

1.

"JACQUELINE MARIE-CLAIRE DUVAL DE LA FORGE-À-BELLESFÉES."

Jacqueline ducked her head to avoid the Paris prefect's cynical gaze as he examined Jacqueline's papers. The platform of Gare d'Austerlitz teemed with travelers anxious to board. They glared at Jacqueline, blaming her for the delay. Even the shiny green locomotive's blasts of steam accused her with each passing minute.

She reached down to scratch behind the ear of the she-wolf beside her. The wolf's eyes closed in delight. Jacqueline squatted down to whisper, "This is the third time this year I've had to rescue you from your own indiscretions, Angélique. Next time, I'll let you sit in jail."

"What was your business in Paris?" the prefect asked.

Before she could answer, a man stepped between Jacqueline and her inquisitor and addressed the prefect too quietly for Jacqueline to hear. Angélique snorted a laugh. Her lupine sense of hearing must have caught the exchange. The man strode away, and the prefect offered Jacqueline a hand to help her rise.

"I apologize, Madame Duval. I did not realize who you were." The prefect returned her papers, spun on his heel, and left.

The conductor blew his whistle. As second- and third-class passengers boarded their coaches, he opened the door to Jacqueline's first-class carriage and lowered the steps for her. Angélique leapt in and Jacqueline followed. The conductor closed the door, only to quickly open it again to allow another man to join them. The man removed a silk brocade fez and set it on the seat beside him, then opened the sketch pad he'd brought and lost himself on the page.

Once again Angélique snorted her amusement. Annoyed, Jacqueline turned her gaze out the window, chewing the inside of her cheek. Her sister seemed to know every man in Paris: artists, musicians,

writers, expatriated nobles, owners of all the bar-tabacs and taverns in the Latin Quarter, and purveyors of opium along the Boul'Mich.

With a soft whine, Angélique lay her head across Jacqueline's lap, one paw on her knee. Jacqueline stroked her sister's tawny brow until the amber wolf-eyes closed, then tucked herself deeper into the corner of the carriage further from the strange artist and leaned against the window, staring out over the farms, brick factories, and slaughterhouses of southern Paris. Once the train chugged away from the station, she could breathe a sigh of relief. Angélique was safe. Again.

"Your dog loves you," the artist said.

"She is not a dog, monsieur," Jacqueline answered.

Peering closer, he slowly grinned. "So I see." He twisted his thin mustache. "Intriguing."

She wanted to scream, 'She's my twin sister who is determined to destroy herself, body and soul, because she despises the beast she's become through no fault of her own, leaving me to clean up her messes, bail her out of jail, collect her unconscious body from some hashish den, or smuggle her out of town before the police track her down.'

Angélique whined once more and licked her hand. Jacqueline tempered her anger. She would not allow her sister's antics to ruin the flush of good fortune Jacqueline had enjoyed the past three weeks. Four buyers had purchased her design for fuel conservation, and a fifth bought plans for a cooling system for his metalworks. She had also secured a commission to do a chemical analysis of a vineyard and develop a nutrient-rich fertilizer. The last elicited a nostalgic smile; the task essentially replicated the same project she had completed for her chemistry thesis at the Polytechnique when she was fifteen, allowing her to graduate with four doctoral degrees.

Jacqueline folded her arms and snuggled down, her good humor somewhat restored. The trip to Orléans would take eight hours. She dozed off and on with the rocking of the carriage, waking at each thin shriek of the locomotive's whistle, then settling comfortably again on her travel cushion. When she glanced out the window of her carriage, billows of gray smoke from the locomotive lent a misleading gloom of clouds obscuring the view to the countryside despite the midday hour. Every so often, the smoke parted to reveal a shaft of summer sunlight piercing the woods or glittering on a distant farmhouse. Not yet accustomed to the new railroad's daily passages to and from Orléans,

goats and sheep scattered at the thundering noise. Down on the streams and canals, mule drivers and punters shook their fists and cursed the infernal iron invader.

