

“Jacqueline Marie-Claire Duval de la Forge-à-Bellesfées?”

The courier read the address from the package he held, then eyed Jacqueline doubtfully. In her filthy leather trousers, quilted insulated gloves, leather apron, with dirty strands of honey-blonde hair peeping out from her welding cap, and modified safety spectacles she called “gogglers” dangling around her neck, she hardly appeared to be the intended recipient, a mistress of a petit château in the Loire valley.

When Jacqueline scowled, he proffered the package.

“Any response?”

Nothing identified the sender. She tugged off her gloves to fish in her pocket for some change and handed a few coins to the courier. He gasped with an incredulous “Merci mille fois!” before scampering away.

Jacqueline’s twin, Angélique Aurélie, met her at the doorway of the château, still barefoot in her peignoir, her hair loosed, and eating an apple. Angélique was always eating these days, barely five weeks into her expectancy.

“You gave him too much for the service,” she said.

Jacqueline focused on the package. “It never hurts to spend a few francs locally, as long as I have them.”

“But your finances are bound by the Assizes. What if you lose to that lying, porcine piece of lard?”

“Then I’ll sell more designs.” Jacqueline set her gloves on the receiving table to better examine the delivery. “The lawsuit is before the King now, and I did save his life. Twice. I think he’ll show clemency. I’ve been knighted, and all evidence in this stupid suit exonerates me. So, despite Rodolphe Armand being a friend to the King, and even though French law never favors

women, the King has to see reason.”

Angélique merely scoffed. “So then, what’s the package?”

Jacqueline untied strings and opened the brown paper wrapping to find a portfolio stamped with the initials EG. Inside the worn leather case was a collection of designs for an updated locomotive engine for the Paris-Orléans Railroad. Curious, she set those aside and read the accompanying letter.

Angélique picked up the gloves, touching fresh globs of solder. “What are you working on?”

“I’m rebuilding your clarinetist,” Jacqueline replied, still reading.

Commented [DM1]: Yay!

Angélique peered over her shoulder. “That doesn’t look like my clarinetist.” She took the designs to peruse. “You master the École Polytechnique at thirteen years of age, sell over three hundred commissions before you graduate, take first place in every exposition, and somebody wants you to make a train? That’s a little beneath you, no? Or do you think you’ll lose the suit and need the money?”

Jacqueline chuckled. “Ernest Goüin doesn’t need anyone’s help building a locomotive, mon Ange. However...”

Her brow furrowed as she reread the letter and scanned the designs again. “I think de Guise must have sent him my way.” She sighed in annoyance. “Ghosts. Sorcerers. Revenants. Vampires. Assassins. Shall we add haunted trains to our list of misadventures?”

Commented [DM2]: Fun!

“Don’t forget us lycanthropes.” Angélique pointed an elongated finger to the expanded sun-glasses covering her wolf-eyes in tinted glass and winked at Jacqueline. “Does that say fifty thousand francs? Ooh! Let’s have a look.”

Angélique parked the apple in her teeth and took the papers from Jacqueline. She *hmp*,

*hmp, hm-hmmped* as if reading aloud. Her eyes then widened and she pulled the apple from her mouth.

“Blood coating the machinery? The most frightful of agonized cries?” She returned the papers to Jacqueline. “What does he suppose you can do about it? You defused and rebuilt a renegade automaton, so he thinks you can resolve a haunting?”

**Commented [DM3]:** Repair doesn't feel like the right word. End, perhaps? Or resolve?

“I have no idea.” Jacqueline untied her heavy apron and smacked it down on the receiving table beside her gloves. “But I will have a little chat with dear Alain.”

“Ah, no.” Angélique caught her sleeve. “When you call him ‘dear Alain,’ I know you’re charging into a fight.”

Jacqueline huffed. “We never fight.”

“*He* never fights. That doesn’t stop you from starting them.”

Angélique laughed, pressing a finger against her twin’s mouth to silence a retort. With a wink, she returned Jacqueline’s apron and gloves to her.

