



The Advocate and the Truth

The Martin Chronicles
Series One, Book One

First Edition

Shaun Martin

A Genshin Impact fan fiction.



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First Edition, 2026

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Chapter One

Before the Verdict

At the crack of dawn, the Court of Fontaine was still blue. Not the bright, theatrical blue that tourists remembered from postcards, sunlight dancing across the waterways while the Palais Mermonia gleamed above the city like civilization itself had been polished overnight — this was the quiet blue before morning properly existed, when the aquabuses had only just begun their routes and the streets below our apartment windows were nearly empty.

Inside the bedroom, everything was equally still.

Until I opened my eyes.

“Oh, shit.”

I threw the blanket off so violently that half of it landed across Clorinde’s face. She didn’t move, not for a full two seconds, and then one purple eye appeared from beneath the fabric.

“Shaun.” That single word carried an impressive amount of threat for someone barely conscious.

“I’m sorry.” I scrambled across the bed, caught my foot in the sheets, nearly fell directly onto Wriothesity, and saved myself only by grabbing the nightstand.

He opened his eyes. Stared at me. Then at the clock. Then back at me.

“No.”

“I didn’t even say anything.”

“It is five twenty-three in the morning.”

“I KNOW.”

“That,” he said, closing his eyes again, “is precisely the problem.”

I rushed toward the wardrobe while Clorinde pulled the blanket from her face behind me.

“You told me your appointment was at eight.”

“It is.”

There was a silence I didn’t like. I froze with one trouser leg half on. Clorinde looked toward the clock, then toward me.

“It takes approximately twelve minutes to reach your office.”

“I have preparation.”

“You prepared last night.”

“I have more preparation.”

“You prepared until one in the morning.”

“I REMEMBER.”

Wriothlesley made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a groan and buried his face in his pillow. “Apparently none of us are sleeping.”

“You can sleep!”

“You’ve opened four drawers.”

“I’m looking for my shirt.”

“It’s hanging on the chair,” Clorinde said. I looked. It was hanging on the chair.

“...Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She disappeared under the blanket again.

My law office occupied two rooms above a photography studio, not far from the Steambird offices, which meant I technically could have slept another hour. Technically. But my newest client had a court appearance that afternoon, and I’d received her complete case file less than twelve hours ago — which meant there was no universe, Teyvat or otherwise, in which I was sleeping peacefully.

I buttoned my blouse while walking. Mistake number one. Mistake number two was trying to locate my stockings at the same time. Mistake number three was forgetting that Clorinde had left her dueling boots beside the wardrobe. My foot struck one, I stumbled, the chair moved, and my camera bag hit the floor.

Somewhere behind me, my husband said quietly, “Magnificent.”

I turned around. Wriothesley had pushed himself upright against the pillows, hair thoroughly destroyed by sleep, looking far too amused for someone I had supposedly victimized.

“Don’t.”

“I said nothing.”

“You said magnificent.”

“I was complimenting your technique.”

Clorinde opened her eyes again. “What happened?”

“She attacked your boot.”

“My boot won.”

“THANK YOU, WRIOTHESLEY.”

He grinned, and I found myself — not for the first time — wondering how I had ended up married to these two. There were other moments, usually while Wriothesley was deliberately annoying me and Clorinde was pretending she wasn’t entertained, when I wondered how either of them had survived before me. Probably more peacefully. Certainly less interestingly.

I shoved the case file into my satchel. Clorinde finally sat up, hair falling loose around her shoulders, and without the uniform and the gloves and the posture that made half of Fontaine reconsider every poor decision they’d ever made, she looked softer. Tired. But softer.

“Come here.”

“I’m late.”

“You are not late.”

“I’m emotionally late.”

“Shaun.”

I sighed and walked back. She took my collar between her fingers and straightened it, then another button, then another. I looked down.

“Oh.”

“You skipped one.”

Wriothlesley leaned over. “Two.”

I slapped his hand away when he reached toward me. “Do not participate.”