Angélique grew restless, confined to the little coach in the stifling mid-July heat. Jacqueline could scarcely blame her. If they had taken the road coach from Paris, her sister would have been free to run about on the frequent stops. Never mind the trip would have taken two days and would have left them both filthy with road dust. Of course, Angélique and her antics held the blame for their manner of transport. Not that Jacqueline minded; as a polytech and master of the forge, she felt it her duty to give her patronage to the industrial marvel that was the new Paris-Orléans Railroad, particularly since she made frequent clandestine use of its rails.

"At least we're not locked into a compartment car, like the unfortunates in the Versailles disaster last year," Jacqueline said to her sister.

The man looked up from his sketch pad. "Indeed, madame. What a horror, unable to free themselves as their train caught fire. These new coaches are much safer and a relief to my rheumatic bones."

Jacqueline turned her head and chewed the inside of her cheek. She had meant her comment to reassure Angélique, not initiate conversation with a stranger. Angélique pawed lightly at her leg, teasing her for her social inhibitions. Jacqueline ignored her and returned to her nap.

The locomotive suddenly lurched with an ear-piercing squeal. Gasping, Jacqueline pitched forward as the brakes dug in. Angélique yelped as she fell to the floor, growling her displeasure as she climbed back up on the cushion. Cries of alarm rose from the adjacent first-class coaches, the Versailles tragedy uppermost in everyone's thoughts. Jacqueline peered through the dissipating smoke. The train had halted in the middle of a vast meadow. Frightened goats darted forward, charging the invader, some stiffening and dropping to the ground, others bounding to hide behind the stolid cows. Off beyond the fields, a simple church spire rose above gray roofs.

She looked at Angélique and shook her head. "Not yet."

"Probably cows on the track," said the man seated across from her. He set his sketchbook down and stood stiffly. "Just in time." He opened the carriage door and peered about. "I could do with some fresh air."

He turned back to retrieve his fez from the corner of his seat. As he set it on his head, he turned to Jacqueline to offer a hand. When she recognized Eugène Delacroix, she suddenly realized why Angélique

had found their situation so amusing. Delacroix counted among the coterie of artists whose salons Angélique frequented. Jacqueline demurred, looking away.

Delacroix turned and stepped down, then jumped the remaining meter to the tracks through hissing billows of steam. As he descended the rail bed, he drew a silver cigar case from his vest pocket and placed a panatella to his lips.

Jacqueline chuckled. "Fresh air, indeed."

Angélique growled.

Jacqueline stroked her sister's brow. "If you didn't have half the Paris prefecture looking for the notorious Angélique Laforge, you could have ridden in your human form, so you can very well quit your growling. And no, I have no wish to engage with your friend." She rubbed Angélique's ear to calm her. "Patience, mon Ange, we'll soon be there. And I wired ahead for a diligence to convey us to Bellesfées, so it will await us. We should be home in time for supper."

Her smile turned to a determined pout. "Time for some new designs."

Thinking of her draughting board, Jacqueline leaned over to see what the artist had been sketching. To no surprise, she saw her own face in several casts of repose or gazing out the carriage window, along with various poses of Angélique, maw to paws or head resting on Jacqueline's lap. Delacroix had focused on Jacqueline's curls and the roundness of her eyes, but she wasn't happy with his depiction of her wide cheeks or her strong jaw and mouth. The sketches accentuated her less-than-feminine features. He had also insisted on portraying her bosom rather décolleté, despite the fact she wore a travel coat. Thank goodness he hadn't seen her without her coat: Her arms, large and firm and muscular from years at the forge, would have made him wonder if she were a woman at all.

"Delacroix is probably on his way to Nohant to referee the bouts between Madame Sand and Chopin." She chuckled drily. "Shall we demand payment if our likenesses end up on display in a certain someone's salon?"

Angélique's ears perked up and flickered; she pawed at them and whined. Sliding from the seat, she panted her sudden anxiety. Jacqueline stood to leave their coach, watching as several second- and third-class passengers, mostly men, passed the forward first-class cars to see what had stopped the train. None of the other first-class

passengers seemed curious enough to leave their coaches. Angélique leapt from the car. Jacqueline was about to step down but halted when her poised foot knocked a tall grey hat off a gentleman hurrying past below the rail bed. She managed to catch the hat.

"I'm so sorry," she cried.

"Your pardon, mademoiselle," he said at the same time. "I didn't see —"

He broke off his sentence with a dazzling smile as he looked up into her face. "Madame Duval? What a pleasure to meet you!"

