and Simon and makes himself as open as he can possibly be. “...is between you and me. So, do you need anything?”

Simon blinks slowly, pursing his lips in thought as Cahusac holds his breath and prays that the pup will give him a chance. Simon is very much dependent on Jeanne still, but he is also dependent on the trust in his pack, that they will protect him and help him, no matter what.

In this the Odem is at war with the artist and while it is a bit low to use Simon’s love for Jeanne and his wish to make her happy like this… Cahusac is no saint.

“Can you get me colors? I can mix most, but…”

“Yes.” Cahusac doesn’t yet know how and it will involve going to Jussac to ask for a favor or five, but if that’s all…

He hopes for an enthusiastic reaction, but Simon only tilts his head again and again that fine lock of hair falls across his forehead, as the pup narrows his eyes and finally nods.

“You know that this knife is sharp enough to cut off someone’s hand?”

“I know, Simon,” Cahusac has to fight hard not to smile. This is familiar territory. This screams Jeanne loud enough to drown out the cathedral bells.

“But you don’t think I would do it?”

“I trust you,” Cahusac looks straight into the young Omega’s eyes. “I know I did something bad, but I hope it was not unforgivable. And I trust you to not just randomly kill people, because they hurt your sister.”

Simon’s face falters before he nods and lowers the knife.

“She can do that herself.” Simon sounds like he is citing someone and it sounds vaguely like Boisrenard and Cahusac will whoop his Aleph’s ass if he talked to Simon, who is not just a little unstable on his worst days, about killing Cahusac.
“She won’t,” Cahusac says and straightens. “I hope.”

“Nah.” Simon shakes his head and the darkness in his eyes is swept away by the kind of sweet smile that will break quite a few Alphas’ hearts in just a few years. “Jeanne doesn’t do that. She only yells.”

Cahusac reaches out and ruffles Simon’s hair. If the little one still believes that, Cahusac won’t destroy his innocence. He’ll keep the thought of Jeanne with a gun and murder in her eyes just for himself, no matter how disturbed that is. There are things that this memory shouldn’t reside beside, like the impression of her warm skin and her habit of tucking her head under Cahusac’s chin. The way she looks on a foggy morning on a mountain in the middle of nowhere, wrapped in his coat, woodland eyes smiling full of hope and a wild strength that will let her kill people in cold blood.

So alive. So beautiful.

His, if he only could stop hearing the wolves howl.

“You’ll have the colors by next week.”

The stairway seems endless as he looks up. It is much less so when he walks it with heavy feet.

She sits by the window in the kitchen, the space she has fit herself in, amicably shared with Boisrenard and Felix, though for her, today, it is a lonely space.

Dressed in washed out clothes she’d brought from Lyon, her gaze is fixed onto something outside; not the street where people are, the windows where they aren’t, the holes tightly shuttered against rain and wind and prying eyes.

Felix lies curled up in her lap, moving with abandon against her whenever her fingers still.

She does not look up.

Cahusac rests his shoulder against the doorframe to watch her, striking a relaxed pose, giving her time, space, the chance to ignore him. A courtesy in expectancy of the courtesy that she won’t ignore him.

Of course, she does.

Cahusac expects Jeanne’s skin to be rosy, translucent under the freckles, yet lively. Instead, the dull tone seems to vanish in the lightless kitchen, bogged down by the messy bun she has pulled her hair into.

Watching her is something he should do more often, perhaps then he would notice the peculiar way she pets the cat, scratching slow circles around his ears, or the way her left knee tips to the side, very unladylike, when she has her knees drawn up to her chest.

Or the incredible silence of which she is capable.

How long her lashes appear after she cried.

Etienne screeches laughter down in the courtyard and it is her flinch that finally gets him to move.
He drops to his knees and reaches for her hand without ever finishing the movement.

“Will you permit me to take care of you?”

Jeanne looks at him, her face closed off and miles away, even as her gaze hits him.

“Why should I, Cahusac?”

Because I love you, comes to mind and is discarded immediately. Jeanne doesn’t care for all his reasons.

Because you are hurt is not much better. He can’t even whip out “Because we are pack and you are one of us”.

Cahusac had blundered that thoroughly the night before.

“Because I am desperate enough to make amends to do whatever you want me to.”

This coaxes a reaction out of her, if only a doubting eyebrow.

“Even if I tell you to leave me alone?”

Once again it only shows how precious little personal experience Jeanne has with Alphas. That she actually thinks she could be left alone is precious cute.

“Only if you allow Bernajoux or Boisrenard to make sure you have everything you need.”

“Damn right,” echoes Boisrenard from the door and Jeanne makes a face.

She looks hollow, subdued somehow, as if she had eaten too little, slept too little and could not bring herself to do more.

“I know what I did, Jeanne. I…” There is blood under her fingernails, nothing visible, but the smell clings to her skin. “I am not a perfect man. I’m not even a good man and not half as good as I’d need to be, before I deserve you. This… it might happen again.” She still hasn’t pulled her hands away and he dares to reach out, touch his fingertips to hers, working off hope and desperation and equal measures. “It’s likely, even… I fear and I…”

“…are not subtle about it.” Jeanne’s fingers twitch against his, her eyes awash in memory of his dreams and his blood and her actions. Again this. The mountain. It all would have been so much easier if Marquemont’s man had kept his mouth shut, if Cahusac hadn’t... done what he had last night. Lashed out in desperation.

“I know,” she sighs. “And I am not quite innocent.” Her fingers curl. “It is not as if I were innocent.”

Cahusac jubilates inwardly, silently to not startle her again, but keeping the small smile off his lips is a struggle he loses.

“Whatsoever you need,” he murmurs, promising silently that it will be the truth.

“I might ask you to dance for me, Cahusac.”

“I’m a good dancer, Jeanne-Marie Durand.”

“That remains to be seen,” she murmurs and though her words are cold, there is a tiny twist of her lips, the seed of a smile not yet coming to full fruition that give him hope.
Cahusac chooses to interpret it as permission to stand and proceed.

Reaching behind him, he barks “Blanket.”

Boisrenard says nothing, just shoves one of the blankets they store next to the oven, keeping them warm in case of an emergency, into Cahusac’s hand.

It is after Cahusac has already turned to Jeanne again that he feels fingers linger on his shoulder, a moment of silent support, a gentleness warming his packmate’s scent. Endorsement. Thank God. This is a pack effort.

Cahusac unfolds the blanket, ignoring Jeanne’s suspicious looks or her annoyance when he drives away Felix simply by wrapping her into the blanket. The blanket is warm, he knows, and he revels in it as he picks up Jeanne, takes her place and sets her down in his lap, carefully tucked against his chest, safe within his arms.

It’s selfish, needy and selfish, to want her close when she is hurting, but the Alpha within him preens as she, with the tiniest of sighs, leans into him and drops her head against his shoulder.

“Was getting cold, hm?”

Instead of an answer Jeanne’s burrows into his embrace, suddenly boneless, all fight gone out of her. All of a sudden, she is too soft, to be alright.

Cahusac brushes his lips over her hair, rests his cheek on top of her head with his gaze seeking Bernajoux, like a child suddenly at a loss how to proceed.

They have a plan. They made a plan, rallying around her and the question of how best to help her. Like pack. Like Cahusac would have done, had he not…

Bernajoux’s gaze turns sharp.

Cahusac turns away, turns his lips back to Jeanne’s hair and whispers wordless apologies into the shining dark mass.

“Jeanne?” Bernajoux’s voice is dark and it’s soft and Cahusac remembers that voice. It has promised him bloody retribution and safety and it delivered. Bernajoux always delivers, because he never promises what he is not absolutely sure he can keep.

It is what had brought Cahusac past the terror and Jeanne is so much stronger than that, even if she is for once silent as she shifts her head a fraction against Cahusac’s shoulder and looks up.

“We brought you something to eat,” Bernajoux says and he smiles at her annoyed huff.

“No, don’t look like that. You’ll like it. Trust me.” His smile grows and behind him, Boisrenard nods.

In the safe circle of Cahusac’s arms Jeanne stiffens slightly as Bernajoux walks forward, linen bag in his hand. It’s impossible not to smell the heavy, sweet warmth of the treat and Jeanne straightens slightly.

“What is that?”