“I live here.”

“You’re making it worse.”

Clorinde fixed the last button and smoothed the fabric over my shoulder. “What is the client’s name?”

“Élodie Martel. Nineteen. Apprentice mechanic from the Fleuve Cendre.”

Her expression sharpened almost immediately — the sleepy wife gone, the Champion Duelist arrived. “What charges?”

“Theft of proprietary machinery, trespassing, obstruction of an official investigation, and destruction of company property.”

Wriothlesley stopped smiling. “That is quite a collection for nineteen.”

“Exactly.” I grabbed my waistcoat from the dresser. “She worked for a private engineering contractor supplying components for municipal maintenance meka. Two weeks ago there was an accident underground — three workers injured, one still hospitalized.”

“And the company blamed her?” Clorinde asked.

“Not exactly.” I paused. “They blamed the workers.”

Wriothlesley’s brows lowered.

“Élodie says the machinery had been malfunctioning for weeks. Management knew. She copied maintenance records because she thought they’d alter them after the accident.”

“And did they?” he asked.

“Some records are missing.” That got both of them fully awake. “She took an internal storage device,” I continued. “Company

security caught her returning to retrieve the physical inspection logs. There was a struggle. A cabinet broke. Apparently that became destruction of property.”

Clorinde studied me. “And the obstruction charge?”

“She refused to tell investigators where she’d hidden the storage device.”

“Where is it?”

“I don’t know.”

Wriothlesley smiled faintly. “That sounds inconvenient.”

“It is very fucking inconvenient.”

“You’re meeting her before the hearing?”

“At eight. First time in person.”

Clorinde finished adjusting my collar. “Listen before deciding what happened.”

“I know.”

“I know you know.” Which was Clorinde’s particular way of saying you care, and sometimes caring makes you sprint ahead of the evidence — a diagnosis that was, annoyingly, often correct.

Wriothlesley extended a hand. “Come here before you leave.” I walked around the bed; he caught my wrist and pulled me close enough to kiss my forehead. “Do not get arrested.”

I stared at him. “Why does everyone say that to me?”

“Pattern recognition.”

“I have never been arrested.”

Clorinde raised an eyebrow. “Convicted,” I amended, and Wriothlesley laughed.

“If Neuville sends you to Meropide, I’m charging you rent.”

“YOU’RE MY HUSBAND.”

“Which is why you’ll receive the family rate.”

Clorinde actually laughed. I pointed at both of them. “You’re horrible.”

“And yet,” Wriothlesley said, “you married us.”

I kissed him anyway. Then Clorinde. “Go back to sleep.”

“Yes,” Clorinde said, already drifting. Wriothesley was lying down again before I’d made it three steps toward the door.

“Shaun.”

I turned. His eyes were closed. “Your camera.”

I looked at the bag still lying on the floor where it had fallen. “...Right.”



Fontaine smelled different before breakfast — wet stone, fresh bread, cool metal from the railings along the waterways. Steam rolled from the street grates as I hurried toward my office, heels striking pavement with the kind of purpose that made people move instinctively out of the way. The city was waking around me: shopkeepers lifting shutters, a newspaper boy arranging the morning edition of *The Steambird*, two Gardes speaking quietly beside a patrol meka. Far above, sunlight had finally reached the upper windows of the Palais Mermonia.

I slowed just enough to look at it. Somewhere up there was Neuville — possibly already working, knowing him, *definitely* already working — and probably unaware that his boyfriend had just encouraged me not to get arrested. Or perhaps fully aware. There were very few things Wriothesley wouldn’t eventually tell him.

My Kamera bounced against my hip. I carried it nearly everywhere, even on legal days — a habit left over from before I studied law, when I chased stories instead of clients. I still did, some months: a few afternoons with *The Steambird*, portraits, community features, arts coverage, occasionally an investigation when Charlotte appeared in my office doorway wearing the expression that meant she’d discovered something either fascinating or professionally dangerous.