Jacqueline didn't recognize him and could not fathom how he would know her. She turned her head and mumbled, hoping to avoid conversation.

"From the Brussels Exposition last year?" he pursued. "Forgive me, we haven't met, but I found your presentation on the conservation of engine emissions fascinating."

Jacqueline looked again to assess his features. She was never good with names unless they came attached to commissions for her engineering designs, but she considered making an exception for this man. He was older than she, probably by at least ten years, and his wild, curly blond hair suggested he was of that fashion called "Romantic" by the effete. He stood tall and muscular, with a long, earnest face, clean-shaven, bright brown eyes, a Greek nose, and a bow to his upper lip that fascinated her as he smiled hopefully. Jacqueline curtsied with a slight nod, and she couldn't help returning his smile with equal warmth. "Please," she said, "just Duval."

"Alain de Guise," he returned. "I work with the railway. Your designs are quite revolutionary, if you don't mind my use of the word."

She smiled even wider, blushing. "At least two investors thought so as well."

"Ah, that explains why the prefect was so interested in you," he said. "I let him know his error. Imagine France's foremost engineering genius stealing some bauble from a Moroccan prince."

Jacqueline's breath caught. Angélique whined and circled. Embarrassed for her sister's sake, Jacqueline curtsied again and excused herself, but de Guise stayed where he was and extended his hand. "Please allow me."

Jacqueline gathered her skirt and petticoats and accepted de Guise's hand to guide her down the steps. He caught her as she jumped from the bottom step, holding onto her waist until she regained her balance.

Unaccustomed to such intimacy, Jacqueline pulled away. De Guise then offered his arm.

She considered it with a growing sense of discomfort. "Thank you, but I need —"

Angélique nosed between them and pushed Jacqueline forward. De Guise stared in astonishment as Jacqueline set her hand on the wolf's head instead of on his arm.

"Thank you again, Monsieur de Guise," she called as she took her leave of him.

Mud pulled at her short boots and splattered her stockings and hem as she hurried forward. De Guise followed, which made her worry she had offended him, for he had been nothing but charming for those brief moments. Surprisingly, she rather enjoyed his attentions. But for the nonce, she was more concerned with the annoyance of the delay.

"If I'm eating supper at midnight, I shall be very put out."

Angélique snorted an agreement.

Jacqueline's complaint was mollified somewhat when she came around the front of the great green locomotive and saw what had halted the train. The men who had gathered formed a wide circle beside the track, ignoring the engineer's admonitions to keep back. As she pushed her way forward, they parted to allow plenty of room for the she-wolf at her side. Jacqueline smirked, sensing their dilemma in deciding which was the more bizarre sight, the girl and her wolf or the metal form lying across the tracks, clanking almost as much as the locomotive. Its legs jerked and twitched as if an interior engine had caught somehow.

"A mechanical man?" she said, puzzled.

"Please, madame, return to your coach." The engineer turned to de Guise, "Just came barreling up the rails, sir. I couldn't avoid it. It fairly threw itself at the locomotive."

"That's all right, René. We're all safe. That's what matters."

At this exchange, Jacqueline took a second glance at de Guise, evidently someone of status in the railroad. She thought she knew everyone associated with the Paris-Orléans, from executives to designers to coal-stokers. Still, his name was not familiar, and surely if they had met, however briefly, she would have recalled that lovely smile.

The automaton hammered its fists into the rail, refocusing Jacqueline's attention. As the engineer continued conferring with de Guise, Jacqueline ventured closer to examine the clockwork mystery.

A suit of armor but cast in something far heavier. Not iron. Bronze perhaps? That would make for an incredibly heavy machine for any delicate clockwork drive, yet the form was too refined to contain a full set of mechanical engines. A full two and a half meters in length—or rather, height when it stood—with a barrel chest and well-defined limbs of burnished metal, the machine probably weighed a bit more than a hundred kilos.

Jacqueline knelt beside the figure to feel the armor.

“Careful, mademoiselle,” a conductor warned, blocking her with his arm. “It’s very hot. You’ll burn yourself.”