“His Majesty’s cook had leftovers.”
“The King? The King ate that?”

“For breakfast,” states Bernajoux and produces a fist sized, golden-brown pastry, rolled in sugar and smelling like...

“You?” Jeanne asks and breathes deeply, bending forward until her nose almost touches the treat and suddenly her body snaps back and her nose is buried in the crooks of Cahusac’s neck, searching for that one elusive scent.

Boisrenard has buried his face in his arms on the tables with his shoulders shaking in suppressed laughter.

“This is it, isn’t it?” Jeanne murmurs, looking up at Cahusac, her eyes shimmering in wonder, innocent for once and almost he regrets revealing the mystery, never seeing the surprise again on her features.

“Cinnamon,” Bernajoux says and takes her hand to place the pastry on her palm. “It’s very rare here, very expensive. Literally for the King.”

Jeanne bends her head with an awed gesture and carefully sniffs in that adorable, scent-challenged way of hers, before her raspberry lips quirk into something that comes as close to her normal self as she is probably able right now.

“Literally you, then, yes? Rare and precious?”

“Ohoooooooooo!” Boisrenard throws back his head and applauds, laughing still.

“She got you there, Bernajoux. Though she is right of course.”

Bernajoux throws the bag over his shoulder at his mate before he stretches out his hand and brushed a lock of Jeanne’s hair behind her ear.

“We’re from the same place, at least, little sister,” his murmurs with a warm smile. “and give Cahusac a small bit. He is trying very hard.”

Their eyes meet over Jeanne’s head and this time Bernajoux has a real smile to spare for Cahusac.

Sugar melts on his lips, blends with the sharp sweetness of the cinnamon and the cool softness of the dough itself. Jeanne has pulled her feet up, curling deeper into Cahusac while she eats the rest. One bite for him. He would have given her all of it, had she not insisted.

“Jean asked me to tell you something…,” he murmurs into her hair, breathing all the small increments in which her pain bleeds out of her scent. Only to find it spike at once.

“Shhh…,” he says and steals a sugar crumb from her lips with his. “They’re fine. The little Alpha is strong and healthy and he will be fine. His sister is a little weak still, but she ate with good appetite and the nursemaid is very hopeful. They’ll stay with her in the convent in Paris. They’ll be fine.”

Jeanne leans back and looks up at Cahusac, her eyes shimmering too much now, but she nods. And then she smiles. She does not hide the tears as she drops her head back against his shoulder and exhales in one long, slow breath, before she digs her teeth into the pastry.

“All right.”
Advent sneaks up on them and Paris dives into a frenzy of festivities. Court gets even more lavish, the halls overburdened with garishly colored decorations. The King laughs louder, gives with more generosity and becomes more frivolous by the day.

Their presence is demanded and eats up precious time they’d need to go after the hints that Jussac and Richelieu managed to draw from Amara's master, meager as they are.

And at night the Red Guards sit in their kitchen, huddled around the single flame of a candle to listen to Boisrenard's sonorous voice tell them of things that could get them all killed.

"The light of family," he says, his words followed with rapt attention by Etienne on his lap. "The flame that we keep going and hand down to our pups. Once it meant something different, but as time progressed and more and more of us died, it not only became the light of hope in deepest winter, but also a promise. To not give in, to not forget."

Simon sighs against Cahusac's side, his head resting heavily on Cahusac's shoulder. But he smiles.

"Will you keep it burning, Eme?" he asks softly into the solemn darkness.

"Until the sun returns."

Across the table Jeanne looks up from the needlework in her hands and her eyes find Cahusac's unerringly. There is something in those depths he can't decipher, a part of her that is hurt, still hurt and will stay that way. The part that has her get up in the evening, press a kiss to his lips and walk off to sleep in the pup's room.

'Figure it out, Cahusac,” that part says when he runs against the walls of his own mind and Bernajoux just rolls his eyes and Boisrenard mumbles under his breath about Cahusac's idiocy.

“I don’t get it.” Around them snow dusts the trees a powdery white, the hunting lodge encased in a dream of safety, almost like a fairy tale where the bad things can’t find them. “She said she forgave me…”

“The doesn’t mean she forgot, Chiot. And rightly so.” Boisrenard leans on the other side of the thick oak, chewing idly on a piece of dried meat.

“If she only gave me a hint what she wants from me… I leave all the choice to her and she just… ugh,” Cahusac grumbles into the cold afternoon air, not looking at Boisrenard, especially not when the other Alpha snickers.

“Let me…” Boisrenard clears his throat as Bernajoux’s laughter sounds from behind the lodge, followed by his carefully retreating form and several snowballs. “Damn, look at him…”

Face overtaken by a dreamy smile, Boisrenard forgets for a moment what he was about to say.
Cahusac lets him have this moment, just watches in silence with him as first Simon, then Jeanne, Adèle and Etienne come storming around the corner, more snow in their hands.

“When we met,” Boisrenard sets out again, “he saved me. You know that part.” He laughs under his breath, the story one of Cahusac’s favorites when he had been young - how Bernajoux had gotten thrown into the same cell as a gravely injured Boisrenard - a stranger then - and had broken them both out and saved them by sheer force of his rage.

This, though, is new.

“While I healed… He did some questionable stuff to get access to medicine for me but it wasn’t enough in his opinion. So… he went and signed away his freedom to the first man he thought was able to help and not going to turn me in. His hard-won, just gained freedom to pay for some stranger to treat me. He had no real idea who this guy was, just that he probably, maybe, didn’t hate throwbacks and was willing to help them.” He snorts. “He thought he was doing me a favor, being all noble and shit.”

Their eyes meet and both roll them up to the skies in a long practiced show of mutual annoyance.

“Did you beat him up?” Cahusac slips a little closer to Boisrenard, half rounds the tree to not miss anything of a part of the story he had never heard before.

“Nah,” Boisrenard smiles. “I was bedridden still. I yelled. Loud enough to make Jussac think he’d need to protect him from me.” His smile grows. “And I told him… Jussac that is… he either take on both of us or he would have neither and Bernajoux bullshitting some reason that he couldn’t make that decision for me to get me indebted and in service and… “ The smile falters, freezes with a new thought.

“I had survived and he was free and he just threw it away for some stupid noble reason, as if I hadn’t made it amply clear in the prior weeks that… I would have walked through the upper three levels of hell if I could only walk it with him and I’d rather cry my way through another month of pain than him protecting me from something I didn’t need protecting from at the cost of his one chance at a decent life.”

Boisrenard pushes away from the tree with a shrug.

“There you have it. If he couldn’t take care of himself, I had to do it and the only person taking ownership of him was me and I’d tear out the throat of any bastard who tried.”

His thumb fiddles wistfully over the spot on his leather gloves, where a ring might sit if they could wear them.

“You… own Bernajoux.”

“Well of course! I married him. Three days later.” Boisrenard grins at his younger packmate and winks. “It was the only way to keep him from being an idiot.”

The last words turn soft as he speaks it, his gaze once more lingering on his mate, rolling around in the snow. “How long has it been?”

“A months,” Cahusac sighs and himself follows Jeanne as she tries to keep Etienne from harm.

“She’s stubborn.”

“Yeah… oh, yeah!” Although it is not funny, the snort just happens, a thing of pride and thing born
from the part of his soul that always looks to Jeanne first when he enters a room.

“You’re waiting for permission from her… but seriously, Chiot? She gave you this permission once already. You just need to stop treating her like Bohemian glass!”

“But she’s…”

“Capable of eviscerating you. She did eviscerate you when you deserved it. So what makes you think she’s a fragile flower that needs your protection?”

Cahusac stares. When he says nothing, Boisrenard just plows on.

“She isn’t. This is your stupid noble’s heart speaking that puts Omegas on a pedestal to be cherished and wrapped in cotton. So get over it.” Boisrenard pushes away from the tree and winks, masking the seriousness of his words until it’s too late and he already is making his away across to his mate. “Stop making decision for her. Or she will, Cahusac. And trust me, Jeanne will!”

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“Hrm…” His hum reverberates through the room and the warm, oily hands on his back stop, just long enough for Bernajoux’s chuckle to fade.

“I assume that means yes, love?”

“Hrmhm.”