“Go finish my clarinetist. Let me broach the topic with Monsieur le Railroad Agent to learn what I can without feathers flying. Don’t worry.” She brushed back her black-tipped tawny hair with a coquettish grin. “I won’t bite.”

**Commented [DM4]:** This makes it sound like A will go talk to him now while J fixes the clarinetist; but below A sits down at the piano when they reach the concert hall, instead of delivering her sister and going on to talk to Alain. Please address the perceived discontinuity.

“Bof. Since when are you the sensible one?” She waved her sister away impatiently.

“Since marrying a duke, becoming a grande dame of a great house in Britain, and owning the life of luxury and grace I have so richly earned.”

Finishing her apple, she flung the core out the front doors and wiped her hands on her peignoir.

“Very graceful,” Jacqueline said with a snort.

“I don’t really need a clarinetist,” Angélique said as she followed her on her way to the

music conservatory. “I played plenty of concerts all over Europe without a panharmonica or an orchestrion or anyone else.”

“Yes, yes, brilliant prodigy, outshining Thalberg, the favored pet of royalty and nobles throughout Europe.”

“Don’t forget stunning beauty,” she teased.

“Of course. With wolf eyes.”

“You could have those, too, if you’d join Llewellyn and me. Then we’d be twins again.”

“We’ve had this discussion. I’m content to let you be the wolf with all your other charms.”

“And I’m content to let you keep your silk armor instead of repairing my clarinetist,” Angélique returned. “It saved your life. You never know when another vampire will sweep into the Loire Valley.”

As they passed through the kitchens arguing, their housekeeper Marthe scowled, looking up from chopping vegetables.

“God forfend,” she scolded. “Another vampire? Why not another assassin to shoot at us? I don’t know how you girls get into such trouble.”

The twins each kissed Marthe’s cheeks and continued on past the kitchens, the pantry, and the servants’ wing into the music conservatory wing, up the staircase to the concert hall, where Angélique seated herself at her beloved Érard fortepiano.

“I thought you were going to speak to de Guise,” Jacqueline needled, returning to the cannibalized clarinetist of her clockwork chamber orchestra.

“I’ll get there. After practice.”

For the next half hour, life was as it had always been when they were children: Angélique

at the piano, Jacqueline at her machines. Contentment so filled Jacqueline she didn't notice when Angélique left the hall, but eventually her thoughts drifted from happy memories to the horrors described in Goüin's letter. Each drop of molten solder evinced the gory images, while the exuberant cries of her four protégées out on the lawn drifted through the open balcony windows and resounded in the concert hall as shrieks of terror.

She gave up after a few hours and went to find Alain de Guise, the intriguingly charming man who had captured her heart and changed her world. His smile could displace her dreadful imaginings.

The air was heady with the pungent fragrance of the grape harvest, which had begun in late August for the champagnes just after Angélique's wedding celebration and would continue through September. Dozens of villagers worked the vineyard from late afternoon until the next day's sunrise. At midday, a different round of workers hauled the carts of grapes to the winery for sorting before sending the vendange to the pressing room on Jacqueline's giant clockwork trucks.

She waved to the workers and watched for a few minutes. It always fascinated Jacqueline that they could strip the fruit and later cut the vines back to almost nothing, yet next year the harvest would be just as abundant or more so, and meanwhile, this vendange would produce the unique varietal wine of Bellesfées. Some ancient wisdom could likely be found in the metaphor, something about stripping away the past to have a future, growth from pain, all things in season. Jacqueline rarely wasted time searching for a philosophy; physics, chemistry, engineering, maths, logic—there were plenty of lessons to learn without digging for more.

Jacqueline found de Guise with Angélique, now fully dressed and coiffed, looking like the duchess she was, though still barefoot, seated at a table laden with a pique-nique luncheon in

**Commented [DM5]:** So... Angelique is the one who says she's going to talk to de Guise, but J is the one who seeks him out after that.... If that isn't going to happen before now, just have A divert J until she calms down instead of A saying she will do it.