I loved journalism. I loved hearing people describe their lives in their own words. I loved photography even more — there was something powerful about freezing a moment exactly as it had existed. But eventually I’d found the limitation: a photograph could

make people look, an article could make people angry, and neither could necessarily make someone stop. Law could. Sometimes. That sometimes was enough.

I climbed the stairs to my office and unlocked the door. The brass plate read SHAUN MARTIN — ADVOCATE, and beneath it, in smaller lettering, *Civil, Criminal & Public Interest Representation*. Taped underneath that, courtesy of Charlotte: NO, SHE WILL NOT TELL YOU WHO SHE'S DATING. I had removed it twice. She had replaced it twice.

My desk looked exactly as I'd left it several hours earlier — papers everywhere, three fountain pens, one empty coffee cup, two photography magazines, and Élodie Martel's case file dominating the center. I dropped into my chair and started with chronology.

Six-forty in the evening: mechanical failure in a drainage control facility beneath the southeastern quarter. Three employees injured. Élodie hadn't been scheduled to work that evening but had stayed late finishing repairs. Seven-oh-five: the supervisor ordered an evacuation. Seven twenty-two: local authorities arrived. Nine-fifteen: Élodie accessed the company archives. Nine thirty-one: a storage device was removed. The next morning she'd tried to return. Security confrontation. Arrest.

Simple. Too simple.

I opened the photographs — damaged conduit, bent valve housing, a shattered cabinet, and bruising on Élodie's wrist, documented after her arrest. I zoomed in. Four marks. Finger-shaped.

I pulled another statement. The security officer: The accused became aggressive when instructed to leave the premises. Élodie's version: He grabbed me when I tried to reach the records. No independent witness listed.

Interesting.

I reached automatically for my camera before remembering the evidence photographs already existed. Journalist habit. Instead I

wrote: *Who grabbed first? Why return physically if she already copied records? Where is storage device?*

At seven fifty-six, there was a knock. Four minutes early.

“Come in.”

The young woman who entered looked nothing like the dangerous criminal described in the charging document. Small — not fragile, there was muscle in her forearms from mechanical work — but carrying herself like someone trying to occupy as little space as possible. Brown hair roughly tied back, a work jacket repaired at both elbows, dark circles under her eyes. Beside her stood an older woman who introduced herself as her aunt.

Élodie’s eyes flicked toward my desk, then the windows, then the door.

“Sit wherever you’re comfortable,” I said. She chose the chair nearest the exit. I noticed, and didn’t comment. I abandoned the desk after about three seconds — too formal, too much distance — and moved to the chair opposite them instead with just my notebook.

Élodie stared at me. “You’re Advocate Martin?”

“Shaun is fine.”

“You don’t have to convince me you’re innocent,” I told her.

Her mouth tightened. “I didn’t say I was.”

“Good.” That surprised her. “My job isn’t to manufacture a version of you that looks good in court. My job is to understand exactly what happened, what the law says about it, what the prosecution can prove, and what protects you best. So I’m going to ask questions you might not like.”

“I’ve had plenty of those.”

“I imagine.” I opened the notebook. “Why did you take the storage device?”

“Because they were deleting things.”

“Did you see them delete anything?”

“Yes. My supervisor.” She told me when. I wrote it down. “What did he delete?”

“Maintenance reports.”

“Did you personally see the contents before deletion?”

“Yes. Pressure instability in the east conduit. Seal degradation. Pneumousia regulator inconsistencies. We reported it six times.”

“Who’s *we*?” She named four workers; two of them were among the injured. I stopped writing.

“Why return the next morning?”

Her eyes dropped. “There was a paper ledger. They couldn’t remotely erase that.”

“So you went back.”

“Yes. Without contacting the Gardes.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

She looked at me sharply. Good — anger was easier to work with than fear. “No,” she said. “I didn’t contact them. Because people like them don’t listen to people like us.”

Her aunt touched her arm; Élodie pulled away.