Bernajoux’s thumbs dig a little deeper, finding the knot that inevitably tangles up the muscles in Boisrenard’s shoulder whenever the weather gets colder and wetter.

“I saw Cahusac invite Jeanne to his room earlier.” Bernajoux’s warm, incredibly soft lips breathe an open mouthed kiss to the spot he’s working on, chasing away the pain for a moment, allow Boisrenard to smile.

“About time,” he grumbles.

“Well done,” Bernajoux agrees and Boisrenard’s smile grows.

“Do I get a reward?”

He feels the impact of heavy hands on the pillow on both sides of his head, with no need to open his eyes, he knows the feeling of these lips caressing down his back between his shoulderblades the second before the touch happens.

And the deep voice whispering in his ear? His heartbeat picks up speed already, before the first word leaves his mate’s lips.

“What do you want, beloved?”
January turns to February and the first tentative snowdrops are peeking above the wintery landscape when Jussac and Adèle finally return from one of the scouting missions that have been going on and off all through the winter.

“Bardot”

A name and a story of secret trades in shady inns had been all that Richelieu had gotten out of Amara’s Master who had turned out to be just another lowlife with enough money to buy into the exotic.

Cobweb-thin connections extending in too many directions and ending in the middle of nowhere. A trader, a contact maker, someone acting as the extended hand of their vile operation.

Every Resistance member had been on the lookout for months, ears to the ground to finally find the common thread.

Cahusac had spent days, sometimes weeks, in the Court of Miracles, trying to catch rumors. He came home with fresh bruises and several pounds lost to curl around Jeanne’s warmth that flickered with her easily provoked temper. And what she couldn’t smooth over, Cahusac’s little rivalry with Laflecche did.

In the end, all he could tell was that their targets hunted in the northern half of France.

BB crisscrossed three provinces, their search only broken by everybody’s short reprieve during Christmas, and all it netted them had been another broken body, another dead Omega, more sleepless nights.

“We need someone who isn’t just a little buyer. Someone who has been at the chateau.” Even even-tempered Jussac had come close to frustrated outbursts at some point.

Adèle comes knocking on the pack’s back door in the early hours of dawn one morning, her big eyes lost pools in an ashen face, too young to bear such deep strains of sleepless nights and tears she refuses to shed.

“Meet at the Palais for supper,” she grates and turns to walk away.

Bernajoux is faster. He grabs her, stirs her upstairs and orders her in no uncertain terms to take a nap.
When they meet, Jussac, if possible, looks even more strung out than Adèle, under a barely controlled layer of gritty triumph.

“We retraced the steps of the Omega you found in August.” His lips curl in a slow snarl.

The little one and her family had long since been relocated to England by the Underground. And then, the Musketeers had smuggled her back in.

None of her family knew who had saved her. They assumed the Underground, and the Omega had sworn to never correct them. Jussac, back then, had let that slide and whatever he had seen in her, it had held true now. She had stepped back onto the same soil where the monsters dwelled and had walked the path of her own odyssey.

“You brought her back?” Boisrenard snaps, none too happy. “Why didn’t you tell us? We would’ve gotten her instead of some Musketeers.”

Jussac rubs his face and shakes his head. “I didn’t even know if she would do it. If she could do it. We’ve had enough failures with this already and I needed you on the ground searching if this fell through as well.”

“But it didn’t,” Bernajoux concludes. “She came through.”

Jussac rubs his face again and sits a little straighter. “She did. She’d never heard of Bardot but with her help, Adèle and I retraced her steps from the point where you found her to the chateau. Or close enough.”

Then he tells them a harrowing tale of horrors, of being sold and traded, of days running and weeks surviving in the woods and a location.

“Larchant is far enough out that nobody questions it. The chateau is in the middle of their hunting grounds and de Pons is well known for his hunting habit…”

All their eyes turn to Richelieu where he sits and stares back at them over his steepled fingers.

It is just them here, the Resistance - and Jeanne. Jean is already busy securing Underground resources in the hopeful case they need them.

Just think about the occasion when the Resistance might need a midwife, Jeanne had once told him and laughed. Or don’t, because that’s traumatizing.

And here they were...

“Can we bribe someone?” Bernajoux asks Richelieu.

Richelieu shakes his head. “The Marquis de Guercheville and his friends are too close to Court. The family belonged to Marie de Medici’s circle. That’s how they got their title. They will recognize any of you the moment you appear among their household staff.”

“We will need to make sure that they’re at Court,” Cahusac agrees.

Jeanne, sitting between Bernajoux and Boisrenard fiddles carelessly with one of the knives Boisrenard gave her.

“So… how do we get inside then?”
“You will not go.” Bernajoux’s words are as calm and collected as always, the underlying tension barely perceptible.

While Richelieu and Jussac are putting together a possible wider operation to hunt down any escapees, the pack had retreated to one of the sitting rooms to hash out the details for a plan that is so risky that even they think it might be too much so.

If Boisrenard hears the tension, he is ignoring it. "Oh, come now...you can't let the pup go alone."

"No!" Bernajoux shuts him down and Boisrenard freezes.

"Are you joking? Is this a weird joke that I don't understand? I will damn well go because I will not leave the pup alone!"

“I said no, Jaques!” Bernajoux’s yell echoes off the walls, too loud, too desperate and it shocks everyone but his mate to silence.

“Bernajoux, I can do this!” There is a faint note of desperation in Boisrenard’s voice, subdued anger, too.

“You won’t go,” he says with finality. “I won’t let you.”

“You won’t… excuse me.” This time the anger breaks through. “Do you think I am too dumb to see through a simple undercover mission? Really?”

Jeanne already has moved the first step when Cahusac pushes past her.

He steps between his packmates just as Boisrenard’s normally cheerful temper bubbles over.

“DO YOU REALLY THINK I CAN’T DO THAT? IS THAT WHAT YOU THINK?” he roars. On Cahusac’s other side, Bernajoux flinches.

Jeanne has no mind to check who comes running into the room, alarmed by the ruckus, her eyes are transfixed on Cahusac as he firmly pushes into his packmate’s line of sight, palms pointing towards him to keep him at bay. Boisrenard won’t attack, not yet. But he is hurt and that makes him dangerous.

“Boisrenard. Listen.”

The Alpha’s head whips around and his furious gaze locks on Cahusac.

Only Jeanne sees the twitch in Cahusac’s shoulder, the survival instinct that he ruthlessly squashes. Jeanne and maybe Jussac, who she instantly recognizes when his blood red jacket moves in front of her, building a barrier of dominance and authority between her and the potential catastrophe brewing ahead if only one of the Alphas loses it.

“It’s not you, Boisrenard.” Cahusac’s voice exudes calm, warmth even, as if he is absolutely sure that the Alpha will not lose it.

Boisrenard’s jaw works, the muscles rippling under the dark beard and Jeanne thinks she can hear
his teeth clench as his gaze never wavers from Cahusac, like a lifeline, like the one beacon that gives you the direction to a safe harbor.

Bernajoux behind them has moved the half step into the sight cover that Cahusac provides, knuckles starkly contrasted against the skin on his tightly clenched fist, a desperate measure brutally evident in the tension of his neck.

“He doesn’t think you can’t do it. He knows you could.” Cahusac steps closer, his hand almost touching his aleph’s shoulder before it’s caught in an unforgiving grip. “It’s him,” he tells the enraged Alpha, voice soft, barely above a whisper, but Jeanne can hear the strain in it, guess the bruises that will form on his hand once Boisrenard lets go. “He can’t do it.”

And like that Boisrenard falters. It’s like all the fight, all the rage evaporates, the last thing they all see before the Alpha closes his eyes, is pain. Pain echoed in the severe expression on his face as he turns away. “Damn!”

Bernajoux’s fists sit heavily on the windowsill, his gaze turned to the immaculate gardens outside. For a moment Boisrenard seems to set out to join him, but he stops once more and turns to Cahusac.

“Am I really that stupid?” he asks, lips a thin line behind his beard.

Jeanne speaks up before Cahusac can.

“Proud, Boisrenard. It can blind the best of us. And let me tell you, you are not the only one.” Just by chance, her gaze swipes over Cahusac as she pushes past Jussac and steps close. Cahusac, on the other hand, stays where he is, no attempt to stuff her back behind the ridiculously dainty sofa that would provide no protection whatsoever anyway.