Jacqueline moved his arm aside. The calluses on her fingertips protected her from much of the heat, and her gloves, though trimmed in dainty lace, were thickly padded with insulation, a precaution she’d devised to protect herself from her own impulsive curiosity in cases such as this. Nevertheless, she tested warily. Bronze indeed, and extremely hot.

The arms and legs were cylindrical and articulated, attached to the metal torso in cogwork designed to regulate speed. The torso seemed surprisingly slender for so ambitious a machine. She could not figure out how any system of steam or coal fuel could be tucked away in so small a confinement. The head resembled a helmet similar in construction to a diver’s casque, with a hinged faceplate riveted shut. Three dials notched by degrees sat positioned where the left ear would be, with two gauges in place of the right ear. The needle of the upper right gauge hammered emphatically into the red, while the lower gauge’s needle sat idle at zero, but since they lacked marking, she had no idea what they indicated. To Jacqueline’s shock, no vapors hissed from the rivets along the body’s seams.

“The pressure is tremendous. No regulators? That’s insane. But what powers the boiler?” she muttered. “I hear no pistons, no engine. It will explode at any moment without some system to...”

She tried to turn the form over, to the gasps and protests of the gathered crowd.

The engineer spluttered. “Mademoiselle, the danger! Come away now.”

But Jacqueline remained intent on the automaton. “Help me, monsieur. It’s far too heavy for me alone.”

“Please, Madame Duval,” de Guise argued. “Let us worry about this machine.”

"But I'm not worried," she replied. "Won't someone help me?"

Three dashing fops came forward to help, one wrapping his hands with his cravat, the others using riding gloves. Over the engineer's protests, they rocked the massive body until it finally heaved to its back with a violent clatter. The fops backed off again, congratulating one another's masculine show even as they skittered away.

Jacqueline wiped the glass faceplate and tried to peer into the suit to find the secret of its workings. White vapors swirled about inside the casque, but just as the train's billowing smoke had obscured the countryside on her ride, the vapors confounded her view.

"There's nothing here. Nothing I can see. Perhaps lower? Behind the breastplate? If I could open..."

Her voice trailed off as the vapors suddenly coalesced to the image of a face, deathly grey sunken flesh, like one recently dead. The shifting vapors obscured any details of its features except its eyes, wild and terrified, pleading in an awful expression of agony and anguish. They met Jacqueline's gaze in wordless communion. As their awarenesses connected, the erratic clanking of the bronze suit eased. She caressed the glass, half in fear, half in consolation. The figure's taut lips moved, but Jacqueline couldn't make out the silent words.

"A pry bar," she cried. "Please, we must open this casque at once."

At the urgency in her voice, the crowd backed even further, fearing the machinery would indeed explode as she had said. The engineer folded his arms and shook his head.

De Guise came forward to stand behind Jacqueline. "A pry bar, please, René."

The engineer glared, but he stomped back to the locomotive and returned with the large tool, which he grudgingly handed to de Guise.

"Will this do?" de Guise asked, offering it to her. "Or shall I?"

Jacqueline grabbed the bar from him and placed its claws at the seam of the faceplate, catching a rivet. The figure within began to thrash, desperate to be freed from the confining helmet. The entire form rattled all the more.

Behind her, Angélique gave a low moan. Jacqueline ignored her sister's warning, intent on the eyes behind the glass. She tried leaning to the pry bar, but her corset, with its steel-and-bone stays, prevented her from bending enough to gain leverage.

"Such a stupid fashion," she grumbled.

She threw off her travel coat and reached around to untie the lacing knot, fumbling through the fabric of her skirt to undo it. The few women in the crowd cried out aghast and moved away from the scandalous scene, dragging their escorts with them. The younger men laughed, catcalling.

Again, de Guise came close and assisted her, unknotting the laces and loosening them. "I only wish to help," he reassured her. He even took up her coat to cover her again.

Jacqueline didn't answer, too engrossed with her goal to be embarrassed. She drew a deeper breath, braced her stance, and pressed to the pry bar once more. This time she succeeded. The rivet popped, and the faceplate flew open.