**Commented [ED6R5]:** Two paragraphs up, J doesn't notice when A left the hall.

**Commented [ED7R5]:** And she's been working for a few hours.

**Commented [DM8]:** There appear to be some continuity issues here. The last you mentioned Angelique she was sitting down at the piano. No mention of her actions after that, yet here J finds de Guise with A. However you proceed, please just make it consistent.

Two paragraphs up, I say that J didn't notice when A left the hall.

**Commented [ED9R8]:**

the courtyard of the east lawn. Jacqueline's autonomous clockwork assistant, Monsieur Claque, stood patiently near de Guise, tiny puffs of steam emerging from the top of his casque-like head every few seconds. Tasked with assisting the convalescing de Guise, the giant automaton dutifully tended his patient, pouring wine and slicing meats and cheeses despite de Guise's assurance his aid was no longer needed.

Angélique's intended ward Têtue stood off to the side, her brawny arms folded and her wolf-eyes sharp, watching Llewellyn train three other young women in the art of knife-wielding. Jacqueline suspected the women requested the lessons only because the duke was a handsome, exotic **Welshman** with his long black hair, slender but powerful frame, and the same lupine eyes as Angélique and Têtue. On the other hand, two of the young women had wielded weapons against the formidable vampire Mircalla and survived, so it made sense they would want to further their training. Jacqueline took note of Llewellyn's sword across his chair at the table. That would be Têtue's preferred weapon, and her lesson had already ended.

The oldest of the four—boyishly sturdy, rough-edged, and muscular—Têtue had experience in ironworks and punch cards, having worked in several factories in her years of wandering once she left her brutal husband. Adèle Frontenac, a slender blonde, was a bright, well-educated woman at eighteen, and had quickly caught on to the nature of draughting, as well as mastering more complex formulae than the basic maths she had learned in the convent. Renée Guichet, seventeen and well-muscled from four years of house and yard work, was more facile at organizational tasks, having run her household finances for the past three years. Despite no formal education, she was a quick study under Frontenac's tutelage, and she did a splendid job of triaging and inventorying the salvage from Jacqueline's burnt-out workshop. She also had a knack for dressmaking and piecework, adjusting or redesigning Angélique's cast-off dresses to

**Commented [DM10]:** Why did I think he was Welsh? Or is it just that he would still be considered English because it is a territory?

**Commented [ED11R10]:** Yes, but avg. reader won't get it. I'll change it.

fit the four of them.

Unlike the others, fourteen-year-old Justine Montpellier had only recently risen from bed, bandaged from her head to her elbows after losing almost all the flesh on her face, head, and shoulders to the ravages of a young vampire's talons. Yet, Jacqueline was impressed by her gentle nature, her soft voice, her wide-eyed wonder, and her graceful, deliberate movements—even while brandishing a knife.

"You don't just jab or poke. Slide in, then a little slice to the side," Llewellyn told them, and demonstrated the technique. "This isn't a death cut, but it does hurt like the devil and is harder to heal."

The young women imitated his technique. While Frontenac advanced with confidence and Guichet moved with vengeful force, Montpellier applied a dancer's delicate fluidity. The women laughed at their accomplishments, surprised at the skills they acquired so quickly.

Jacqueline chewed at her cheek, however. She knew their personal talents had been sharpened by the blood they had been forced, unaware, to drink from Mircalla. The young women had yet to discover what other powers they might manifest. Jacqueline had pondered the appropriate moment to disclose the information to them and had decided to wait until they chose their roles at Bellesfées beyond "the Order of Duval," as Têtue called their little coterie.