She makes sure to let him see the faint shimmer of pride in her smile as she touches her hand to Boisrenard’s arm and nods to the window where Bernajoux is standing, starkly alone, a shadow in front of the brighter exterior, his back a wall to hide whatever is breaking at the thought of his mate walking willingly into imprisonment.

Jussac, on the opposing side of the room, breathes a low, nevertheless audible sigh of relief and eyes both Cahusac and Jeanne with a mute warning, that they answer without second thought and respond to by stepping apart and towards the door... without bickering.

“I’m sorry.”

They cast a last glance at their packmates when they hear Boisrenard’s voice, seeing only how he wraps his arms around Bernajoux’s middle. The other Alpha turns with a violent motion, throwing both arms around his mate’s shoulder to pull him into a bone-crushing hug.

They can’t see Bernajoux’s face, but there’s no need to. Even without a throwback’s senses, Jeanne long learned to identify the distress markers in their scents and his words scream pain. “It’d kill me,” he chokes and presses his nose into Boisrenard’s neck, gulping into his scent like a suffocating man air.

“I won’t, I swear,” Boisrenard answers, lips to Bernajoux’s ear, as his hand wraps around the Alpha’s neck in a gesture that stakes a claim, yet promises safety at the same time.

She curls her hand around Cahusac’s and lets him lead her out of the room.
“Will you two start as well?” Jussac asks, looking firmly at Cahusac, hitting him with all the pre-emptive fatherly disappointment he is capable of, but Cahusac only shrugs.

And really what is he supposed to do? She knows what he wants to do. He knows what she will do if he does. They both know what will happen then.

So, over Jussac’s words, Jeanne meets Cahusac’s eyes with the knowing glint in them, telling him in no terms that they will start. Alone. In private. Discussing this in no uncertain and intimate terms. Until Cahusac has had his chance to grumble over the danger Jeanne might be in and she’s reminded him of who exactly will be on the frontline of this insane plan and how careful he has to be.

"No," she smiles at Jussac. "We're good."

Jussac rolls his eyes as he turns and walks back down the hall to Richelieu’s office, leaving no comment on the way Cahusac wraps his bigger form around his lover, how his scent spikes, marking her as his or at his whispered “As you wish, mon coeur.”

No attempt to try and reassure her, to tell her that it isn’t dangerous. She knows the plan. She knows the truth.

***

“How do you do it?” she asks days later, all reassurances forgot as she watches her breath flee her mouth in a fine cloud.

The cold bites into her skin despite the thick layer of two tights, a woolen skirt and a thick shoulder wrap over her woolen vest.

Boisrenard next to her laughs hollowly and moves closer, shuffling their bodies together until he can comfortably wrap her in his arms. They’re both kneeling on the ground behind a row of bushes two dozen feet up a hill from the small chateau.

Its owner rarely uses it, keeping it open only for his noble friends’ amusement whenever the duties of nobility - mostly boredom - become too hard for them to bravely bear.

Bernajoux had snorted at that and shifted uncomfortably in his thin clothes, exchanging a quick glance with his one noble packmate who had grinned back, all Alpha, despite the thigh-long tunic and the cloak he had wrapped around his shoulders to hide their width.

Adèle had done remarkable work on Cahusac, tousling his black hair to soften the cut and his jawline in equal measures. Just a few dashes of color and a minuscule amount of coal had turned him from a too-beautiful Alpha into something that uncomfortably reminded Jeanne of Simon.

When he curled in his shoulders and hunched forward, as if to protect a vulnerable body from the cold, he could’ve fooled even her.
She still hears his teasingly-drawled “Boredom is a bane of the noble’s existence… I bet they long for some excitement” as she watches the cart draw up to the estate, a lone figure on the bench and two of them kneeling on the bed, hands bound, their necks forced into a bow by heavy collars.

Boisrenard’s chin lies heavily on her shoulder. “I am just not as sensitive to the cold as all of you southern types.”

He wears his rapier, two guns and more knives than Jeanne cares to count. Between them and the young omega that Jussac had designated as their messenger, there is enough weaponry to take down a smaller hunting party and yet, they’re forced to just watch.

She looks over her shoulder, face close enough to her packmate for their noses to touch and raises an eyebrow. “You know that’s not what I’m talking about.”

He does. Boisrenard makes a face and buries his face in the crook of her neck with a huff. He’d held it together so remarkably well while Jussac had turned Bernajoux into the picture perfect representation of something that was not supposed to exist in France, while Bernajoux himself had stopped meeting their eyes and turned his warm and lively face, always either full of exasperated annoyance, sharp calculation or subdued amusement in his pack’s presence, into a mask of someone who had long since given up.

“Ask me that after this is over and I manage to get a night of sleep again.”

Sleep….

In the safety of the Palais Cardinal the idea of infiltrating the slavers’ base with two Alphas, capable of tearing apart a dozen men with their bare hands, had seemed like a great idea.

Boisrenard and Jeanne would be close by, providing both backup and an advanced post to send Jussac’s omegan messenger out for the attack force as soon as Bernajoux and Cahusac had entered the house.

Their captive, whose name Jeanne still refused to even think, had provided Jussac with enough information to plan for a safe window in which nobody would check on the fresh wares too closely.

Adding Bernajoux as an Alpha had been a risky move but they’d all agreed that Adèle was too young still to bear that burden, despite her vocal protests. Instead, she had been relegated to waiting in the woods with a bolstered cart and blankets halfway between the estate and where Jussac would be waiting with the horses and a handful of Red Guards to take down the despicable abomination in the name of Cardinal Richelieu.

“I will never again be able to scold him for worrying too much,” she admits softly to the cold winter landscape and the solid embrace of her packmate.

In the distance, the cart vanishes around the last bends in the road - guided by one of their prisoner’s servants that Jussac had mercilessly convinced to aid in this operation, first with open threats to the man’s family and then with promises for a new employment should anything tragic happen to his master.

“All I wanna do is run down there and stop them.”

“But you won’t, no matter how distressed you are.” He sniffs her neck and Jeanne feels arms tighten.
“No. We’ll see this-”

He sniffs once more.

“Jeanne…” Every thought stops at his tone of voice. “Are you carrying?”

His words wash away the worry that has been her constant companion for the last days, a stone in the pit of her stomach, and replaces it by the sharp knife of panic.

*Have you missed your monthly bleeding by almost a week already? Have you ignored it because in the grand scheme of things it doesn’t matter? Have you told yourself every day that if Cahusac doesn’t notice, it’ll probably be nothing?*

Does this change everything? Anything?

Her hand on her stomach feels nothing but the thick wool protecting her from the cold while she stares at Boisrenard and fights for words.

“How?” she asks.

His arms tighten around her middle, his right flattens over hers and instead of an answer, he rumbles deep in his chest, taking another big breath against the skin of her neck. The moment the rumble turns into a dark, pleased growl, she knows.

Mother Mary, lend her strength, she knows.

“It doesn’t change anything.” And that is the mountain she will build her last defense on. She will not leave it without Cahusac.

The last time she had pups to protect. This time? Nothing changed from five minutes prior, not she, not her idiot Alpha and surely not Boisrenard.

“Tell that to Cahusac,” he rumbles, pleased with himself, “He’ll have your hide after this is over.”

“Not if you don’t tell him and only if he’ll still have something to come after me with. Do not stop me, Boisrenard!”

The small distance away the young Omega lifts his head and turns to them, sensing the rising tension even if he can’t hear their words. He had gotten caught up in a Resistance operation a while ago and come to know just enough that Jussac had decided to utilize him, but not enough to deliver vital details should he ever get caught. Just another one of those impossible, cold calculations that Jussac makes regularly because someone has to make them.

Another Alpha might doubt her, even Jussac would ask for reassurance first, but not Boisrenard.

He pats her hand that still tries to grasp the reality of what she has only, maybe, suspected and presses a kiss to her cheek as the cart passes the gate. “Wouldn’t dream of it, little sister.”

He throws a wink to the Omega and rightens Jeanne’s shawl, subtly checking the position of the two knives that had been his once. “Just remember to get behind me when the shit drops from the bedroom window.”

