

LITTLE SAINTS, FORCE MAJEURE

*From* THE INGREDIENCE SERIES

(Excerpt: Chapters 1-4)

I.

“*Voilà !* I found it, over here. Michel, where are you?” Beryl stamped a small foot impatiently.

“Coming, pet,” a male voice responded, and Michel stepped onto the path to join her. “How can your voice carry that cross tone on this gorgeous day?” He brought his arms around her. “I’ve been to Père Lachaise more times than I can recall, but never have I seen it under such a perfect, clear blue sky.” He nuzzled her neck. “It must be the company.”

Beryl giggled softly. “I’m not cross, I’m just excited. This is my first time here, and I always swore one day I would visit Oscar Wilde’s memorial.”

“Not a unique goal,” Michel said, motioning toward the crowd that surrounded the great writer’s monument.

“I suppose not. But my father was a huge fan, he collected everything he wrote. He was from the same part of Ireland as Mr. Wilde. I think that was one reason he liked his work so much. He always wanted to come here someday to pay his respects. Before he died, I promised

I would make the pilgrimage for him.” She blinked away the tears that had started to form in her hazel eyes.

“A lovely gesture.” Michel looked up as the crowd dispersed. “*Alors ... here’s our chance.*” They moved closer and stood before the monument, admiring its design ... the modernist angel, the epitaph from Wilde’s poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*:

*And alien tears will fill for him*

*Pity’s long-broken urn,*

*For his mourners will be outcast men,*

*And outcasts always mourn.*

Michel broke the silence. “And now you must follow tradition, for you and your father.” He gave her shoulders a squeeze.

Beryl smiled and opened her purse. She dug out her makeup bag, opened her compact mirror and applied a generous swipe of lustrous, red Chanel lipstick to her full lips. She stepped up to the monument and, like so many others before her, pressed her lips to the stone and kissed, leaving a perfect imprint.

“The most voluptuous kiss Monsieur Wilde has ever received. See how jealous his neighbors are.” Michel waved an arm, indicating the surrounding monuments and markers.

Beryl laughed. “You are a smooth talker, Michel. And you were very sweet to bring me here today. I know it’s no big deal to Parisians, it’s kind of a typical touristy thing to do—”

“Nonsense, we Parisians are very proud of our sites.”

“You know what I mean. Growing up in London, I never knew whether I’d make it to Paris for a visit, much less live and work here.”

“A model can live anywhere she chooses.”

“A *successful* model.”

“For one so new to the business, look how well you’ve done. You’re here, you’re working, you’re just what Paris needs.”

“You really are too kind!”

“I’m serious. We may have some of the major influential fashion designers in the world, but where have many renowned models come from? Naomi Campbell, Jean Shrimpton, Twiggy, Kate Moss.”

“Yes, my Brit comrades,” Beryl grinned. “I suppose London will take me back if Paris doesn’t fall in love with me.”

“*Non*, I won’t let you go.” Michel drew her close. “I’ll keep you here one way or another.”

“Very persuasive,” Beryl whispered, brushing his lips with hers. She melted into him as he kissed her passionately, crushing her to his chest.

“Pardon,” a passing worker interrupted them brusquely. “The cemetery is closing in ten minutes.” He continued on.

“Oh, I had no idea it was so late,” Beryl remarked.

“Come,” Michel said, taking her hand. “I cannot leave without visiting the Little Sparrow.” They dashed away from the Wilde memorial, toward Edith Piaf’s resting place.

A tranquil silence fell over the site as visitors threaded their way through the gravel paths leading out of the cemetery. In the mellow light of the late afternoon sun, the spring breeze rustling through the leaves, a tall figure stepped out from behind another monument, where he

had stood watching Beryl and Michel. He set his gaze on the direction they'd taken, eyes brooding, his sensuous mouth set in a frown behind the neatly groomed mustache. He brought a hand up and pushed back his sandy hair. His eyes still fixed on the couple's retreat, he moved closer to the Wilde monument, positioning himself where Beryl had stood to plant her kiss on the stone. He broke his gaze, took a handkerchief from his breast pocket, draped it over Beryl's lip print, and pressed firmly. He carefully pulled the handkerchief away and scowled at the crimson impression next to the monogram embroidered on the fine linen—G.B., Guy Benoit. He carefully folded the handkerchief, tucked it into a vellum envelope, returned it to his pocket, and once again sought the direction Beryl and Michel had taken ... his heart breaking all over again, as if for the first time.

“You're better off,” Guy's friends had assured him. “Should've found yourself a nice French girl. Once you've recovered from this, that's exactly what you should do.”

But none of his friends had told him how to go about recovering. The extraordinary feeling that started out as what he had thought might be the love of his life ... beautiful Beryl, an aspiring model from London, having landed a golden opportunity at the Haute Couture Fashion Show, her maiden trip to Paris ... he, an established photographer, hired for the same event by one of the designers who happened to be a fan of his work. Guy had never covered a fashion show before—he was more keen on photojournalism and had always considered fashion photography a little frivolous. However, as the event progressed, he realized how hard the models worked. His budding respect burst into full bloom when he first set eyes on Beryl. He couldn't say what it was about her that made her stand out from the scores of stunning women, models with varying levels of experience. But later, his series of photographs featuring Beryl

captured that elusive quality he had seen from the start and presented it to the world ... and the world responded in hearty acquiescence of his assessment. Guy's photos were instrumental in launching Beryl's career in Paris, one job offer following another. She was a far cry from supermodel status, but she was well on her way.

Her gratitude to Guy was boundless in those early days, and the two of them were seen together everywhere. What had gone wrong? Guy was never quite sure. He started to notice a cooling after about six months. She started taking longer to return his calls, sometimes didn't return them at all. Her tone became kind, maddeningly solicitous—the tone of voice that always means it's over.

Finally the horrible night of heavy rain, as he stood in a doorway across from her apartment building in the fourth arrondissement, waiting with the singular patience shared by private investigators and lovers who know they're losing and realize the time has come to remove the bandage with one swift motion. She had said she was tired and wanted to stay home alone that evening, to rest ... but he knew she was lying. He watched the building's entrance, rain streaming off the turned-down brim of his fedora, the streetlights dimmed by mist. He perked up at the sound of car wheels on the gleaming cobblestones, and he watched her emerge from the taxi ... he felt a fresh sting in his heart as he recognized her escort, a young waiter they both knew well from their favorite meeting place, Café Calvaire.

As the couple entered Beryl's apartment building foyer, he raised his camera, snapping what would be the first of many such photos. The clandestine collection grew quickly during the weeks that followed—grainy shots of Beryl and the waiter in restaurants, parks, secluded spots

along the Seine—and with each new addition, it occurred to Guy that he may have a future in detective surveillance.

On the day of confrontation, Guy presented Beryl with a book of the photos, beautifully bound. (He had gone to great pains to catch her at her worst—a challenge, given her natural beauty. Only an expert photographer would've known how to emphasize what she considered her flaws.) He had been mildly surprised at the intensity and range of her reaction—shock, denial, hysteria, anger, regret—all of which fell on deaf ears. He had honed his nonchalance, and he now held it over her, steadfast, as she tearfully begged him to forgive, forget, and to destroy the evidence.

He took some grim pleasure as the photos slowly circulated. The designer who had hired Guy for the fashion event denounced Beryl publicly, and a significant number of doors were closed to her. Regardless of her earlier success, she would never be a Parisian, and Guy was one of their own. Eventually, the waiter returned to Café Calvaire, dropping Beryl for a young student of the Sorbonne; Beryl picked up the pieces and resumed her career as best she could, the title of supermodel farther from her reach than before but not unattainable; and Guy returned to work, winning several competitions with less scandalous but equally powerful photojournalistic efforts. His friends congratulated him on his professional achievements, as well as the cool manner in which he had dealt with the 'English crumpet.' He had taken the high road, bravo, well done, *à votre santé*.

Guy had fooled them all.

His bitterness had thrived and he had nourished it, like an exotic deadly flower. He no longer documented Beryl's actions, but he continued his voyeurism as she worked to redeem

herself, his wrath increasing with every triumph in her career, with every new man in her life.

He had dealt her a blow, but she would be fine. While he died. Died inside, the same miserable death, over and over. Intolerable. He could not allow it to continue ...

“Monsieur.” The attendant’s voice broke into his thoughts. “The cemetery is closing. Five minutes.”