“Élodie,” I said gently, “where is the storage device?”

Silence. Her aunt looked at her. I waited. She looked toward the window instead.

“Somewhere safe.”

“That’s not sufficient.”

“I know.”

“If the prosecution believes you’re withholding stolen company data, they’re going to argue continued obstruction.”

“I know.”

“If that device contains what you say it contains, it may also be the strongest evidence supporting your explanation.”

“I know.” Her voice cracked, and there it was — not defiance. Terror.

I leaned forward. “Who has it?”

She shook her head.

“Élodie.”

“If I tell you —” She stopped.

“If you tell me what?”

“They’ll go after him.”

Him. I kept my voice neutral. “Who?”

She stared at her hands. “My little brother.”

Her aunt closed her eyes, and everything changed.

“How old?”

“Fourteen.”

“Where is he?”

“With a friend.”

“Does he physically possess the device?”

“No.”

“Does he know where it is?”

“Yes.”

“Does anyone else?”

“No.”

There are moments in legal practice when a case stops being paperwork. This was one. I’d seen it before: someone young makes one frightened decision, then another, then another, and each decision makes perfect sense from inside the fear. From outside, they form a staircase directly toward disaster.

“Listen to me,” I said. Élodie finally looked up. “We are not putting your fourteen-year-old brother in the middle of this.”

Her eyes filled immediately. “I didn’t mean —”

“I know.”

“I just didn’t know who else —”

“I know.” Her breathing became uneven; her aunt reached for her again, and this time Élodie let her. I gave her a moment. Then another. “This is what we’re going to do. You’re going to tell me exactly where that device is. I will arrange for lawful preservation of it. We document the chain of custody. Nobody alters it. Nobody destroys it. Nobody leaks it to *The Steambird*. Nobody posts its

contents on some bulletin because they think public outrage will fix everything.”

She looked embarrassed. “That was my second idea.”

Despite myself, I laughed. “Of course it was.” For the first time, she almost smiled. “Your brother gets removed from this entirely. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“And if you have lied to me about what’s on that device, now would be an excellent time to say so.”

“I haven’t.”

“Good.” I closed the notebook. “Then we have work.”



By eleven-thirty, the case had changed shape. By noon, it had teeth.

The storage device arrived through a properly documented transfer after one extremely uncomfortable conversation with the relevant authorities. Élodie’s brother was furious, her aunt cried, and Élodie apologized to him six times while he told her to shut up six times in return. Normal siblings, then.

The copied records showed exactly what she’d claimed — repeated warnings, repeated maintenance delays, and one internal memorandum that was particularly damning: *Replacement deferred until next fiscal allocation. Continue operations under reduced load.* The facility had not continued under reduced load. Production logs proved it.

There are stories that become tragedies because nobody knows what’s happening, I thought, staring at the memo, and there are stories that become tragedies because everybody knows and decides it would be inconvenient to care. Those were the ones that made me furious.

My office door burst open.

“SHAUN.”

I didn’t even look up. “No.”

Charlotte entered anyway. “You don’t know what I’m asking.”

“If you’re here before lunch, you’re either asking about my relationships or requesting confidential information.”

“Neither.” A grin. “Okay, partially the second.”

“Charlotte.”

“I haven’t asked anything yet! Is it true one of their employees stole internal records?”

“I represent someone involved.”

Charlotte froze. “Oh.”

“Exactly.” Her whole demeanor changed — it was one of the reasons I actually respected her. Charlotte loved a story almost pathologically, but when the line appeared clearly enough, she knew it existed. “Understood,” she said.

“Thank you.”

She looked at the file, then at me. “Anything I can report?”

“Public hearing begins at two.”

“That I already know.”

“Then you know everything I’m telling you.”

She sighed dramatically. “Being your coworker was much easier before you became respectable.”

“I have never been respectable.”

“That is true.” She headed toward the door, then stopped when I said her name.