As he pushes away and unfolds the telescope he wears in a pouch on his hip, his hands and body leave warm spots that feel the cold so much more acutely all of a sudden.

“You are not invulnerable, Boisrenard. Why do I have to keep reminding you lot of that?”
Down below, the cart stops in front of the house as three people step out the front door.

“Because there is a lot more meat to go around for me, Jeanne. I can spare a…”

She watches as the middleman steps closer, bending to the prisoners on the back of the cart. That seems unusual but Boisrenard moves before she has clued herself in that she is watching the stranger bend right down to Cahusac and *sniff* his neck.

“…Grimaud…” The name is unfamiliar, but the horror in Boisrenard’s voice paints the unknown with rivers of blood and the horrors that are etched into his skin, with all of Cahusac’s nightmares and the memory of her own little odem imprisoned with the Inquisition.

“Who is Grimaud?” she asks and pushes off the ground to follow him up the hill and towards their messenger, ducking from tree to tree and behind bushes.

Jeanne is not fast enough to follow his mad dash up the steep terrain but she hears his words nonetheless.

“Tell Jussac that “Bardot” is Grimaud and he is here. Quick! Quick, go! Or those two are dead.”

The Omega asks no questions, just runs up the hill and Jeanne can’t say for sure if Boisrenard’s eyes follow his retreat to make sure he doesn’t slip or if he doesn’t dare look to the scene behind her.

“Lucien Grimaud,” he spits the name. “is a blood traitor. Met him a few years ago in Poitiers on a mission. Even was running slaves then, too, the bastard.”

“He agrees with them?” Jeanne’s voice rises dangerously but before she can say any more, Boisrenard whirls around and covers her mouth with a big hand.

“Shhhhh…” His soft eyes flare with a fury that turns them into pools of molten tar. “He doesn’t. That’s the worst,” he murmurs staring at her, his hand releasing her with a careful motion as if he doesn’t yet trust her not to yell. Or himself. “He plain doesn’t care as long as they leave him alone and make him money.”

“That’s…” Whatever Jeanne is about to say, what exactly not even she knows, is cut off when a shot rings out.

She grabs Boisrenard before he can turn, peeking past his arm and her own hand where she tries to hold onto him.

“Servant.” Terror squeezes Jeanne’s voice to a strangled whisper.

He sags against her hold.

“You need to…” he swallows and closes his eyes and when he opens them, the mindless rage churning under the surface has turned into the endless cold of the sea. “Tell me what is happening because if I look…”

Grimaud levels the pistol at Bernajoux’s head and there could be nothing in the world stopping Jeanne from running down there, risking the bullets and death just for a chance to save them. Then she remembers that this pistol is empty now, the bullet in the body at Grimaud’s feet.

And while Bernajoux must know it, too, he flinches, his gaze glued to the ground. The perfect, broken slave.
“Does he know them?”

“No.” Boisrenard closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, his body leaning carefully into the touch of her hands, searching for distracting warmth through the layers of their clothes. “But as soon as he sees me, he’ll know.”

“A trained Alpha is valuable?” she murmurs and puts all her hope in Boisrenard’s answer, praying that this - please, Mary, Mother of God - is the reason why he can still stand here. Barely contained but still here.

“To control an Alpha…” he huffs bitterly.

Something in his face twists painfully but to see it, she’d have to look away from Bernajoux and Cahusac. And turning away from them feels like breaking the power of the silent prayers her heart is pumping out with every beat, mute pleas, promises of blood and sacrifices and whatever God wants if he only keeps them alive. Mother Mary…please…

“No!” She pushes past Boisrenard when the first blow lands on Bernajoux’s head but strong arms catch her against his chest, her face pressed into her doublet to mute her voice.

The beta used the butt of his pistol, once, twice, because nothing can just knock out Bernajoux. Nothing. Right?

Above her, Boisrenard growls.

He lets her go and she turns, just in time to see Grimaud grab the horse’s reins and lead the cart towards the house.

“They are alive. He knocked them out. He wants to keep them that way for now.” Boisrenard murmurs like a body dragged over a patch of gravel. She knows how that sounds. She caused it when she threw Marquemont’s men down the mountain.

“We need to get in there!” She has no idea how Boisrenard of all people can still be so calm, so outwardly together even if his eyes scream murder. But she doesn’t have this amount of self-control. “No waiting for Jussac.”

That all of that calm is nothing but veneer for her sake becomes obvious as Boisrenard’s gaze snaps to her. “You have a plan?”

One of the Betas below kicks Cahusac off the cart to drag him inside and this time it’s Jeanne who growls. “I am a poor, helpless woman alone in the woods…” She bares her teeth. “We need Adèle.”

***

The hem of her skirt brushes over snow, soaking up the cold as she walks past the chateau's gates, heavier with every step. Like a hand trying to hold her back, telling her of madness and death. Cahusac's empty eyes and the blood tacked to her shoes and skirt and hands, washing his wounds. His hollow voice.
...in medio umbrae mortis.

"Hail Mary, full of grace."
She knows there are eyes trained on her from within, sees the heavy stoles move in the windows next to the front door.

“The Lord is with thee.”

She has cycled through three Hail Marys already, mapping the distance to the front door by how many she can possibly fit in.

“Blessed art thou among women.”

She remembers acutely the feel of Cahusac's body sliding above hers, inside her, his lips pressed to her ear, praising her beauty. Her. His bright eyes shining in the lamplight, made brighter by his outrageous lashes, the way the sweat glistened on his neck as he threw back his head, the deep indentations of his teeth in his lower lip as he tried to swallow his moans.
The shower of pleasure. His tugging on her hair, little jerks, him fighting hard and breathlessly to keep control.

“And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”
Low murmurs in the dark, their hands intertwined. "Please be careful."

Watching him sleep in the shadow of firelight in a cheap inn two hours West.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God.”
Gratefulness and the enormity of this gift.

“Pray for us sinners.”
Wordlessly whispered where he couldn't hear. "Matthieu."

“Now and at the hour of our death.”

The Amen is swallowed by the sound of her knuckles hitting the door, the rustle as she smoothes down her skirt one last time and crosses herself.

Two men stand inside as it swings open. With unwashed hair and yellow teeth but well-kept weapons and hungry eyes.

Jeanne clutches her heart.
"Oh thank God! Messieurs, please help me!"

They look at each other and she barrels on. “We are on the way to my sister in law in Villiers. She is having a child. I am a midwife. Please, Messieurs! Our cart slipped off the road not far from here and we can’t go on. It’s just me and my sister. Down at the crossing towards Guercheville....”

The men follow her outstretched hand as if they might see the cart and the sister at the end of it.

Jeanne doesn’t wait for them to make up their mind together. They should be more suspicious after the earlier trouble. On the other hand, though, she is perhaps just used to different levels of 'suspicious'.

“They won’t be able to resist. If they’re good men, they won’t be able to resist helping you. If they
“aren’t…”

“And they aren’t,” Adèle had thrown in.

“They won’t be able to resist the opportunity.”

She takes the first five steps down the white sandstone porch, her feet slipping a little in the mud. Boisrenard’s knives radiate cold where they are sheathed, hidden in her vest like a shining beacon, a call to action that just begs her to walk in there and do… something. But when she casts a careful glance over her shoulder, they are sharing a dirty grin and a shrug. One calls something into the house that sounds like “Be right back.”

Then they follow her.

She leads them back the way she came, past the massive oaks that stand like bleak grey guardians over the entrance, watching her guide two men to their deaths like Delilah led Samson.

Looking up, she finds a lonely jay in the branches, watching them, too, not sounding the alarm.

He and the oak they know, and, for a second, guilt flares, before she remembers Jael, not Delilah, and she remembers Cahusac and Bernajoux locked in that house and running out of time.

Their names are Jacques and Albert, though one of them is called “bite d’âne.” Information Jeanne really could do without.

They tell her about their achievements, paint themselves as soldiers in the service of a noble lord instead of dirty mercenaries helping a criminal.

The half-mile walk to the crossing seems longer with their tales of where they have been, what they have seen, trying to impress a hapless country girl.

She smiles at them in, what she hopes, is a coy fashion. There is no need though, they follow her like a bunch of brainless dogs on a trail that promises meat.

The cart sits just around the bend from the crossing safely out of side from even the most accidental observer.