The sweet spring breezes, the carefree sunshine that makes the heart ache ... Guy slowly shook his head. This latest paramour of hers, this Michel, he was right. Guy, too, had been to Père Lachaise many times, but never had he seen it look as beautiful as it looked today. Michel’s observation was through the eyes of love; Guy’s was through a sense of resolve, of vindication. He patted the pocket containing the handkerchief. His exposé on Beryl’s infidelity had been a start. Now he had what he needed for the conclusion of his revenge. One more fire to light, a spark that would be ignited far from Paris ... to the south, down to the sea.

His recent freelance assignment in the Camargue had yielded more than a striking series of photographs capturing the region’s unique beauty and wildlife, attributes that had inspired Van Gogh and Gauguin. He also had met fascinating people, otherworldly people ... people who know the power of belief, the power of faith ... people who understand how to navigate the unknown when the familiar proves inadequate for fulfilling needs, desires. Particularly fascinating were the two men he had met at a cocktail party held by one of his clients after the shoot had wrapped up.

The party was elegant, everyone in evening dress, which made the pair stand out even more. Guy overheard someone say that one of the men was Moroccan, the other *Cigano*, a Romani from Portugal. Guy watched them with interest as they circulated through the crowd,

introducing themselves, talking softly. Before he had a chance to speak to them, the hostess called everyone to attention, explaining that the Moroccan—Bokor Ghireza, as he was called—had agreed to entertain with a demonstration of his talent. She brought him to the front of the room, the lights were dimmed, and he began. Throughout the demonstration, Bokor Ghireza did little talking; the Cigano, whose name was Rascasse, played master of ceremonies with cheery aplomb worthy of a carnival barker. At first, Guy watched with everyone else, bemused, anticipating the usual parlor tricks or sleight of hand. But soon, to his astonishment, he rescinded that assessment. What a revelatory experience! Bokor Ghireza, his expertise with magic, his hypnotic power, took a subtle hold on the entire room. No one was immune to his spell. The voice of Rascasse smoothly shifted from confident bark to a purr, almost seductive, the ideal accompaniment to Bokor Ghireza's eerie command of his subjects' actions. The demonstrations were harmless enough, volunteers performing as instructed, then recalling nothing upon awakening. But the mystic's capabilities were disconcertingly apparent. The applause was thunderous, and somewhat uncomfortable. Bokor Ghireza had been a little *too* good.

Guy had lingered afterward, talking at length with the two men. Bokor Ghireza knew of Guy's misery even before Guy could name it. *Oui*, he had assured him; he knew what could be done, and what would be required to do it.

Now Guy had what he needed.

Beautiful Beryl. It was almost a pity. Almost.

With a parting glance toward the Little Sparrow's memorial, Guy turned and strolled in the opposite direction, along a path leading to the cemetery's exit. He took a deep breath. Now

that he had what he needed, he could relax a little, could even look forward to meeting his friends later. A thought occurred to him, and he spun on his heel and returned to Oscar Wilde's monument. He kissed his palm and pressed it against the cool granite. He returned to the path, walking briskly as the closing bell rang. Perhaps it would bring him luck; he had always been fond of the works of Oscar Wilde.

\* \* \*

Two days later, Guy stood before the Hôtel Le Negresco, on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, smoking a cigarette. His eyes darted impatiently down the street, first one direction, then the other. Noon, the instructions had said; where was that blasted Cigano? He dropped his cigarette to the sidewalk, stamped it out, checked his watch again. At last, he saw Rascasse, approaching from the west. "You're late," Guy mumbled.

"Five minutes, maximum." Rascasse was in his mid-thirties, short, stocky, with a thick growth of beard and eyes so dark, they almost appeared black. He was wearing the same clothing he had worn to the cocktail party, a three-piece brown tweed suit that had been expensive when it was new. Still, its shabbiness went unnoticed against its wearer's confidence. His reckless air wasn't lost on the ladies, while men, soon after making his acquaintance, inadvertently studied his speech and mannerisms. Within the brief time it took him to charm a room, he was able to take advantage and pick pockets to his heart's content. But he hadn't needed to resort to such tawdry tricks since he had teamed up with Bokor Ghirezza.

Guy looked at him doubtfully. "You look different, what is it?"

"It's the time of day," the Cigano replied. "We met at a soiree, where the drinks were flowing, at a more civilized hour. I fare better from mid-afternoon on." He glanced up at the

elegant hotel. “You know, this hotel was founded by a Romani, like myself, Henri Negrescu. When I was a boy, my uncle told me we were distantly related to him, but I don’t believe it’s true. Monsieur Negrescu was from Romania. And I think he was only half Gypsy, anyway.” He shrugged. “Still, they say all Romani are related, so who knows?” He took out a small, spiral notebook and flipped a few pages. “Let’s see ... ah yes, Guy Benoit, the photographer. Issues with the fickle model, correct?”

“Correct.” Guy reached into his jacket and pulled out a thick envelope. “Everything is here, just as you instructed.”

“Cash, right? That was the deal.” Rascasse opened an end of the envelope and peeked inside. “Ah, good. Payment, the specimen, the photo ... hm, that wasn’t just your heart talking, was it? She’s quite pretty.”

“How soon will it happen?”

“Oh ... depending on Bokor Ghirezza’s workload, I’d say about three weeks.”

“And it won’t be traceable?”

“Absolutely not. There will be no signs whatsoever of wrongdoing.”

“And ...” Guy hesitated, “... you’re sure she’ll feel nothing?”

The Cigano arched a brow. “Do you want to go through with this or not?”

“Yes, yes, I do,” Guy hissed. “I just don’t want it to be ... drawn out unnecessarily.”

“It won’t. I promise.” Rascasse closed the envelope.

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“It’ll work.” Rascasse eyed Guy carefully as he brought out a pack of cigarettes. He took one and offered one to Guy. “Listen, amigo ... I can see you have your doubts. But you

saw what Bokor Ghirezza is capable of, you saw with your own eyes.” He lowered his voice. “I confess, more often than not, I’ve made my way in the world as a confidence man— ”

“*Sans blague !*” Guy said sarcastically.

“— so I understand why you would be leery of handing over your money to me, why you might hesitate to trust me. But I assure you, Bokor Ghirezza is the real deal. If I were to double-cross you, that would mean I would be double-crossing him ... ” he shook the envelope emphatically, “ ... and you’d have to pay me a great deal more than this to cross that Moroccan Svengali. He scares the hell outta me. So you can either choose to believe what you saw that night, along with what I’m telling you now ... or you can keep your money and we’ll forget the whole thing. If you choose the former, I guarantee you will not be disappointed in your investment.”

Guy cast his eyes out to the sea and fell silent for a few minutes, smoking pensively.

Finally, he said, “Let’s do it.”

“You won’t regret it. Bokor Ghirezza understands the pain of betrayal.” Rascasse held out a hand to shake.

Guy took the proffered hand, gripped it tightly and, with his other hand, deftly removed Rascasse’s watch. Rascasse started to protest and Guy gripped his hand tighter, silencing him. “This,” he said, holding up the watch, “is collateral. It’s not that I don’t believe you. Let’s just say, in my travels around the world, I’ve learned a few things about survival. When our transaction is completed, I’ll return this to you. I’ll send it special delivery, I’ll even bring it to you in person if you prefer.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Rascasse snarled. “Turn me loose.” Guy released him, and he rubbed his wrist. “I’ve half a mind to call the whole thing off,” he sniffed.

“Surely you don’t blame me for my trepidation.” Guy tucked the watch into his pocket. “Look ... I’m sorry if I was too rough. I was swindled a few years ago, I still get pretty sore when I think about it. I’ve learned to be cautious.”

“Just don’t lose that watch,” Rascasse snapped. “It’s got great sentimental value to me. If anything happens to it, I may go to Bokor Ghireza with a request of my own.”

Guy’s thoughts returned to the demonstration at the party, and he swallowed. “Maybe I was too harsh,” he relented, reaching in his pocket for the watch.

“No, no,” Rascasse said, holding up his hand. “What’s done is done.”

“Come on, don’t be a martyr about it.”

“No, keep it. Go ahead with your *collateral*. It’ll be a pleasure to be able to say I told you so.” He finished his cigarette and dropped it to the pavement. “I’ll be on my way. There’s work to be done, and frankly, I have had quite enough of your company.” He turned to leave.

“Rascasse, wait!” Guy stopped him. “I’m sorry. I acted like a thug. You’ve given me no reason to doubt you.” He took out his wallet. “Here, let me at least pay your car fare, or bus or train, whatever it was that got you here.” He pulled out a few bills. “Is that enough?”

Rascasse took the money and counted it. “More than enough. Very generous.” He pocketed the money and lightly tipped his hat. “*Adieu*.” He turned and walked away, whistling softly.