“When the hearing begins, pay attention to the maintenance history.”

Her eyes sharpened. “That sounds suspiciously like guidance.”

“Public records.”

A slow smile. “You’re very annoying.”

“I learned from professionals.” She disappeared, still smiling, and I checked the time. Twelve seventeen. My stomach growled. I ignored it.

My office door opened again almost immediately.

“If that’s Charlotte —”

“It isn’t.”

Navia stood in the doorway holding a paper bag. I stared. She smiled brightly. “Clorinde sent me.”

“Traitor.”

“She said you wouldn’t eat.”

“I was going to.”

“When?” I looked at the clock. Navia lifted one eyebrow, and I hated, not for the first time, that all of my partners knew me too well. She came inside, set the bag directly on top of my notes, and kissed my cheek. “You have forty-three minutes before you need to leave.”

“I have documents.”

“You also have a body.”

“Debatable.”

“Shaun.”

“Fine.”

She sat on the edge of my desk while I opened the bag — bread, cheese, fruit, something sweet that I immediately knew Wriothsesley had contributed.

“You all planned this?”

“Of course not.” Navia smiled innocently. “Clorinde planned it.”

“Of course.” I took a bite. Navia glanced at the case file without touching it.

“Nervous?”

“Yes.” That answer surprised even me.

She softened. “Good.”

“Good?”

“It means you understand it matters.” I looked down at my hands.

“I don’t want this girl’s life destroyed because she panicked while trying to prove people were in danger.”

“Then don’t let them forget she’s a person.” Simple. Very Navia. I smiled; she kissed my forehead. “That’s what you’re good at.”



At one forty-eight, the Opera Epiclese loomed ahead of me. Élodie walked on my left, her aunt on my right. Charlotte and several other journalists were already gathering near the entrance; Gardes maintained order while spectators climbed the stairs. Fontaine loved a trial — sometimes too much.

Élodie stopped. “I can’t.”

I turned. “Yes, you can.”

“There are so many people.”

“You don’t have to speak to them.”

“They already think I did it.”

“You did take the device.”

She stared at me. “That was supposed to make me feel better?”

“No.” I adjusted the strap of my satchel. “We aren’t going in there to pretend you made every decision perfectly. You didn’t.” Her face fell slightly. “But neither did the people accusing you.”

She looked toward the doors. “What if I lose?”

There it was. The question every client eventually asked, in one form or another: *what if the worst thing happens anyway?* I couldn’t promise her it wouldn’t — I’d learned a long time ago that false reassurance was just another kind of abandonment — so I told her the truth.

“Then we’ll deal with what comes next.”

“You mean appeal?”

“If necessary.”

“And if that fails?”

“We deal with that too.”

“You make it sound simple.”

“It isn’t.” I smiled. “But you won’t be dealing with it alone.” Something in her shoulders loosened, and the doors opened.

Inside, the great courtroom glittered under the lights, and at its center, high above the proceedings, sat Neuville — calm, immaculate, unreadable. For exactly half a second his eyes found

mine. No smile, no acknowledgement, nothing that could suggest familiarity between Chief Justice and advocate. Professional boundaries, of course. Still, I knew that look: *do not cause trouble*. I almost smiled.

“Are you ready?” Élodie whispered.

I looked at her, then at the prosecution, then at the documents in my hands. Three injured workers. A frightened nineteen-year-old. A company that had apparently decided repairs were more expensive than risk. This was why I had stopped merely writing stories.

I stepped forward. “Absolutely.”

Across the courtroom, Neuville raised his gaze. “The Court of Fontaine is now in session.”

The room fell silent. I opened my file, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I could already hear Wriothesley later asking whether I’d managed to make it through the day without getting arrested. I intended to. Probably.

But first — I had a story to stop from becoming a tragedy.

Chapter Two

The Weight of Evidence

The courtroom always felt colder once the doors closed. Not physically — Fontaine’s engineers had perfected climate control long before anyone perfected common sense — but in the silence. Hundreds of people could be seated inside the Opera Epiclese, and yet the moment Neuville spoke, the room seemed to pull itself inward around his voice.