Young Adèle sits curled into herself on the cart's bench, long locks twisted into a loosely braided tail. She looks small and fragile in the harsh black and white winter landscape, the blond of her hair a rare peek of sunshine.

With the way the cart dips to the left where its wheels have slipped off the road, balancing precariously over the ditch, everything in her posture screams helplessness.

A cruel part of Jeanne, small and insistent, hopes that one of the men will be alive to witness she and Boisrenard lifting the cart back on the road and understand who had come for them.

Guilt follows that thought. Just a vague idea that she should be better than this.

Just… not now.

“Adèle!” she calls softly as they step up to the carriage. “I brought help.”

Adèle jerks up, her legs fumbling in the cold to find enough of a grasp on the slippery carriage steps
to safely climb off. One of the men with Jeanne races past her to reach out and steady her precarious steps and between his hand and the firm grip Adèle has on the bench, she reaches the frozen ground.

The man doesn’t let go of her hand, not even as Adèle twists away to bring distance between them and he realizes far too late that she isn’t scared. She just needs enough room to pull her rapier from under the bench and drive it through his heart.

By the time he releases her and tries to get away, she has already grabbed his wrist in return and pulls him forward, alphaic strength no match for whatever measly power he believed he possessed.

Jeanne turns to the man behind her in time to see Boisrenard leap over the ditch with the easy surety of someone who learned to move in the rigging of a ship, bring down the butt of his pistol on Jacques’ head with a resounding crack.

Jeanne pretends not hear his grumbled: “Bad waste of a good name.”

He reholsters the pistol and pushes the man against the cart.

“Better for the jacket,” he comments, louder now, with a deprecating glance at Adèle.

“I don’t think they will notice the hole,” the younger Alpha shots back and tears the shawl off her hair, already bending down to undress the man as Boisrenard does the same.

She fits easily into her new disguise, the jacket too big even for its previous owner. Boisrenard doesn’t. So they switch and he ends up with the bloodstained garment after all.

Shifting the cart back onto the road is quick work between him and Adèle. He slits Jacques’ throat between the trees where the ground will soak up the blood and nobody will find the bodies until they are long gone.

“Two guards down…,” Boisrenard makes a face as he says that, pushing the horse into a leisurely trot.

“There were more inside, within calling distance,” Jeanne adds, helping Adèle to hide her hair in a tight braid at the base of her neck. Now, with a man’s clothes and her posture proud and unafraid, she looks every bit the young Alpha, too slender still with a lot of room for her shoulders to grow into and a voice just a little on the soft side, but there is nothing girly about her.

It hurts to know that she will have to go back to over-pronouncing all the things that she isn’t just to vanish in the mess of Betan expectations.

“Well,” Boisrenard snorts, “how many more can there possibly be? Grimaud will be with the Alphas. He can’t risk letting them get their hands on the men and if we’re really lucky, he still thinks that someone tried to scam them.”

Jeanne pulls her shawl closer with a nod and a wordless prayer that he is right. “I don’t think his men would’ve followed this easily if they thought this was an attempt to free the throwbacks.”

“He’ll want information.” Boisrenard reaches back to where she sits on the bed of the cart and tugs on the shawl. “Courage, dear heart. We have a little time.”

It’s tempting to comment on how calm he is and Jeanne’s already opened her mouth to scold him when she sees the finest of tremors run up his hand. His eyes shift to Adèle where the young Alpha
stares ahead, then he shakes his head imperceptibly. Jeanne touches her fingers to her father’s pistol at her belt and forces a smile.

“We still can’t kill them all,” she says instead and makes a face.

Of course, Adèle takes it as a challenge. “We can try!”

“No. We just need to find Bernajoux and Cahusac and a position that we can hold until Jussac gets here. Adèle will do the same with the Omegas.”

They draw close to the last bend in the road and both of the Alphas draw up their hoods.

“First we need to find them.” This time, Jeanne grumbles against his implacable wall of put-upon optimism and is shut down by both at the same time.

“They’re in the cellars,” Boisrenard comments at the same time Adèle says “Cellar.”

“You can’t Alpha-proof a normal room. Bernajoux would run through an interior wall if he puts his mind or rage to it.” Boisrenard smiles an expression of bitter satisfaction. “I’ve seen him ram through security doors before…”

For a moment, Jeanne is tempted to tell him that Bernajoux would probably tear through the foundations of that chateau if Boisrenard were in danger, but they have reached the gates and up ahead the stoles in the windows next to entrance move again.

Adèle risks one last word to them as the draw up to the porch, “I’ll take the cart around the house and go up the outside wall,” then Boisrenard stops with a sharp nod.

She jumps off and grabs the horse’s reins while Boisrenard helps Jeanne off the bed with a generous helping of barely appropriate touches. She slaps his hand away once, when it wanders too close to her hip, all for good show.

In the gloomy winter light, it should be hard enough to discern faces under the hoods, just familiar clothing and a strange woman as distraction.

It’s all their plan hinges on.

Improvisation is a sad little fact of the Resistance, Boisrenard had commented earlier when her idea had run out in face of the reality that they had no true idea what to expect inside, something she had heard Cahusac murmur so many times now that the words sent a mournful pang of worry through her heart.

On the other side, she thinks, dancing out of the way of his cheap attempts to invade her space, the Red Guards’ idea of improvisation always seems to yield some result.

Like now, when the door opens in front of them and a leathery face with a prominent scar along one eye appears.

“Albert! Are you insane?” the man demands to know from the form behind Jeanne. Boisrenard just shoves Jeanne into his arms and barrels past. She smells alcohol and a whiff of blood on rough hands that catch her and drag her into a stately entrance hall. “You can’t just…”

The man pushes her aside when Boisrenard whirs around and backhands him so hard that the sound of bones breaking echoes through the room. He drops like a stone.
“You spent too much time with Cahusac,” she grumbles and finds her reward in the way his lips twitch.

“Blood on the rug causes questions, squirrel.”

Upstairs a door opens and a voice calls a question that Boisrenard answers with an inarticulate yell about how he stumbled.Voices in the background laugh.

“Well,” she murmurs, as Boisrenard grabs the man’s doublet and throws him over his shoulder in one swift motion. “We made it inside. What now?”

When she follows his nod, the door at the end of the narrow hallway becomes apparent. “Kitchen. Noble folk don’t want the dirt in their house, they keep it with the servants.” He bares his teeth. “So it doesn’t disturb the guests.” As low as he speaks, the growl in his voice almost drowns out the words. He’s losing control.

But even without that, Jeanne only needs to see him stomp towards that far away door to know he is slowly losing what’s left of his control. He moves like Cahusac into a fistfight, fixated on his goal with the single-minded intensity of a predator on the prowl. There is an alcove under a low stone arch to the left of the door, shaded by the murky light and the lack of windows; this is where he dumps the body.

Boisrenard stares at the heavy lock that holds the door close. The heavy oak, iron-fortified door that separates the empty kitchen from the cellar that lies behind the worn stairs.

With a heavy iron lock that none of them can pick. The door closes to the outside, normally held in place by heavy oak bars in heavy iron hooks driven deep into the stone.

“Can you open it?” she asks and draws her pistol, eyes fixed on the lock.

“Yes. It’s meant to keep throwbacks inside, not out.” His fingers caress the blackened metal of the lock. “Silently? No.”

His gaze finds hers in the twilight with the sparkle of his slightly demented grin lighting up her heart. “Whoever is behind that door will know we’re here.”

Then his eyes dip to the pistol in her hand, holding only one shot, and he frowns. “They’ll kill the prisoners. We’ll need that for distance.”

Cahusac. Bernajoux. Not *the* prisoners. But she knows why he says it this way.

She shifts the pistol to her left hand and draws a knife as his grin reappears, sharper.

“Don’t aim,” Boisrenard reminds her. He’s said the same a dozen times when they were training. Don’t aim. Cripple. Run.

Air fills her fluttering lungs as he twirls the oven poker around his wrist one last time.

No running this time. Good.

Nobody expects Boisrenard caressing the door with his left while he whispers his mate’s name. Or the horrible fire in his eyes when his hands stop trembling and ram the oven poker into the crack
behind the lockbox, tearing it out of the wood whole with one violent motion.