Guy watched him go, then looked up at the sky, as if noticing for the first time the brilliant sunshine, the cobalt sky, the intoxicating sea air. What a stunning day, and what a lovely

city! He had several hours to kill before returning to Paris; may as well enjoy himself for awhile. His spirits lifted at the thought, and he crossed the street, heading for the Promenade. He took Rascasse's watch out to examine it, and he stopped in his tracks. A Breguet! He hadn't expected something so luxurious. He looked closer and saw engraving on the back: *Te camelo*. He tucked it into a different pocket, one with a button. Mustn't take a chance on losing it; valuable collateral, indeed. He shook his head, as if to push the sordid business aside, and he picked up his pace, feeling like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

From the back seat of a taxi, Rascasse watched Guy's actions. "Be careful what you wish for, amigo," he whispered.

"Pardon, monsieur?" the driver asked.

"Nothing. Just thinking out loud."

"Are you ready to go now? Where to?"

"It's a rather long drive, I hope that's not a problem," Rascasse said.

"You're my first fare of the day. I'll take you to Toulon, if you like, it's your money."

"Not nearly as far as that. Just a village near Brignoles ... Alegranssa."

"Alegranssa? Never heard of it. But if you can direct me, I'll get you there." The driver switched on the meter, put the taxi in gear and pulled away from the curb, taking the main thoroughfare out of Nice, heading west. "Strange," the driver went on. "I thought I knew every village around here like the back of my hand."

"It's very small," Rascasse said, lighting a cigarette.

"So what's there? A good vineyard, a popular local cheese?"

“They do boast a decent little rosé,” Rascasse answered. “And the village is the starting point for some fine hiking trails. Other than that, not much. No tourist attractions to speak of. Of course, like most small communities, it has a certain personality about it that one can find quite charming.”

“Perhaps some literary material, eh? The Alegranssa Trilogy.”

“Nothing for Pagnol to write about, I fear,” Rascasse chuckled.

“Then perhaps a special someone ... am I right, monsieur?” The driver winked at Rascasse suggestively from the rear-view mirror.

“I suppose you could say that.”

“I knew it!” The driver held up a plastic coffee cup. “To Alegranssa.”

“*Oui*,” Rascasse smiled. “To Alegranssa.”

## II.

Alegranssa ... 'happiness' in old Occitan.

Situated in the Var department, about 40 kilometers inland from the Mediterranean Sea, the village of Alegranssa's population stood just shy of 3,000 residents. Nestled at the end of a long drive lined with plane trees, it boasted all the prerequisites of any self-respecting Provençal village: a charming square with a fountain; an excellent *boulangerie*; a designated area to serve as a playing field for a game of *pétanque*; and a colorful market every Friday that drew shoppers and vendors alike from the village itself and a few surrounding communities. Alegranssa had two cafés for hot and cold drinks, as well as lighter fare. The *pâtisserie* window constantly displayed temptations that would weaken the most dedicated abstainer. A vineyard just west of the village had recently received a 94-point rating for its product from a prestigious international wine critic ... and Alegranssa's finest restaurant, Demang Matang, was owned by a talented chef who had attended Le Cordon Bleu. A shop in the square sold lavender products and Provençal fabrics; still another offered the miscellaneous jumble that thrift store aficionados worldwide find impossible to resist.

And yet, for all its attractions and its tranquil setting, fine hiking trails, and close proximity to *Park Naturel National de la Plaine des Maures* and the sea, Alegranssa never quite seemed to bring in the tourist trade that so many similar villages thrived upon. The citizens never dwelled on this state of affairs for long. What was the point? The village fared well enough without extensive tourist trade. Once in awhile, however, a local merchant would grow weary of watching customers enter his place of business, only to ask directions to Saint-Tropez, Cannes, or Aix-en-Provence. Sometimes travelers would arrive late enough in the day to be

convinced that a fresh start the following morning would be optimal. Then Alegranssa's Hotel Rosa would put out the red carpet, Demang Matang would court with its finest dinner menu and splendid outdoor terrace seating, and the cafés would send the tourists off the next morning, fortified with rich, aromatic coffee and fresh, flaky croissants. Unfortunately, this was more often the exception than the rule.

Then something happened that gave the villagers hope. A new business opened in the vacant shop east of the square—one that offered a product very popular in the South of France, but uncommon within the immediate vicinity of Alegranssa.

The little shop had seen myriad transformations throughout its existence. Built in 1622, it had started out as a cobbler's business. Its original construction was largely intact, with exposed beams, tiled floor, and a fine arched fireplace in the tiny apartment on the upper story. The showroom was small, lined with plenty of shelves to display goods. A rough-hewn oak cabinet stood at the end of the room, serving as an ideal space to hold a cash box or register, ledger books, and pads for taking orders from customers. Beyond the customer service station was a doorway with a boxwood beaded curtain—the entryway to a spacious studio workshop, where generations of artisans had spent hours crafting goods, repairing treasures, creating luxuries.

The crowning glory of the shop was its remarkable wooden door. Solid oak, created during the Renaissance, with intricate carvings of twining vines, grape clusters and fleurs-de-lis, it had been painted, repainted, stripped and varnished through the ages till it had acquired a deep, mellow sheen, attracting the eyes of antique hunters and tourists who happened to be passing through. Decorators and architects frequently proposed tempting prices to purchase the door. All were turned down; the door was not for sale.

The most recent offer came from a well-known interior designer, whose client—more celebrity than actress—had obsessed over the door since she spied it while filming in the area. It was exactly what her villa in Cap d’Antibes was screaming for, she insisted; nothing else would do. The designer had inquired and was refused, like so many before him. Returning to his client with the bad news, he brooded over the situation throughout the entire ride from Alegranssa to Antibes, unable to enjoy the stunning scenery of the Côte d’Azur. His client did not respond well when the answer was no. She’d had very little experience with not getting her way.

The history of Gardaire, the shop’s current proprietor, was far more enigmatic than that of the shop itself. No one knew exactly when he had arrived in their village, where he had come from, or how he came into possession of the shop. Some guessed he might hail from French Guiana, due to his soft, island accent. His age was difficult to determine. His skin was smooth and taut, the color of a chestnut, his physique diminutive and very trim. He wore his hair closely cropped, and his dark brown eyes shone behind wireframed glasses, eyes alive with a youthful interest in the world around him. His style of dress was a variation on *aikidogi*—a martial arts training uniform—wraparound jacket, belt, and loose-fitting drawstring trousers. Gardaire possessed a number of variations on this ensemble, all in lightweight cotton, dyed in soft hues. For the winter months, or for somber occasions, he appeared in subdued brown, deep blue, burgundy or black.

If anything belied Gardaire’s age, it was his hands—the gnarled hands of a lifetime craftsman. He jokingly told customers that he probably had worked as many jobs as the little shop had seen throughout its existence. But the work he loved most of all, he would add, was his work here and now: the occupation of *santonnier*—santon maker.

Santons, the beloved clay figurines depicting the nativity and Provençal culture, had been born during the French Revolution, when churches were closed and large nativity scenes prohibited by law. Jean-Louis Lagnel, an artisan from Marseille, crafted tiny, terracotta *santoun*—“little saints” in the Provençal language—allowing families to continue religious traditions within their homes, without fear of consequences. The tradition continued long after the Revolution, evolving into a family craft, passed along from parents to their children. What had started as an underground solution to religious oppression gradually became big business in Provence, with museums and annual fairs devoted to the much sought-after figurines.

Gardaire admitted that he had not grown up with the tradition, but everyone agreed he was a master. His santons gained popularity in a very short time, holding their own beside those of long-established *santonniers* of Provence. Keenly attuned to public demand and tastes, Gardaire often created custom pieces. Children would squeal with delight at seeing themselves replicated in lilliputian terracotta. An old woman shed tears at Gardaire’s santon based on photos of her cherished dog from her childhood. Responding with a barely audible ‘*merci*’ as she left the shop with her treasure, she headed straight home to add it to her elaborate *crèche*.

Gardaire had accomplished the near impossible—he had become an accepted member of Alegranssa’s community. Like many small towns and villages worldwide, Alegranssa was welcoming to visitors and eventually accepting of new arrivals only to the extent of cordiality; an outsider never completely lost the status of ‘outsider,’ particularly one from another country. Gardaire had broken the barrier. The one thing about him that confounded his neighbors was his disdain for publicity. His santons were so popular, he frequently received requests for interviews, often from high-profile publications or news magazines. Once, a young independent

filmmaker had approached him, proposing a short film about his business, showing him at work. Gardaire turned them all down, politely but firmly. He wasn't in the business of celebrity, he claimed, adding with a wry smile that he couldn't risk losing his soul to the spotlight's glare. He was content with business generated by word of mouth. His fellow citizens scratched their heads over this, exasperated; a little publicity would benefit the village as a whole. But Gardaire maintained his stance with such charm, his neighbors found it impossible to denigrate him for his choice.