“The Court of Fontaine is now in session.”

Élodie’s hand tightened around the edge of the table beside me. I noticed without looking directly at her.

Across the chamber, the prosecution arranged its documents with the confidence of people who believed the facts were already settled. The company representative sat behind them — Monsieur Adrien Delorme, operations director for Martel Engineering. Late forties. Perfect coat, perfect gloves, and a perfectly arranged expression of reluctant disappointment, as if Élodie had personally forced him into this unpleasant public spectacle. I already disliked him, which meant I had to be careful. Personal dislike made people sloppy. Clorinde’s voice surfaced in my head from earlier that morning — *listen before deciding what happened* — annoyingly useful woman. I opened my notes.

The prosecutor rose. “Your Honour, the matter before the court concerns the deliberate theft of proprietary company information, unlawful entry into restricted premises, destruction of company property, and subsequent obstruction of an official investigation.”

Straightforward. Clean. Almost elegant. Élodie looked at me; I gave the smallest shake of my head. Not yet. *Let them build it.*

“The accused, Mademoiselle Élodie Martel—” I glanced toward the company representative. Same surname — an interesting little detail that sounded more dramatic than it actually was. No relation. I had checked. “—was employed as a junior mechanical apprentice at Martel Engineering’s southeastern maintenance facility. Following an industrial accident on the evening of the twenty-seventh, the accused accessed restricted company archives without authorization and removed an internal data storage device.”

No dispute there.

“At approximately nine thirty-one that evening, security records show Mademoiselle Martel leaving the archival corridor. The following morning, she returned without authorization and attempted to retrieve additional company documents. When confronted by security personnel, she resisted removal, resulting in damaged company property.” A photograph appeared on the evidence display — the cabinet, broken hinge, scattered papers. Very dramatic. The prosecution loved broken furniture. “She was detained shortly afterward. When questioned regarding the location of the stolen storage device, she refused to cooperate.”

Again, true.

“The prosecution therefore submits that these actions demonstrate not a momentary lapse in judgment, but a deliberate sequence of unlawful conduct.”

There it was. *Sequence. Intent.* That was what they needed — not a frightened apprentice, not a worker protecting evidence, but a person who planned, a person who stole, a person who obstructed. The prosecutor turned slightly. “The accused may claim that she

acted from concern regarding workplace safety. That concern, even if sincerely held, does not grant private citizens authority to seize property, trespass, or interfere with an investigation.”

That argument was not wrong, which made my job considerably more interesting.

“If every employee who disagreed with management were permitted to remove confidential records at will, commercial operations throughout Fontaine would become impossible.”

I made a note: *disagreed with management*. Good — he had just reduced six documented safety warnings to a workplace disagreement. *Keep talking. Please.*

The prosecutor concluded. Neuville turned toward us. “Advocate Martin.”

I stood. His expression remained perfectly neutral, and I knew that face intimately enough by now to recognize that it meant absolutely nothing. Professional Neuville was terrifyingly good at not being anybody’s boyfriend, friend, houseguest, dinner companion, or reluctant participant in Furina’s latest theatrical disaster. In this room, he was simply the Iudex. Good. That was how I wanted it.

“The defense does not dispute that Mademoiselle Martel removed the storage device.” A murmur moved through the spectators; Élodie stiffened. “We also do not dispute that she returned to the facility the following morning.” The company representative relaxed slightly. He shouldn’t have. “The question is not whether those events occurred.” I picked up the copied maintenance report. “The question is why.”