Neither of the guards is prepared for the sound of a pissed off Alpha in search of his mate. Nor the way he looks.

They are still staring when Jeanne lunges forward from her crouched position right of the opening door, driving steel through dense leather and then soft flesh.

A sound of bone cracking against stone behind her. A wet gasp of sudden clarity above when a man, a young man, only a little older than Adèle, understands he’ll die.

He can’t scream. The knife has stolen his breath, even his last one.

Boisrenard’s knife thunks into his eye socket and that’s it.

That’s it, she thinks and falls backward, into Boisrenard’s waiting hands that pull her to her feet and out of the way of the falling body.

“Well done, Squirrel,” his warm voice rasps against her ear, far more understanding in his voice than she can deal with right now.

“I want to throw up,” she admits but he just snorts.

“Later. Come on.”

Moisture glistens on the walls, reflecting the weak light of the oil lamps along the vaulted passageway. Once, this hadn’t been a prison. Shelves along the left wall still hold an assortment of baskets and pots. She counted winter apples and onions and a few parsnips among several bottles of wine, waiting for the return of the noble masters of the house and their appetite.

To the right, though, where the cellar stretched under the house, cells had been mortared into the space.

She counts six, all locked with the same heavy oaken doors. Five along the side and one ahead.

And around them... silence.

No guards storming at them, no angry yells, no shots fired. And maybe. Maybe they just are lucky.

Or too late, the small voice in her mind supplies while Boisrenard blocks the door with the bodies and one of the oak bars. His face mirrors her thoughts as he storms off towards the first cell, plans, and logic left behind.

They race through the first three cells and find nothing but moldy straw. Tear the door open. Hesitate. Stare. Slam it shut. Next.

The fourth door is locked and Boisrenard halts. His eyes flicker to her, a moment with no breath, no sound, nothing to say.

“Courage, dear heart,” she whispers, not even convincing herself with the words. But maybe him, because he steps back and then slams forward. Once. Twice. And the lock breaks.

Beyond, there is darkness. Deep shadows. The soft clinking of chains. A name on Boisrenard’s lips as he storms in.
Jeanne steals a lamp from the wall and finds them locked in embrace, Boisrenard’s hands curled around Bernajoux’s arms that hang locked in chains from the ceiling. He can stand, but he can’t stretch to gather enough strength to break them.

Blood darkens his skin, smears from his lips to Boisrenard’s where they kiss. It leaks from his short-cropped hair to his neck in sluggish rivulets, down his side from shallow abrasions and cut where someone took a swipe at him but didn’t dare do more.

“I love you. Don’t ever do that again. I love you.”

She turns away to try and tune out Boisrenard’s too intimate whispers but Bernajoux’s words draw her back. “Get me out, Jaques. We need to get Cahusac.”

Jeanne turns back in time to see Boisrenard jump up and wrap a chain around both his wrist and then twist until a link breaks.

He catches Bernajoux with an arm around his middle and pulls him into a quick hug, just the second that his mate allows before he pushes out the door and takes a deep breath. “The Alpha let the Betas have a go at him. Like rabid dogs. He knew damn well what he was doing.”

“Yeah, that could’ve gone better,” Boisrenard admits. He hesitates a moment, biting his lip. “It’s Grimaud.”

Bernajoux stops dead in his tracks before he whirls around and grabs Boisrenard’s rapier from its sheath. They don’t have time but he takes a moment for a quick, intense kiss. “This time, we’ll get him.”

Deep down, they know where Cahusac is - the last cell, the one opposite the cellar entrance, is the biggest with the sturdiest door - but they take the time to check the one remaining door between them and there.

It’s only a matter of time until some of the men upstairs muster the courage to come and check on their friends. Not yet, but until then, they don’t need more trouble.

They are meters away still, when Jeanne hears the words, dully forcing their way through the thick wood. Built to hold an Alpha but they can’t hold that voice. She knows them too well and if she didn’t hear them, she’d feel them echo through the old stones and her own nightmares.

“I walk through the valley…”

“...of the shadow of death.”

Just before her hands can hit the door and yank it open, a heavy hand lands on her shoulder and drags her back.

“No!” Bernajoux murmurs and catches her slap with his right. “It’s a trap.”

“It’s Cahusac and he’s losing his mind!”

He carries Boisrenard’s rapier and one of the pistols. They took his shirt and shoes and left blood instead but Bernajoux doesn’t seem to care, his gaze zeroes in on her as it always does when his eyes
narrow and the flames within soar to life.

““You sure?”

“I can hear him, Bernajoux! He’s saying this…”

“The psalm.”

“Yes.” He has to understand. “Please.”

They stare at the door. At the impossible. Outside, far away, someone yells and if they’re lucky, it’s Jussac. In the cellar, silence blankets everything like the shroud of winter, until even they can hear Cahusac’s broken voice.

Then Bernajoux shakes his head. “No. Cahusac doesn’t break that fast.” He tilts his head and closes his eyes to listen. “That's French, not Latin. He knows we’re here. He’s ready.”

“We can’t just storm in. Grimaud can’t risk us getting a hit on him. We make one move, Cahusac is dead.” Boisrenard leans into his mate’s body, touching his skin carefully, a lot more intimately than is proper with his fingers grazing over the other Alpha’s side.

“We need a distraction. A bargaining chip.”

Then they both look at Jeanne. Boisrenard’s lips curl. “Can you cry on command?”

She can’t, try as she might, all she feels is a churning mass of helpless anger and worry and all it makes her want to do is hit someone. “I'm bad at it,” she admits after trying, after thinking of the dead Omega in Paris, of her parents and coming away nothing but more furious.

The onion in her hand exists accusingly, a small, mismatched thing, one of those that usually sting like the devil’s ire. There is nothing like rubbing it under her eyes and on her hands because her Alphas need ‘something so harmless he’ll never suspect any danger from it’. Her. Helplessly sobbing so they or she can get close enough to Grimaud and get him away from Cahusac.

She rubs her eyes, already groaning before the tears and her nose starts running.

They need a decoy, a distraction and, apparently, distressed carriers are something that Alphas just react to, in one way or another.

Let it never be said that Jeanne Marie Durand is above using desperately reckless plans to break people out of captivity.

Especially if they have nothing else.

Opening that door, they expect the worst, Bernajoux ready for battle, one hand on the handle, his rapier in the other, wild around the edges yet once again making himself smaller. A mythical creature from Boisrenard’s stories, raw power given form and a very bad temper honed by a cunning mind. And by his side, Boisrenard, deceptively relaxed, as easy as they come when they wade into a bar fight with laughter and wine on their breath.

Jeanne has to blink away the tears clinging to her lashes to focus on them and the space beyond. Soot stained walls and chains and a rack and Cahusac, suspended in the middle of the room, like Bernajoux had been, robbed of all leverage to use his strength and fight. His skin is darkened by dirt
and bruises, bloody from the cut above his eye to the cuts on his chest and burns. Fire casts dancing shadows over him, layers his eyes in darkness but even then, Jeanne can feel the annoyance radiating from the half suppressed snarl and the slow, long lungfuls of air.

And next to him, pistol carelessly pointed upwards at the prisoner, stands an evil smirk wrapped in an Alpha. He looks good, in the same rough way that Boisrenard wears so well; unlike Boisrenard, though, this Alpha has not one drop of benevolent humor in his eyes, the soft brown hardened to cold flint. He wears the scars on his face like he wears his mismatched armor: a proclamation and a challenge. I don’t care.

“Grimaud…,” Boisrenard speaks, bored in tone and his stance. “And here I was hoping your flesh’d finally catch up to character and rot away.”

Grimaud just laughs, a short huff bar any amusement. “You, I admit, are a surprise. I could’ve sworn, Boisrenard, you were claiming allegiance to the Cardinal and Betan status the last time I saw you. Yet here you are and….”

He blinks and delight colors his features as his gaze locks on Bernajoux and recognition dawns. “Oh…. Oh that is rich.” His hand with the pistol carelessly pokes at Cahusac and sends him into a slow swing. “I am not sure what’s better, that you are either blood traitors or insane. And I would appreciate the irony much more if you weren’t hurting my business.”