His mind was made up on the matter. He no sooner would become the darling of the santon world than he would consider selling the shop's beautiful ancient door.

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"Gardaire?" Rascasse called as he entered the shop. He looked around, admiring the santons on the shelves. He picked up a figurine that caught his eye and examined it, a bemused smile on his face.

The boxwood bead curtain clattered as Gardaire entered the shop from the workroom.  
"Bonjour, Rascasse."

Rascasse held up the santon. "Who is this supposed to be?"

Gardaire approached him, looked at the santon, and nodded. "Ah! That one is called Marius. He's based on an amusing character from a book called *Tartarin de Tarascon*. He tells a lot of tall tales, turning situations to his advantage. Sort of a lovable scamp."

"That figures." Rascasse shook his head. "He looks like my father. Sounds like him, too." He set the santon back on the shelf. "How long have you been making these?"

“I’ve not been making santons for long. But I’ve modeled animals and people from clay since I was a child. It was a smooth transition.”

“Well, I congratulate you. They’re quite good.” He pulled the envelope from his jacket. “Here are the things you need. The money, too. Minus my cut, of course,” he added with a shrug.

Gardaire took the envelope. “Is the young man absolutely certain about this?”

“I gave him ample opportunity to change his mind. He’s sure.”

“Very well.” Gardaire opened the envelope and took out the photograph. “*Oui*. This should be simple enough. I’ll do my best to create something satisfactory. It’s almost harder to capture the pretty ones with even features, like this one. Others with discernable characteristics, like a prominent nose or a crooked smile ... those are easier. More distinctive.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine,” Rascasse said. “Looking around at all these santons ... you truly are an artist.”

“That’s enough of that. But *merci*,” he replied shortly. “I’ll take it from here.” He slid the photograph back into the envelope, and tossed it on the counter.

“If you need me, you know how to contact me.” Rascasse opened the door. As he did, three teenage girls entered. Surprised by the door opening before they could open it themselves, they burst into giggles.

“*Bonjour*, mademoiselles,” Gardaire exclaimed, beaming at them. He motioned to Rascasse. “My friend here was just leaving.”

“*Au revoir*,” Rascasse said to Gardaire. He smiled at the girls. “*Bonne journée*, mademoiselles.”

“*Au revoir*, monsieur,” one of the girls managed to reply, as her friends continued to giggle and blush.

“Now then,” Gardaire said after Rascasse had gone, “what can I do for you charming girls?”

“You tell him,” one said to another.

“No, you,” insisted the third one.

“*D’accord.*” The tallest girl, the one with the long brown hair, stepped forward decisively. “We would like a santon, monsieur. You make them special sometimes, is that true?”

“*Oui*, mademoiselle. If you want it to look like someone in particular, all you need to do is provide a good, clear, photograph, and I’ll do my best.” He scrutinized them for a moment.

“You wish for me to capture the likeness of a young man. Correct?”

The giggles began anew. “*Oui*, monsieur,” replied the girl with the black ponytail. She nudged the third girl, plump, with rosy cheeks and chestnut curls. “Marie, the photo, *tout de suite.*” Marie said nothing but took a sheet of paper from her backpack. She passed it to her friend, who handed it to Gardaire. “It’s a birthday present for our friend, Roxanne,” she explained. She motioned to the paper. “She’s very keen on him.”

Gardaire held up the sheet. “Tell me about him. Where did you get this picture, what’s he doing?”

“It was in our school paper,” the first girl said. “We photocopied it to make it bigger, so you could see him better. His name is Jean-Paul, he’s playing soccer. This was taken at a game where he scored the winning goal.”

“Ah, of course,” Gardaire said. “I can make it out now. So, he’s a sports hero, eh? Does he know that Mademoiselle Roxanne is sweet on him?”

“Oh, no, monsieur! She would rather die than have him find out.”

“Why is that?”

“Because, he’s very handsome, and always has lots of girlfriends. His girlfriends, they all are very popular, they have nice clothes, they’re beautiful, they dance ballet, have perfect grades. But Roxanne ... well ... she’s like *us*, monsieur. Ordinary.”

“Which is she? Ordinary, or like you? She cannot possibly be both.” Gardaire smiled as the girls stammered and blushed at this. “I’m sure the young man’s girlfriends are no better than you, or your friend Roxanne. Truth be told, they’re probably nervous and afraid of the same things you are. Exams ... what they’ll do when they graduate from school ... boys ... everything.”

“I don’t think so.” The second girl shook her head. “But it’s kind of you to say it.”

“Tell you what I’ll do,” Gardaire proposed. “Give me a month to complete the santon, then come back and collect it. Present it to Mademoiselle Roxanne, with Gardaire’s compliments. I’ll see if I can work a little magic into the santon. If the spirits agree to work with me on this, Mademoiselle Roxanne will receive an invitation for a date from Jean-Paul himself.” He winked. “My santons have been known to heal broken hearts. Just imagine what they can do for a *hopeful* heart.”

“Oh, monsieur!”

“But remember, magic doesn’t work all on its own. So when you give the santon to your friend, tell her she must have confidence in herself, even if she doesn’t feel it right away. And

that goes for all of you. You must promise you'll look in the mirror every morning and say, 'I'm as marvelous as the popular girls at school. The world just doesn't know it yet.' And be sure you smile at your reflection. Don't frown at something you see that you don't like. This is what we all tend to do, we focus on what we see as our flaws. Instead, find something you like, and smile about it. And on days you really cannot see anything that will convince you to smile ... think of something funny that always makes you laugh. Like a favorite joke, or a funny story." He raised an eyebrow. "Or the silly noise you all made when you entered my shop, enough giggling for ten girls." This made them laugh all over again.

"I can't do this, monsieur," Marie piped up. "I have two horrid brothers, and they'll make dreadful fun of me if they hear me talking to my mirror."

"Then merely think it to yourself, my dear," Gardaire suggested. "It will be just as powerful." He looked at all three of them, his expression solemn. "You must promise to keep your end of this bargain, or I cannot in good faith create the santon for your friend."

"But Monsieur Gardaire, what if we do all this and the magic doesn't work?"

Gardaire considered this thoughtfully. "Sometimes the spirits seem to refuse us when we ask things of them. But they always have good reasons. If the magic doesn't come through this time, they'll favor us later, on another request. Meanwhile, you'll have a little pleasant routine in the morning, which is something you don't have right now." The girls looked at each other and shrugged, nodding. "So will you promise to do it?"

"*Oui*, monsieur," they chorused. "And we'll make sure Roxanne does, too," the first girl added firmly.

“*Tres bien !*” Gardaire folded the sheet of paper and tucked it into a pocket. “Now, my remuneration . . . for I am a tradesman, and no one should ever work for free. You remember that for yourselves, too.”

The first girl opened her purse and brought out some money. “This was all we could get together, between the three of us. We can have more when we come to pick up the santon, if this isn’t enough.”

Gardaire smiled at their anxious, hopeful faces. “As luck would have it, this is just the right amount. I sometimes charge more than this for custom pieces, but I’m running a special for the next few days. Your timing was just right.” He took their payment, pulled a small notebook from his pocket and quickly scribbled an invoice. He tore the page loose and gave it to the first girl. “Your receipt. Come back in four weeks. And remember what you promised.”

“We’ll remember. *Merci ! Au revoir, monsieur.*” They spoke all at once, thanking him, then left the shop with the boisterous noise particular to teenage girls, surprising from creatures so young and petite.

Gardaire watched them from his window, smiling. Already they were walking a little taller. He always enjoyed the opportunity to bolster confidence in young people. He turned from the window and stepped behind the oak cabinet. He found his order book and wrote up the order for Roxanne’s santon. He took the picture from his pocket, unfolded it and examined it critically. This Jean-Paul, he looked all right—probably a little frivolous, but no more than would be expected of a teenage boy. Still, it was never too early for anyone to learn kindness. Gardaire could see to it that Jean-Paul spent an evening with Roxanne; if she developed sufficient confidence by then, perhaps fate would shine on her.