What worried her further was the fact that Rodolphe Armand's suit against her had named Frontenac and Guichet as her accomplices in robbing him of over twenty thousand francs worth of machinery *two years earlier*. The fact she had not met the young women until a few weeks ago led her to believe the vampire's blood in them somehow factored into Armand's accusations, one of the reasons she had agreed to let the girls stay on, but she was not yet willing to accept his version of the truth. While Mircalla traveled through the aether, and likely had

**Commented [DM12]:** But the suit existed before the vampire encounter even took place, aside from the point you already made about the supposed event being before she met the girls, so doubly it doesn't make sense that they are included.

brought the young women through as well, people simply didn't travel back in time; that was a fact of science, and she preferred to hold fast to that.

Jacqueline came up behind de Guise and slipped her arms around his broad shoulders, resting her cheek on his unruly blond curls. The late summer sun had quickened his delicious spicy scent, and she breathed him in, satisfying some of her hunger and tempting another.

"The ladies are doing quite splendidly," he said, pointing to the martial lessons. "I'm most surprised at young Justine. She never should have survived her attack, yet there she is, ready to join the fray."

"You seem to be healing quite well too, my love," she murmured in his ear. "Has it really only been ten days?"

Ten days since Austrian assassins had shot at Louis-Philippe I, King of the French, striking de Guise instead. She didn't want to admit she was enjoying his convalescence, waiting on him, spending hours with him at cards or games or conversation, listening to harrowing tales of his exploits as an agent of the Sûreté Nationale. His deep, sonorous voice resonated through her whole body. A reticent man, he rarely laughed except when he was with her, but when he smiled, a serene warmth filled her. Their passionate nights of lovemaking had become quiet hours of slow, tender movements that surprised them both as they discovered one another anew. She didn't think she could have loved him any more, but each day brought more joys and insights that only bound her closer to him.

He caught her hands and kissed both palms. "And before you ask, chérie," he said, "I did not send Göün to you. I mentioned the haunted automaton you so cleverly managed that one glorious day in July only once, and that was on the day it occurred when I made my report. I know nothing of haunted locomotives." He shifted in his chair so he could pull her into his lap

**Commented [DM13]:** Ah... so you are setting up some time-travel shenanigans... but does that mean the girls were cited in the original suit from the beginning? If so, why no comment about that? There just seem to be some disconnects here that have to be resolved in some way or at least acknowledged if they are related to plot points we haven't come to yet.

**Commented [ED14R13]:** The first sentence of this paragraph states it.



for a lingering kiss. “But I can think of no one more suited to this particular conundrum, can you?”

Jacqueline traced the lovely bow of his upper lip that had fascinated her since the day they met. “I yield to your gentle persuasion, my love.” She then added, “However, I would appreciate the assistance of my sister who, apart from her skills at tempering my temper, has a nose much keener than mine at sniffing out otherworldly intruders.”

Têtue, with her heightened sense of hearing, stalked over to quickly dash the suggestion. “I’ll do that, Duval. Her Grace shouldn’t be risking herself in adventure.”

“Têtue, I’m with child, I’m not dying,” Angélique said with a laugh, plucking up another slice of peach and slurping it down. “And I’m not that far along at all. Just because I’ve been sick every morning...”

She trailed off, then rallied again. “Although I felt pretty good yesterday and today, so perhaps that’s passed.”

Têtue frowned. “This early, there’s always a risk. You’re twenty-three years old, not a young bride. You say you’re not far along, but wolf blood... Who knows how that changes things with us? Most women don’t know they’re pregnant until after a few months, not weeks. You’re already showing. And you can’t fool me, remember. I know when something isn’t right.”

Her brown wolf-eyes narrowed on Angélique, reminding Jacqueline of every time her twin smugly showed off her lupine skills. Jacqueline enjoyed seeing someone else challenge her, especially when the words of caution came from Têtue. Like Jacqueline, the rough woman had a quick mind and a feel for machinery. If Jacqueline could have chosen a younger sister for herself, it would have been Têtue, but since Angélique had turned her to save her life, it was more fitting the young woman join the Llewellyns’ household as their ward.