A high-pitched scream more ghastly than the locomotive's whistle burst from the bronze mechanical man. The compressed vapors billowed from the opened mask in an explosion of steam and sound. As the others fled with echoing cries, de Guise pulled her closer. Jacqueline covered her ears, keeping her eyes fixed on the surreal sight before her. The pressure gauge dropped to five hundred, two-fifty, and finally zero as the vapors within cleared, revealing nothing. Literally, nothing. No face, no form. No more than a shriek fading on the summer breeze.

Restrained by de Guise, Jacqueline leaned closer to peer inside the casque. From the depths, a skull peered back, gleaming white, polished, as it were, affixed atop a copper pipe that disappeared down into the cavern of the chest.

"Did you see that?" she cried. "Did anyone see that?"

She looked to de Guise, but he shook his head, confused.

The engineer stepped closer, his demeanor more respectful. "I saw you released the pressure, mademoiselle, preventing this machine from destroying the track and killing us." He gazed about as if expecting to spy the perpetrator of such ruination lurking at the edge of the field, behind the goats, atop the dike. "Canal drovers sabotaging the rail, most likely. Would have killed us all."

"Angélique?" With her keener senses, Jacqueline hoped her sister could confirm that something — *something* — had escaped the metal automaton.

Angélique howled, long and low, then glared. She huffed in disgust and slunk back to where Delacroix stood by the engine, swiftly sketching the tragic scene before him, likely through his Romantic lens:

portrait of the lady and her armored knight dying in her arms amid the billowing breath of a great green dragon. Angélique *whoofed* at him to get his attention, wagging her tail and prancing in invitation. He grinned, following her away from the crowds and into the meadow.

Jacqueline watched them go with frustration. Of all times for her sister to play the bohemian grisette!

She smacked dust from her gloves. "I should like this machinery placed among my luggage in the guard's van. Are your bogies strong enough to bear it?"

Exasperated, the engineer yanked off his hat and wiped his brow with it. "Madame, have you not done enough to delay us?"

Jacqueline knew better than to lose her temper, though she, in fact, had resolved the delay, not caused it. She smiled sweetly, batting her lashes. "Please, monsieur. Surely someone will indulge me in this whim?"

"Herz, Hoog, help me with this thing," the engineer called to the stoker and the conductor, who had held back.

De Guise said, "Are you sure you are not making a mistake, madame? By rights, I should convey this to the offices at the Gare d'Orléans, but I recognize that you are foremost a clockwork engineer and more likely to figure out the nature and purpose of this machine."

"I am sure of nothing except what I saw."

She extracted herself from de Guise's grip and tried to re-tie her corset and adjust her skirts, bothered by her disarray now that she'd accomplished her goal.

De Guise laughed quietly. "You do manage to get your way, don't you?"

Jacqueline grinned. "I do. But I can't help it. A machine of such intricacy that I didn't make myself? A puzzle! I must know more about it."

And softer, to herself, she added, "And about the poor soul that roiled in its furnaces."

De Guise escorted her as she oversaw the transport of her newfound prize and helped her into the guard's van to watch over it. When the locomotive whistle blew to signal departure, he turned to her with regret in his gaze.

"You amaze me so," he confessed with a chuckle. "I hope we shall meet again soon. Then you must tell me what you learn about this automaton."

He took her hand, still gloved and now filthy from her work, and pressed it to his lips. At her quiet gasp, he said, "I have held you close twice today. You must allow me a kiss."

He moved off before she could find her voice to reply. Without a doubt, had she been fitted with gauges like the automaton, they'd also be hammering at the red zone.

Jacqueline looked around for her sister and caught sight of her at Delacroix's side, wandering back from the tall meadow grasses. Jacqueline shook her head. Despite the mystery and wonder of the clockwork man, her sister—as usual—pursued more carnal pleasures with real men. Jacqueline had hoped Angelique's latest escapade in Paris would have tempered her compulsive self-indulgence. But, no... 'I'm bored, grab a partner and hie off to the meadows.' Clearly Delacroix was amenable to the distraction. Given Angelique and Delacroix both frequented the bacchanalian revelries of Paris salons, the artist probably recognized Angelique's amber eyes. Perhaps even knew of her unique nature. Perhaps had even enjoyed her womanly favors before that day.

Angélique paused at the third-class car, sensing Jacqueline in the van behind it. She whined querulously at Jacqueline's choice of seating and continued to their first-class coach with Delacroix rather than join her sister.