He clipped the photograph to the order and closed the book. His eyes fell on the envelope from Rascasse, and his smile faded. If only all the requests he received could be easy, pleasant ones. If only all that was expected of him were little boosts of confidence and observing their results ... the amusement of watching a young man notice for the first time a girl's adoration that had been smoldering for days, weeks, months. If only he could fill his days doing nothing more than savoring the glow he could conjure in a teenage girl's face ... simply by showing her a truth she was unable to see for standing too close.

He picked up Rascasse's envelope and took it into the workroom. Every job in the world has its ups and downs, its highs and lows, he told himself. He would complete this order first, then he would focus on the Jean-Paul santon. He had learned early in life to tackle unpleasant tasks first, and the rest would come easy.

He fell into the undertaking, his focus so intense, his work so diligent, that when he reached a good stopping point, he was surprised to look out the window and see that night had fallen. He saw in the window his reflection from the work lamp at the broad, heavy table. He remembered the instructions he had given to the girls ... and he smiled at what he saw.

## III.

“No! No, no, no! *Imbecile !*” The bartender threw his hands up, exasperated, imploring the heavens.

The young woman on the receiving end of his scolding burst into tears, snatched her white chef’s cap off her head and flung it to the checkerboard tile floor. “Enough! I can’t take any more! I *won’t* take any more.” Her slender, jackknife figure expressed her defiance, her alabaster face startling against the backdrop of blue-black hair.

“Come now, Veronique.” Tristan de Besse, the restaurant owner and *sous-chef*, spoke in a kindly tone as he approached the bar. “It can’t be as bad as all that. You have but one step in the process that you’re responsible for. How bad can it be?”

“I just can’t get it in my head, monsieur,” Veronique whimpered.

“It’s in your head, simpleton,” the bartender snapped. “Trouble is, there’s too much empty space up there. Any practicalities just roll about, unable to drop into place, like a child’s marble puzzle.”

“Sasha, please.” Tristan raised a hand. “Listen to me, both of you. I’ll grant, this process is a little convoluted. But the end result is a signature presentation of Demang Matang, outlined by our executive chef. It must be carried out precisely to specification. Now, the other steps are covered, Kat and Annabel are prepared. All that’s left is for you two to—”

“But my part is the hardest,” Veronique broke in. “It’s not fair.”

“You chose it, mademoiselle,” Tristan reminded her patiently. “You cannot switch now, there isn’t time.”

“Couldn’t Bonnie do it? Just until I get the hang of it?”

“Bonnie is our hostess, she’ll be busy. Come, Veronique, I know you can do it.”

“If her step was to breathe in and out, she would still be complaining,” Sasha scoffed.

Before Veronique could protest, they were interrupted by the sound of the church tower bell in the village square, chiming the hour.

“There, you see?” Tristan said. “We open in two hours. We must proceed with the run-through immediately.” He turned to the girl. “Veronique, just try. Concentrate, do the best you can.” He eyed them both sternly. “And no more arguing.”

Sasha and Veronique glowered at each other, then looked at Tristan and nodded grudgingly.

“That’s better.” He turned away from them and faced the dining room. “Places everyone!” He clapped his hands briskly, then stepped to an alcove that offered an intimate setting for several tables, separate from the main floor. “Proceed!”

The process began with Sasha. With lightning speed, he placed two cocktail glasses on the bar and swiftly added ice. He slid the glasses down the length of the bar to the end, where Kat waited with a knife, a cutting board and a small bowl of fruit before her. She tossed each piece of fruit in the air, intricately slicing it before it could land—first lemon, then orange, then lime—with all peelings falling aside, the choice segments dropping into the glasses. She grasped the glasses and slid them back toward Sasha. He stopped them, poured into each glass a shot of vodka, Sève Fournier, orange juice and a splash of Campari. He then slid the drinks down the bar to the opposite end, where Annabel stood, manning a small hand blender filled with soy lechithin, cream and Cointreau, which she now blended into a foam. She quickly spooned the mixture over the top of each glass, picked up the glasses and raced to the middle of the room,

where Veronique stood trembling, facing the bar, holding a small silver tray. Annabel set the glasses on the tray and took her place, standing smartly at attention next to Veronique. She nodded at Sasha; and Veronique, with a fearful gulp, held the tray aloft, squeezing her eyes shut, lips moving in silent prayer.

From a shelf below the bar, Sasha brought out a trivet on which he had arranged two cherries speared with toothpicks, each one propped up on its own lemon slice. He set the trivet on the bar, raised his arm and brought it down with a snap, the blade of his hand chopping at the toothpicks. Everyone held their breath as the speared cherries flipped and sailed across the room in a synchronized arc, descending, coming to rest with expert precision into the glasses on Veronique's tray—one to each glass—with a soft *splotch*.

Veronique opened her eyes, lowered the tray, and a broad smile spread across her face. She lifted her eyes to the ceiling. "*Merci mille*," she whispered. She pivoted a perfect ninety degrees, took several steps to her left, entered the alcove and set the tray down on the table next to which Tristan stood, watching critically. She glanced at Tristan, then beamed at the table's occupants. "*Monsieur, mademoiselle ... à votre santé*." She dipped in a slight curtsy, turned, and started for the kitchen at a dignified pace, her head high. After a few steps, overwhelmed by relief and joy from performing her part successfully, she burst into a run and dashed through the doors, like a child scampering to the playground after a grueling exam.

Tristan rolled his eyes, then turned to the couple. "I trust that was satisfactory, Monsieur Fondant?"

In response, Maxou held up a hand. He picked up one of the glasses, brought it to his nose, lifted it up to the light, examining its hue. He lowered it, took another sniff, then finally drank slowly, savoring the taste. He looked up at Tristan and nodded. “*Parfait.*”

“Ah! *Merci!* The staff will be delighted to hear it. Now, with your permission, I’ll see to tonight’s menu.” Tristan bowed to the couple. “Monsieur Fondant ... Mademoiselle Courteline. Enjoy.” He turned smoothly and headed for the kitchen, giving Sasha a thumbs-up as he passed the bar.

Autumn watched him go and turned to Maxou. “Is this really necessary?” she asked, amused.

Maxou handed the second glass to her. “Petite, there are several variations on the word ‘necessary’. This production, while not necessary, will make us memorable. I’ve been working on a writeup for it, to be included in the menus. Mark my words, customers will clamor for the *Aquitaine Sunset* presentation, based on historic descriptions of the drink’s preparation in the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Somewhat modernized, of course, with the inimitable Fondant twist.”

“Twisted.”

They started at the voice and turned to see the handsome bird perched on the sill of an open window, his iridescent, blue-green feathers shimmering in the sunlight. Maxou shook his head. “That’s *twist*, not twisted.”

“Hello, Tip.” Autumn smiled at the bird.

“*Bonjour, perle,*” Tip said cordially, bobbing his head toward her.

“Where have you been?” Maxou asked. “You missed the rehearsal.”

“Timing is everything,” Tip chirped.

“It was quite the spectacle,” Autumn said. She eyed Maxou keenly. “I’m no history expert, but I feel safe in saying this has nothing to do with anything that ever took place in Eleanor’s court. I believe you concocted this routine out of sheer boredom. Either that, or a perverse desire to torture the staff.”

“Torture? They love it,” Maxou insisted. “You saw how excited they were. They’re glad for a break from the monotony— ”

“Yes, the humdrum life of tending a crowd of customers during dinner rush on the busiest night of the week. Throw in your suggestion that the dishwasher entertain diners with a plate-spinning demonstration, and they’ve got Christmas.”

“*Mon Dieu*, such sarcasm!” Maxou looked at the bird. “Tip, did you ever hear the like? She used to be such a sweet girl.”

“I’m just saying, *chéri*, go a bit easier on them,” Autumn said. “That new girl, Veronique, she’s scared half to death. This rehearsal went fine, but to have to repeat it tonight, when the room is full. Why not let her get used to the place first, for a week or two, at least?”

“Because, *petite*, a little tension is exactly what this room needs. Well, not tension so much as a shot of adrenaline— ”

“Neat,” Tip said.

“ — something to make the guests stand up and take notice.”

“You could accomplish that with a strategically-placed cockroach,” Autumn remarked dryly. “That would give everyone a shot of adrenaline— ”

“Shot of adrenaline, with a twist.” Tip flapped his wings.

Maxou shook his head. “Complete lack of vision, the pair of you. I believe it was in my book, *Prévoir and Order From Chaos: Tips for Memorable Dinner Parties*, that I advised, ‘Whenever possible, present your dinner guests with the unexpected ... until it becomes expected’.”