Jeanne doesn’t have to fake the dismayed sounds when he pokes Cahusac again, the chains creak and this time he has to turn his face away to hide the flash of pain that crosses his features.

Boisrenard steps to the left, closes the gap between him and Bernajoux to cut her off from Grimaud and that is her cue.

“No,” she chokes. “He’s injured.”

“Shut. Up!” Bernajoux growls and against everything, Jeanne clamps her teeth together before she can think better of it. She sobs instead, rubs her eyes to wipe the moisture away but to no avail, they only keep coming. And worse.

“...is that?” The sound of her own sobs drowns out Grimaud’s words.

“You brought her HERE?” But nothing could drown out Cahusac’s yell.

When she can finally see again, Boisrenard stands in front of her like her personal protector, Bernajoux has taken a step forward half inside the cell and opened the gap again, allowing Grimaud a glimpse at her, her tear streaked face and her rumpled hair.

“A midwife. She’s unimportant.”

Clutching her hands in front of her she curls her shoulders in and casts her gaze downward, anywhere but Grimaud. Except, Cahusac’s feet, fighting desperately to find ground to stand on. His shoulder is not healed yet. Far from it and the cold doesn’t help. So she looks up again and finds his eyes, his honest to God terrified eyes.

Almost against his wits, Grimaud mirrors Bernajoux and takes half a step forward, the pistol twitching just a fraction away from Cahusac’s body, then he catches himself.

“Hello, beautiful,” he croons and smiles, in the charming, faintly slippery way of the unhinged. His free hand pats Cahusac’s stomach in appreciation, hitting the darkest bruises with unerring precision. “Come closer. I promise I will not hurt your…” He grins. “...man.”
Boisrenard snaps “No, Jeanne,” after she has already moved the first step and she has to drown out Cahusac’s flurry of curses to take the second.

Except, there is Bernajoux, smelling of warmth and sun, and his hand catches her arm, leaving a handprint of that familiar scent on her, breaking even the stench of onions on her hands.

“We’ll make a deal, Grimaud.” His voice shuts them all up. “You can have her. We take the pup... and you let her go at a spot of your choosing. We will not come after you and ignore your...business.”

Boisrenard’s growl and Cahusac’s yell mix with her shocked gasp. Grimaud smirks.

“Answer me one question, though,... Bernajoux?” Grimaud doesn’t guess as much with the name as he is seeking confirmation. He finds it in Bernajoux’s clipped nod. “What is it, blood traitors or are you insane enough to honestly try and play the Bloody Cardinal?”

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“Do you think the Cardinal would knowingly accept things like us in his service?”

Jeanne practically hears Bernajoux’s judgmental eyebrow. In the periphery of her vision, somewhere right of Grimaud’s shoulder, she sees Cahusac rolling his eyes.

“That depends on the power you bring him, wouldn’t it? Nobody hates throwbacks if he can use them, do they?”

Jeanne wipes her face with her hands and sniffs.

Grimaud nods in her direction. “And her?”

“She’s Betan.”

“And sleeps with your packmate.”

“There are many Betas out there.”

“Bernajoux!” Cahusac roars and maybe that is a signal or Bernajoux just decided this is the moment. She has no time to think on it when he launches her at Grimaud, stumbling and flailing into the Alpha’s massive body. The impact barely unbalances him, his arm swipes her aside like one would a fly, throw her behind him and into the shelf there.

Knives, tongs, things she doesn’t want to think about crash into her back as she falls and curls into herself, her arms wrapping around her middle without second thought.

The shot rips through the cells with the power of an explosion.

When Jeanne finds her bearing again, Cahusac has his legs wrapped around Grimaud’s neck, holding him in place as best as he can with what little leverage he has from his bloody fingers wrapped around the chains that hold him.

Bernajoux’s rapier sticks from the arm that held the pistol.

And then it sticks in Grimaud’s chest, the gurgle of the dying Alpha the only sound in the room. And then nothing.

Cahusac lets him drop and past them, Boisrenard leans in the doorway again, arms crossed, grinning.

“Jeanne?” Cahusac asks and twists in the chains to get a glimpse behind himself but Jeanne’s already
stumbled to her feet.

“I’m fine,” she rushes to assure him, carefully touching his skin where it’s not bruised.

He grumbles anyway. “That was the dumbest plan any of you have ever had.”

“A dumb plan that works is not a dumb plan, Chiot,” Boisrenard quips, pushing away from the door to help their younger packmate out of his predicament.

The smell of cordite mixes sickeningly with the scent of blood and of onions, but the blood doesn’t smell like a stranger, it smells like…. “Who of you is shot?”

Panic. Fear. Memory. It smells like *Hold on, hold on, don’t die*.

“Leg,” Cahusac says. “It’s fine.”

He still sounds fine, but he did so the last time, too, before he toppled over and almost bled to death.

She rips the hole in his pants open and finds a wound that burrows deep into the muscle and not out again and that will be a problem. The bone is whole and that is good and he smiles at her, loopy with pain and the quickly fading rush of battle.

Boisrenard and Bernajoux have to team up to break the chains after she quickly wraps the wound but then they drop him to the floor and into her arms. Bleeding. Again. Burned and cut and bruised with a few broken ribs, unfocused eyes and a weak, slightly demented grin, just for her.

“Salut, Mademoiselle Durand. And again you insist on saving me.”

Fists hammer against the cellar door. Boisrenard runs, drawing his weapons, Bernajoux close on his heels and they leave her behind, sitting cross-legged on the blood-spattered floor.

Grimaud’s body lies crumpled in the corner where Boisrenard dragged it. And closed his eyes. Because he is Boisrenard and better than all of them in some ways. So much worse in others.

Cahusac’s head rests on her thighs, her fingers carding through his hair, carefully caressing his face. His right eye is already swelling and the faint smile he wears oozes blood from a cut on his upper lip. He doesn’t notice.

Her pistol gets placed on the floor to her right, still locked and loaded and ready to take on whatever may come at them.

“You knew what was going on, right?” she asks, trying to not remember the panic in his eyes.

Cahusac snorts and reaches up with a bruised hand, missing on the first try, before he gently wipes a thumb over her cheek.

“Do you know how many times I’ve seen you cry?” he murmurs, just loud enough for her to hear over BB shoving another shelf in front of the door. “Still a dumb plan. Your life isn’t worth mine.”

“To me, it is,” she answers and really, what else is there to say?

Looking back, to that beautiful, dangerous predator with nothing but war in his eyes that had walked into her home in Lyon and brought back a part of her heart…she now sees the man who sits next to her in a theater show, commenting on every move of the actors with acerbic wit because he doesn’t agree with their performance. She hears his voice talk war and read poetry in bed at night because he can’t sleep and that means she can’t sleep, her cheek resting on his chest, listening more to his
heartbeat than his words until they forget night’s terrors or they fade in the morning light.

He smiles, his mind far away and wandering the paths that might well lead to rest or terror. It’s hard to tell with him sometimes. Not unconscious, his heart beats steady and strong against her fingers where they rest on his chest. Just exhausted.

“I should be with them.”

Bending down to understand his mumbled words, she glances towards the cellar door and Boisrenard, who reaches out to Bernajoux for the umpteenth time.

“Nobody will get in here,” Jeanne rushes to assure him, only then remembering that he doesn’t know what has been going on outside this cell and what they did to him. “It’s just a bunch of Betas on the other side. They’re distracting them from Adèle and the Omegas until Jussac gets here.” She tugs on his hair. “And if they get in, my pistol and I will protect you.”

Cahusac huffs what might be a laugh and turns his face to her, breathing deeply as he searches for her scent and breathes out again with a faint frown.

He has no voice to follow the thought she knows he is chasing, the smell he wants to follow but loses halfway through when her fingers brush over his cheek and let the obnoxious stench of onions wash away everything else.

He’ll have his chance to rant about that - her other hand brushes over her belly and this time the moisture gathering in her eyes is real - when he is bleeding less, when he can stay awake, when this mission is through, when they’re safe.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys, it's me, needy author person.

:) 

If you liked this chapter, or if you didn't. Or if you liked parts if it and found others meh.

Or if yoi have question or just want to tell me to not take a fucking year for the nexy chapter:

Please comment!
It's like sunshine and oxygen. It turns into words in my brain.
I swear!

Thank you for reading!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!