**Commented [DM15]:** The repetition is a bit much. Please revise to minimize.

“You need to be more careful, Your Grace. I lost two before I even knew I was carrying.”

Angélique sobered. “I had no idea. I’m so sorry.”

Têtue shrugged in the slow Parisian way that signaled indifference. “Made it easier to leave. But then, I’m sure His Grace never beats you.”

Jacqueline shuddered, as she did each time she heard a new detail of one of her protégées’ miserable past. “No, His Grace does not beat her.”

She turned to Angélique. “Nevertheless, Têtue is right. You need to take better care of yourself, mon Ange, for your cub’s sake.”

“Then it’s settled.” Têtue folded her arms again. “Duval and I will handle the ghost train.”

“And I,” de Guise said. “I’ve been bored lounging around like a cheap bourgeois, as Llewellyn has called me. It’s time I earned my keep.”

A rush of anxiety prompted Jacqueline to hold him closer. “Are you sure? This doesn’t sound like anything you need to worry about.”

“Of course I’m sure.” He kissed her again. “My time on the railroads was not merely a covert identity, chérie. If there’s something endangering the security of the railroad, I’m curious to learn what it is and what I can do to help. And it will be good to see Goûin again.”

“I suppose it’s worth some investigation,” she mused. “Since I don’t have a workshop anymore, I don’t know when I’ll get back to any other productive work. I surrender. When should we go?”

“Go where?” Llewellyn asked, joining them. Drenched in sweat, he mopped himself down with a towel, his dark hair hanging loose from his tartan ribbon, his green wolf-eyes bright. His students flanked him, equally disheveled and aglow, gladly accepting the wine Llewellyn

offered.

“Orléans,” Jacqueline told him. “Têtue and I, with de Guise.”

“An outing in the city? Let’s all go. Angélique will be needing larger dresses soon.” He winked at his wife, but she still slapped his arm.

“Ooh, and the women should have their own wardrobes,” Angélique said. “It’s not fair to offer them a home and only give them handoffs to wear. A full trousseau.”

“I’d rather wear trousers,” said Guichet, “like Duval.” She ducked her head, reddening. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t ask.”

“Trousers, coat, and boots,” Frontenac amended. “Long coat with many pockets, like yours.”

Montpellier added, “Leather. For sheaths.”

“Yeah, sheaths,” agreed Têtue. “Good idea.”

“Sheaths?” Jacqueline sat up, startled. De Guise kept her from falling off his lap.

“Knife sheaths.” Guichet giggled. “Not those kinds of sheaths. Leather ones would be uncomfortable.”

Llewellyn spluttered his wine. He laughed aloud at the suggested image, then laughed harder at Jacqueline’s indignant reaction. He had to sit to catch his breath, knocking his sword to the ground.

“The Order of Duval has decided they wish to wear knives strapped to their legs beneath their skirts,” he explained, “either as garters or attached to their boots. I think it’s a splendid idea, and Frontenac and Guichet have experience working with leather.”

“Do you have the tools?” Frontenac asked.

“I think we were able to salvage a few punches and awls,” Jacqueline said, “but I can’t do

any riveting.” She rose, rubbing her brow. “And these stupid lumber strikes and secret ‘banquets’ are destroying my plans to rebuild the workshop any time soon.”

“Banquets?” asked Montpellier.

“That’s what they call the illegal gathering of the mill owners skirting monopoly laws,” she explained. “But let me do a quick inventory. I’m sure there’s plenty of leather and some buckles in one of the porters in the music conservatory.”

“And your finances?” Guichet reminded her. “The Assizes?”

She put her hands on her hips when Jacqueline turned a sharp eye to her. “Don’t pretend we’re ignorant of what’s going around here, Duval. It’s a serious concern. You can’t really afford to outfit us.”

Angélique laughed in delight, halting Jacqueline’s retort. “Ho, ho, ho, là! You are going to have a difficult time shepherding these little lambs, madame!”