Autumn leaned closer and gently brushed the stray lock of black hair back from his face. Her smile broadened as it stubbornly fell down around his eyes again. “And what happens once the unexpected becomes expected?” she asked, her tone seductive.

Maxou grinned. “You’ll have to read the book.” He tapped his glass against hers.

They drank, and Autumn said, “You know, we don’t have to stay. Tristan would understand.”

“He’s an old friend. He’s got a lot on his mind, he’s stuck here for awhile. He needs the distraction, he needs to keep this place going.” He took another drink and nodded toward the bar. “The others who work here, they need it, too. Bad bit of luck, their last chef disappearing like that, leaving everyone in the lurch.”

“It was good of you to step up,” Autumn said warmly, putting her hand over his.

Maxou shrugged. “It’s only until they find someone else.”

“Face it, *chéri*, it won’t be easy to replace you. A little village like this, not much else to bring people here except that it’s not far from hot spots like Saint-Tropez. What other chef of your calibre would settle here? Maybe that’s why their previous chef took off. Got a better offer in a more lively setting.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Alegranssa isn’t without its appeal.”

“Its eccentrics, you mean,” Autumn smiled. “Did you see that man this morning, walking an empty dog collar on a leash? And the choir ladies, every evening in the square. You could set your watch by them, they’re more reliable than the bell tower.”

“Always singing the same thing, at least in the time we’ve been here. A choral arrangement of ‘Bim Bam Baby,’ followed by the Halleluja Chorus.”

“So solemn, in their blue choir robes, carrying their hymnals.” Autumn leaned into his shoulder, laughing heartily.

“*Singers and dancers alike say, All my springs are in You*,” Tip quoted. “Psalm 87:7.”

“And then there’s Madame Pigeon Patisserie,” Maxou went on, “the woman who brings the big bag full of croissants to the square every afternoon and feeds the pigeons.”

“With her husband following behind her, making sure the pigeons find the service satisfactory,” Autumn giggled.

Maxou turned to Tip. “I’m surprised we never see you down there with the pigeons, Tiparillo. Free grub.”

“Pigeons.” Tip ruffled his feathers indignantly. “Riff raff.”

Autumn wiped her eyes. “Ah well, the eccentrics, they’re all harmless enough. And it is a lovely village. It must’ve been fun for Tristan, to spend summers here as a boy.”

“It was, he’s always talked a lot about his happy memories. I don’t suppose he ever figured he would settle here. But after his father died, and his mother could no longer care for herself ... ”

“Very sweet of him to give up everything he had in Paris, to come take care of her.”

“Well, with his reputation, he’ll be able to go back to all that easily enough, later on. He and his mother were always close, she’s a fine lady. Even with her bad health and failing memory, she’s a class act.”

“One swell dame,” Tip chimed in.

“I’m so glad I got to meet her,” Autumn said. “And those old family photos, she was beautiful.” She took another drink and set her glass on the table. “I don’t understand why Tristan’s wife couldn’t stand by him through this. What kind of woman would leave her husband because he takes responsibility for his mother?”

“She liked night life, she liked going out. Tristan tried to keep her happy, work the restaurant, and care for his mother, all at once. He couldn’t do it all.” Maxou ran a hand through his hair. “She wasn’t a bad sort, the wife. Just not a good match.”

“So,” Autumn said, rubbing her hands together, “we need to be on the lookout for a nice, single woman who’s also a chef.” She watched Maxou’s green eyes come alive with the all-too-familiar glint as he caught sight of the legs of a passing waitress. She grabbed his chin and turned his face toward her, bringing him nose to nose with her. “Tell you what ... I think I should be on the lookout. You stick to executive cheffin’.”

“*Ma poulet*, you cut me to the quick! Surely by now you know I can be trusted in the company of *la femme*?”

“Lookout, look out.” Tip flapped his wings vigorously. “Crêpe pan.”

Maxou winced at the memory. “*Oui*, Tip, I haven’t forgotten.” He looked at Autumn. “You had quite the arm then, my little sledgehammer. Made an indelible impression.”

“Not nearly as indelible as the impression you made on my crêpe pan,” Autumn smirked.

“But I always suspected your head’s part granite.”

“Taken for granite,” Tip said.

“I’m outnumbered,” Maxou groaned, burying his face in his hands. Autumn laughed, slipped her hand into his jacket pocket, found a bird treat and tossed it to Tip, who snapped it up in mid-air.

Tristan emerged from the kitchen and approached their table. “Monsieur, everything is ready for you.”

“Tristan,” Maxou said sternly, “when are you going to drop the formalities? We go too far back for that sort of rubbish. No need to call me Monsieur.”

Tristan glanced around. “Sorry, Maxou. I thought, here in the restaurant, we should keep everything formal, businesslike. It’s that Cordon Bleu training, what can I say?”

“You can say ‘Maxou’, that’s what you can say. All this ‘monsieur’ nonsense, makes me feel like a *flic*.” Maxou took Autumn’s hand and kissed it. “Wish us well, *ma perle*, I’m off to lend my expertise.”

“I’ll finish my drink, then do a little shopping,” Autumn said. “I’ll be back for dinner. And Maxou, remember what we talked about ... go easy on the staff.”

“Great bistros seldom rise to the top without a few broken dishes. But fear not, I shan’t overtax anyone.” He kissed her hand again and stood up. Tip chirped and flew to perch on his shoulder. “Right, *Sous-Chef* Tristan, let’s go.”

Tristan led Maxou through the dining room. “We’re doing several recipes from your book tonight.”

“Which book?” Maxou took a red carnation from a bud vase on one of the tables and adjusted it in his buttonhole.

“Let’s see, what was the title ... oh yes, *Five-Star Soufflés: The Puffs That Dreams Are Made Of.*”

“Splendid! Depending on what you’re making, I may have an idea or two for a very impressive presentation.”

“*Déjà vu,*” Tip intoned ominously.

“Oh, well, I don’t know that we need to go into all that, given the *Aquitaine Sunset* floor show we already have planned,” Tristan said uncomfortably.

“Nonsense. As I said in my book, *Whisky Business: Cooking With Gas and Bourbon*, there’s always room for more.” Maxou brought an arm around Tristan’s shoulders. “We’ll need just a few minor props. Tell me, do you happen to have a blow torch, a croquet mallet, and two large black umbrellas?” Tristan stared at him as they stepped through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

Autumn sipped her drink and looked around the pretty room. Lovely restaurant, Demang Matang ... so warm and inviting. That first day she and Maxou had arrived, during what was originally planned as a brief stopover to visit Tristan, they had enjoyed a superb dinner. Even picky Maxou had been unable to find fault with anything about it. She remembered she had spread her arms out and cried, ‘I could stay here forever.’ That was three months ago. Maxou’s small favor of working with Tristan had stretched out longer than they had anticipated. She caught a lock of her thick, russet hair in her fingers and twirled it contemplatively, her brown eyes thoughtful. She knew Maxou. These acrobatics with the waitstaff, just the beginning.

Sooner or later, his wanderlust would kick in. She hoped Tristan would have someone else lined up by then. When Maxou decided it was time to move on, nothing could stop him. She sighed, finished her drink, then she smiled to herself; it was good of Maxou to offer to help. And they were enjoying the village for now, the comfortable little town house they were leasing for their stay. *Live in the moment, foolish girl*, she told herself firmly. *If you haven't learned that by now, you're—*

“Another drink, mademoiselle?”

Autumn snapped to attention and blinked at Annabel, standing before her. She was about to order another, when she was interrupted by a sharp noise coming through the window where Tip had perched: someone blowing on a pitch pipe in the courtyard below. This was quickly followed by elderly female voices, four-part harmony, a choral quartet ... their choice of material not exactly ecclesiastic:

*Get a mip map mop and a brim bram broom*

*And clim clam clean up the rim ram room,*

*'cause your bim bam baby's coming home to-niiiiight*

Autumn looked at Annabel. “Thank you, no, I’ll be on my way.” She rose. “I’ll, ah, slip out through the kitchen. I just remembered something I need to tell Maxou.” She bumped the table with her knee, smiling apologetically at Annabel as she stepped past her.

She reached the bar, and Sasha held up a glass, as if to salute. “The ladies are in fine voice today, aren’t they?” He gulped down the drink. “It’s a pity you weren’t here last year. Their program was Sondheim, combined with *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring*.”

Autumn said nothing as she continued on, through the kitchen doors. Sasha poured himself another drink, snapping his fingers to the ladies' singing.

## IV.

Perhaps it was the penguins congregating along the shoreline that played a part in making the island seem colder than it was. Perhaps it was the formidable sound of the tide crashing on rocks ... powerful, forlorn, never gentle. The waves never seemed to lap softly at the shore; it was always a crash.