“Ah, my love.” Llewellyn wagged his finger at his wife. “Lambs are innocent, and these women are cunning, shrewd, and dangerous. Four more beautiful fairies of Bellesfées.”

Jacqueline suffered their teasing, easing to a good-natured grin.

De Guise got to his feet slowly and stretched, rubbing his abdomen where the healing scar itched. He paused, gazing off to the east.

“Do you have your spyglass, Jacqueline?”

Curious, she took it from her inside pocket and handed it to him. He affixed it and focused, then said, “You have competition, chérie.”

He pointed, returning the glass to her. She espied a large aerostat with a long, blunt-nosed envelope, a boxy gondola, and a single screw propeller at the rear. However, unlike her own airship *Esprit*, with a specially designed hermetic fueling system, this inelegant aerostat emitted

black clouds from its engines, probably using coal as its source of fuel, as it headed southeast.

“Are those gun ports?” she cried. “Is this a new military weapon?”

He shook his head. “I’d have known of its development if it were.”

She closed the spyglass and wrinkled her nose. “I’m anxious to meet the commander of this vessel. I could teach him a thing or two about flying an airship without befouling our vineyards.” Under her breath she muttered, “Foute alors.”

Têtue sniggered at the foul obscenity from her mentor, then stifled it as the housekeeper Marthe appeared to clean away the orts and refill the pitcher of water.

“Language, ma fille,” Marthe scolded. “Working in a forge is no excuse.” When she caught Llewellyn mimicking her, she raised a threatening finger at him before going back inside, passing her son Jean-Paul on his way out.

Jean-Paul handed Jacqueline a calling card, grinning at Montpellier. “How are you today, Mademoiselle Montpellier?”

She lowered her gaze. “I’m well, thank you, Jean-Paul.”

The youth nodded to the others briefly, but he waved to Montpellier as he returned to the house. Guichet nudged Frontenac, and the two tittered.

Jacqueline studied the card with a frown. “Frontenac, this concerns you.”

The three younger women looked at one another in alarm. When Têtue sniffed the air, she growled, ready to confront danger. Frontenac threw her shoulders back, awaiting a blow.

“You’ve been expecting this, haven’t you?” Jacqueline noted.

Têtue leaned closer to see the card. “‘Gaspard Frontenac.’ Your father? How’d he find you?”

“He probably heard reports of missing girls returning from Bellesfées,” de Guise

answered. “Angélique certainly made the name Jacqueline Duval legendary enough from here to Chartres.”

Jacqueline *tsked*. “I knew that was a mistake.”

“It wasn’t,” Têtue argued. “You deserve legends and more. So, how do we save Frontenac from her father?”

Jacqueline raised a brow. “Save?” She pursed her lips. “Frontenac, do you need saving?”

Frontenac didn’t seem to be a damsel in any distress, but Jacqueline was aware of many types of distress women faced in 1843 France.

“Yes,” Frontenac admitted quietly. “That is, I don’t wish to return to my father’s house.” Her eyes slid to glance at de Guise before she went on. “It’s not like here. I’ve met your father. I’ve seen the way he loves his daughters, unconditionally, trusting you both to own your own lives.” She winced. “He’d do better cutting me off and hiring a housekeeper. Then he wouldn’t have to pay a dowry to a man I haven’t even met.”

A soft gasp escaped Montpellier. Frontenac put her arm around the younger one’s waist.

“Yes, he’s engaged me to a perfect stranger, but there’s something suspicious about this arrangement he’s made.” Her voice took on a determined edge. “Besides, I want more than marriage. I want to learn. I want—more than he wants for me. I want what you have, Duval, Your Grace: an education and the means to use it.”

De Guise and Llewellyn both laughed and waggled their fingers at their respective mates. Jacqueline accepted the accusation, while Angélique feigned indignation. But the three younger women awaited Jacqueline’s response nervously. The drilling of woodpeckers, chortling of larks, and woodwind warbling of thrush in the nearby woods filled the tense silence.

Commented [DM16]: beautiful