The boy was unable to explain how these sights and sounds could indicate chilling temperatures. They just did. He shivered slightly and strained his eyes to watch the ship melt into the horizon. It always amazed him how quickly the ship faded from view after leaving the island. The Marion Dufresne ... an oceanic research vessel that sailed all the way from France several times a year, to bring supplies and rotating personnel to Île de la Possession's solitary research station. In another minute, it would disappear altogether, and it would be months before it would return.

Despite its appealing name, Île de la Possession, part of France's Crozet Archipelago, was no tourist attraction. Located in the French Southern Territories in the South Indian Ocean, the subantarctic island was key to the survival of a wide variety of bird species, providing a prime breeding site for penguins, albatross, petrels, and terns. Its starkly beautiful landscape of black volcanic sand beaches and treeless mountains cut by deep, glacial valleys attracted the occasional adventure traveler, but never for very long. The boy didn't mind this at all. Once, one of the researchers had asked him whether he was ever lonely. This hadn't made sense to him. There was so much to do—learning all the plants and flowers, watching the seals play, noting all the different birds, climbing and hiking. Or sometimes, when he finally had finished his daily studies to the satisfaction of his mother's scrutiny, just sitting down at the water's edge, gazing

out to sea, dreaming, letting his mind wander. Who could find the time to be lonely in such a thrilling place?

The boy's thoughts were interrupted by his mother's voice, and he ran to her call. As he approached the tiny stone house, tucked into a sheltering niche worn in the craggy rock, he braced himself for a lecture. Mama didn't like it when he stood watching the ship from the beach. "I'm here, Mama," he exclaimed breathlessly, as he dashed through the doorway.

"Sit," his mother instructed, indicating the low table before the fire. Her son had inherited much from her, including the deep brown eyes; the slight build and clever hands were his father's.

"It looks like snow's coming."

The woman peered out the window. "Too warm. And too early." She carried the black cast-iron kettle to the table, dipped a wooden ladle into it and filled two bowls with savory stew.

The boy took an appreciative sniff of the stew and watched his mother place the kettle back on top of the stove, admiring the graceful movements of her substantial frame and the calm confidence in her broad, brown face. He waited patiently until she finally joined him at the table, then followed her lead as she closed her eyes, folded her hands and murmured grace. The formalities dispensed with at last, he grasped his spoon and dug in. After a few minutes, he looked up, surprised. "Mama, aren't you hungry? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No reason." She smiled. "I'm just a little tired, is all." She tasted her stew, then cleared her throat. "Kleren, do you know how old you are?"

"Sure I do, I'm fourteen."

"No, I mean in *le tet*." She reached out and tapped his forehead. "Up here."

“Oh.” He frowned, lowering his spoon.

“You’re a man. Ready to go make your place in the world. I have taught you all I can.”

“Wh-what do you mean ... leave here?” He stared at her. “Why would we leave? I love it here.”

“Life is ever evolving, child. Nothing stays in one place forever.” She smiled again.

“You probably don’t remember, but when we left Haiti for New Orleans, you cried and cried. Then you cried even harder when we left New Orleans.”

The boy grinned, a little embarrassed. “I was a baby.”

“It’s no shame to feel emotion, or attachment to people and places. But you mustn’t let it overcome you. And you must take care with whom you share those feelings.”

“Is that what happened to Papa? Was he careless?”

“He was brave. And yes, I suppose he was a little careless.”

“I used to dream he would join us in New Orleans,” the boy said wistfully. “Then later, I dreamed he would join us here. I knew before we left New Orleans that he was dead. But I still dreamed it.”

“You knew even before I told you,” his mother said, a hint of wonder in her voice.

“The Bawon came to me. Auntie had warned me about the Bawon spirits, that they were fierce and stern, but this one wasn’t.” The boy paused, then took a drink of water from the tin cup next to his bowl. “The Bawon didn’t tell me what happened. I just knew that Papa wouldn’t be coming to us.” He looked up at his mother. “What happened to him, Mama?”

“He was brave,” she repeated, her words clipped. Her mind returned to that terrible day of parting. How small the boat had looked, how dilapidated! This vessel was to deliver mother

and child safely, all the way from Haiti to New Orleans? “Not to worry,” her husband had assured her, “I have prayed to Met Agwe. You will be safe.” A hurried kiss and embrace, and she fought back tears as he held their son. “My brave boy.” Then he whispered something into the boy’s ear, kissed him, and released him with a decisive nod. Mother and son boarded the tiny ship, were directed below to the hold, and both found tiny knotholes through which they stared at Papa, who smiled and waved the entire time. The boat pulled away from the dock, and Papa grew smaller, smaller, then impossible to see as the vessel lurched to and fro.

Throughout their parting, Mama had heard the sounds of the angry uprising, the people against the hated militia. At that time, the sounds were in her head; she and her son had fled on a quiet day, during a lull in the fighting. But she heard the sounds anyway. She knew what was coming, and she knew her husband would never leave the fight, not even for his family. She still heard his comforting words: *When we have finished the fight for what is rightfully ours, I’ll come to you.* She could still hear his voice. But the sounds of the revolution were always louder. Both sounds would never leave her, and for this she was grateful; they distracted her mind’s eye from what the militia probably had done when they captured brave Papa ... The letter informing her of her husband’s death, delivered to her in New Orleans, was mercifully brief.

Now she opened her eyes and saw her son staring at her, waiting for her answer. “Your papa died fighting for a cause he believed in. He was a hero. That’s all you need to know.”

The boy took another spoonful of stew. “Did he win the fight?”

“It’s still going on, in some form or other,” she sighed wearily. “It may never be over entirely.”

“Then why’d he do it?”

“Because he had to, child. Some men are born to the fight more than others. But *all* men should strive to do what’s right, to do what they know in their hearts is right. All women too, for that matter. I wanted to stay with your papa, fight alongside him like I did when we were both younger. But I knew the best way I could help him was to do what he asked, to take you to safety and raise you as he would want. Understand?”

“W-was I a ... hindrance?” The boy’s voice trembled.

“Bless you, no! Where did you hear such a word?”

“One of the storybooks.” He waved his spoon toward a pile of dog-eared textbooks, novels and magazines that had been given to them by the workers at the research station.

“Well trust me, you were the sun in Papa’s sky. When we married, your papa and I, our lives were united. And you were the sweet honey that sealed our hearts together forever. Even departure from this life cannot break such a bond. You were our *force majeure*. No hindrance, my Kleren.” She leaned close, took his face in her hands and kissed his cheek.

“*Force majeure*,” he repeated, all in a glow, unaware of the pang he brought to his mother’s heart as his thoughtful expression reminded her all too keenly of his father. “I did that, without even trying!”

She sensed the gears turning in his head, and she smirked. “An unconscious accomplishment does not give you license to slack off on your studies,” she remarked crisply. “Imagine how much more you can do when you apply yourself.”

He blushed. “Yes, Mama,” he replied meekly.

“So finish eating, and we’ll get back to your lessons.”

“But when do we leave here? Shouldn’t we prepare?”

“Not till the ship returns, probably three or four months. We have plenty of time. And you still have much to learn.”

“But you said you’d taught me everything you could.”

“Reinforcement, child. Trials, tests. That sort of thing. We need to make sure you’ve retained what you’ve been taught.” She tapped sharply at his head again.

“*Le tet.*”

“Le sieve.” She picked up a plate of corn bread, took a piece for herself and passed the plate to him. They ate in silence for a few minutes, then she asked, “Do you recall much about your father?”

“I think I remember what he looked like. I remember his voice. He never yelled or got angry, but everybody always listened to him anyway. Sometimes I think I’m really hearing him whispering to me, like when we left, but I guess I’m just remembering. It’s so real, though.”

“I’m glad you have that.”

“Do you want to know what he said? I never told you.”

His mother shook her head. “That was between you and him. You keep it. It’s yours and yours alone, his gift to you.”

“I used to think about it real hard in New Orleans, so I could shut out other things.”

“You didn’t care much for New Orleans, did you?”

“I liked the houses and the pretty balconies, an’ I liked the people on our street. I liked the lady at the bakery, always giving us beignets, they were good. And the music, all the time, people playin’ music in the streets and dancing. So grand! But ... I didn’t like Auntie’s boyfriend.”

His mother frowned. “Nor did I. Auntie isn’t always a keen judge of people.”

“Is she Papa’s older sister?”

“Younger.”

“She seemed older. Why didn’t she come here with us? She looked like she wanted to, then she didn’t.”

“She wouldn’t leave the boyfriend.”

“And him so mean to her! I don’t understand.”

His mother rose, scraping her chair on the floor as she pushed it back. “A bad companion is one who brings out our weaknesses, then preys on them. Steer clear of anyone who tries to convince you of something you know in your heart is wrong, no matter how they tempt you.” She collected the bowls and took them to the sink. “Your Auntie never learned that valuable lesson.”

“Couldn’t she still learn it, even at her age?”

“We’re never too old to learn. Besides, she’s not old, she’s no Methuselah.”

“Meh-thoo-sah—“

“Never mind.” His mother poured more water into his cup from a pitcher. “Your Papa would be glad, knowing that his words helped you ignore the bad things in New Orleans and remember the good.”

“When we leave here, can we go anywhere we want?”

She sat down again. “The ship will take us to France. After that ... yes, anywhere. Where would you like to go?”

“To New Orleans, to teach Auntie that lesson about bad companions. She’ll listen to me now that I’m grown up.”

“Teach *him* a lesson, that’s the thing,” his mother said under her breath, her eyes dark and gleaming.

“Who, Auntie’s boyfriend?”

“Yes, child.”

“Who cares about him? He’s a bad companion. We’ll teach that to Auntie, then take her away from there and come back here. Then we can have her chicory coffee every day, an’ won’t she laugh, watching the penguins, and the seals playing.”

“Yes, child.”

The boy cocked his head to one side. His mother’s voice sounded very distant.

“Mama?”

She snapped to attention. “Yes, that would be lovely. You know ... there may be something we can do toward that end here and now, before the ship returns.”

He brightened. “A ceremony?”

She nodded. “We shall speak to Ezili Danto. She will help us.”

“She’ll protect Auntie till we can get back to her. That bad companion won’t be any the wiser.”

“No, he won’t.”

“Mama, what’re you thinking about?”

The worrisome gleam left her eye, and her smile was warm. “Nothing, Kleren. Come now, help me clear the table.”

He jumped up and took the remaining dishes to the sink. As they washed and dried the dishes, his mind began to wander pleasantly, and he thought about everything they had discussed—leaving Île de la Possession, seeing new places, working their way back to New Orleans and Auntie, to save her from her bad companion. They would need to do what they had done in the past, call upon Met Agwe, to bless their journey.

This brought his mind back to Île de la Possession, and he felt a sadness at the thought of leaving it. He had been amazed, when he was old enough to truly comprehend just how far they had traveled, first from Haiti to New Orleans, then to this tiny island. He was endlessly fascinated with the maps and geography books from the research center. He enjoyed repeatedly pinpointing their current home's proximity to other locations, tracing routes on the map with his finger ... almost as if he expected their position to change if he neglected to confirm it on occasion. He recalled the first time he had traced the course of the Marion Dufresne, from Île de la Possession to its port in Marseille. He once told his mother, looking at it on a map, France looked like a large cheese to him. She had laughed and said that was fitting because France boasted hundreds of different types of native cheeses.

And in a few months, he would see France for himself! Yes, there was still much to see in the world ... and they could always come back.

His mother nudged him sharply, and he took the dripping plate she held out to him. He resumed his daydreaming as he dried the plate, and once again he heard his father's voice in his ear ... louder than the angry shouts and bloodcurdling carnage of Haiti's uprising ... louder than the raucous din of the strangers with whom he and his mother had crowded into the tiny ship for the journey to New Orleans ... louder than Auntie's boyfriend's drunken curses and abuses

(which, for some reason, were not once aimed toward him or his mother) ... louder even than the waves that crashed on the rocks of Île de la Possession. Not louder, really, so much as overpowering, yet similar in resolve. Relentless, constant, necessary.

*Force majeure.*

###

## LITTLE SAINTS, FORCE MAJEURE

## Glossary

Word/Phrase	Origin	Definition
<i>à la mode</i>	French	Fashionable, stylish
<i>Amuse-bouche</i>	French	Lit. 'mouth amuser'. Small <i>hors d'oeuvre</i> , different from appetizers because they are offered by the chef, not selected from the menu by patrons
<i>apéritif</i>	French	Alcoholic beverage served before a meal to stimulate appetite
<i>Arrêt</i>	French	Stop
<i>arrondissement</i>	French	Districts; administrative divisions of France, the Netherlands and other Francophile countries
<i>Auberge de Castagna</i>	French/Italian	Autumn's inn. 'Auberge' is French for 'inn'; Castagna is Italian for 'chestnut.'
<i>à votre santé</i>	French	To your health - used as a toast
<i>Beau Oiseau</i>	French	Lit. 'young man/boyfriend' and 'bird'. Autumn's pet name for Tip
<i>bon courage</i>	French	Good luck
<i>bonjour</i>	French	Hello
<i>bonne journée</i>	French	Goodbye (similar to <i>au revoir</i> or <i>salut</i> )
<i>boulangerie</i>	French	French bakery specializing in bread rather than pastries
<i>brocciu</i>	Corsican	Traditional Corsican cheese from sheep or goat's milk; comparable to ricotta
<i>canapé</i>	French	Type of appetizer: toast or cracker topped with savory spread (caviar, cheese)
<i>Carte blanche</i>	French	Unrestricted power to act at one's own discretion
<i>chansonnier</i>	French	Writer or singer of French chansons (songs) - cabaret ballads, often satirical or topical
<i>chante lwa</i>	Haitian	Songs for the lwa (the spirits of Haitian Vodou)
<i>chérie / chéri</i>	French	(fem. / masc.) term of endearment - dear, sweetheart
<i>cigale</i>	French	Cicada
<i>crèche</i>	French	A representation of the Nativity, usually with statues or figurines
<i>D'accord</i>	French	In accord; agreed
<i>De rien</i>	French	Literally 'nothing' - polite response of 'you're welcome' to a thank-you
<i>esprit</i>	French	Spirit
<i>étoile</i>	French	Star
<i>faux pas</i>	French	Social blunder or indiscretion
<i>flic</i>	French	(slang) Police officer
<i>Force majeure</i>	Latin	Superior/greater force. Phrase used in contracts referring to consequences of circumstances beyond parties' control (e.g., forces of nature)
<i>hors d'œuvre</i>	French	Appetizers (e.g., canape) <i>Note:</i> This spelling is singular and plural in French.
<i>iluminasyon</i>	Haitian	Vodou ceremony used to seek guidance in a dream

Word/Phrase	Origin	Definition
<i>J'arrive</i>	French	I have arrived.
<i>Je suis desole</i>	French	I am sorry.
<i>mais oui</i>	French	But of course.
<i>merci</i>	French	Thank you
<i>Mince alors</i>	French	(slang) Blimey! My gosh!
<i>modus operandi</i>	Latin	Mode of operating; habits
<i>Mon ami</i>	French	My friend
<i>Mon Dieu</i>	French	(mild oath) My God
<i>Mon Môme</i>	French	(slang) my child
<i>n'est-ce pas ?</i>	French	Isn't it so?
<i>non</i>	French	No
<i>oui</i>	French	Yes
<i>parfait</i>	French	Perfect
<i>patisserie</i>	French	Bakery specializing in French pastry
<i>Pelúcia</i>	Portugese	Plush
<i>perle</i>	French	Pearl
<i>petit tresor</i>	French	Small treasure
<i>pétanque</i>	French	Game of boules in South of France [from Provençal <i>pèd tanco</i> - foot fixed (to the ground)]
<i>poulette</i>	French	Lit. Allemande sauce with chopped parsley; one of Maxou's terms of endearment for Autumn
<i>poupée</i>	French	Little doll (term of affection)
<i>raison d'être</i>	French	Reason for existence
<i>Sans blague !</i>	French	(sarcastic) No kidding!
<i>s'il vous plaît</i>	French	Please
<i>Sacré-cœur</i>	French	(mild oath) Sacred heart
<i>Saperlipopette</i>	French	Mild oath (obsolete)
<i>Sevis Gineh</i>	Haitian	Service to <i>Gineh</i> , or ancestral Africa
<i>Sevis lwa</i>	Haitian	Service to the lwa
<i>sœur</i>	French	Sister
<i>Sous-chef</i>	French	Chef who is second in authority in a restaurant or kitchen, ranking below the executive or head chef
<i>Ti bon ange</i>	Haitian	"Little good angel" part of the human soul
<i>tout de suite</i>	French	Immediately
<i>tres bien</i>	French	Very good
<i>Voilà</i>	French	Used to call attention, to express satisfaction or approval