I walked several steps away from the table. “The prosecution described this matter as an employee ‘disagreeing with management.’ That is an interesting description.” The prosecutor’s eyes narrowed. I held up the document. “Six maintenance reports documented instability in the east conduit during the six weeks preceding the accident.” The display changed — dates, signatures,

inspection values. A few people in the gallery leaned forward. “Three separate technicians recommended replacement.” Another page. “Two engineers warned that continued operation under standard production load could result in catastrophic pressure failure.” Another page. “And nine days before the accident, management issued an internal memorandum acknowledging these warnings.” I paused, then read the relevant sentence. “*Replacement deferred until next fiscal allocation.*”

The courtroom changed. You could feel when an audience stopped watching a criminal case and started watching a scandal. Charlotte was somewhere behind me; I didn’t need to turn around to know she was writing furiously.

The prosecution rose. “Your Honour, the defense is attempting to place the company on trial.”

I turned. “No. I’m explaining motive.”

“You are presenting allegations of corporate negligence that have not been adjudicated.”

“And I am not asking the Court to adjudicate them in this proceeding.”

Neuville lifted one hand, and both of us stopped. “Advocate Martin.”

“Yes, Your Honour.”

“Remain within the scope of the charges.”

“Of course.” There was the tiniest pause — I knew that pause — and I resisted the urge to smile. I turned back toward the court. “The defense submits that Mademoiselle Martel did not remove the device for profit, commercial advantage, personal revenge, or dissemination to competitors. She believed records relevant to a serious workplace accident were being destroyed.”

The prosecutor stood again. “Believed.”

“Yes.”

“Which is not the same as proving they were.”

“No.” I looked directly at him. “That is why we brought the device.”

Élodie inhaled sharply beside me. The prosecutor froze; the company representative did too. Much more interesting. I handed the evidence certification to the court clerk. “The device was surrendered this morning through documented chain of custody. It has not been altered by the defense.”

Neuvillette examined the paperwork. “You did not possess this evidence at the time preliminary disclosures were filed.”

“No, Your Honour.”

“When did it enter your custody?”

“Ten thirty-six this morning.”

“And the prosecution was informed?”

“At ten forty-two.”

The prosecutor nodded reluctantly. That mattered. No ambush — not technically. Emotionally? Absolutely.

Neuvillette looked toward the prosecution. “Have you reviewed the device?”

“Preliminarily.”

“And?”

A pause. “It appears to contain internal maintenance records.”

“Consistent with the defense’s representation?”

Another pause. “Yes.”

Somebody in the gallery whispered. Delorme leaned toward his solicitor. Interesting. Very interesting.

I returned to my seat. Élodie leaned toward me. “Is this good?”

“Quiet.” Her mouth snapped shut. I almost felt bad. Almost.



The prosecutor called the security officer first — Officer Marcel Renard, broad-shouldered, military posture. He described the events calmly: Élodie entered the facility, he told her to leave, she refused, he attempted to escort her out, she resisted, the cabinet broke. Very clean. Too clean.

When my turn came, I stood. "Monsieur Renard, how long have you worked security at Martel Engineering?"

"Seven years."

"You knew Mademoiselle Martel?"

"By sight."

"Had she ever caused problems before?"

"No."

"Violence?"

"No."

"Threats?"

"No."

"Unauthorized access?"

"No."

"Anything you would describe as aggressive behavior?"

"No."

I walked toward the evidence display. "When you encountered her that morning, what was she doing?"

"Attempting to access the records cabinet."

"Was she armed?"

"No."

"Did she threaten you?"

"No."

"Did she attempt to strike you?"

"She resisted."

"That wasn't my question."

"No."

"Did she attempt to strike you?"

"No."

"Kick you?"

"No."

"Bite you?"

A few people laughed quietly. Neuville looked at me; I cleared my throat. "Withdrawn." Wriothesley would enjoy that later.

"You testified that you attempted to escort her from the building."

"Yes."

"How?"

"By directing her toward the exit."

"Verbally?"

"At first."

"At first." I picked up the photograph showing Élodie's bruised wrist. "Did you touch her?"

Renard hesitated. "Yes."

"Where?"

"Her arm."

"One arm?"

"Yes."

"Which?"

"I don't recall."

"Would this refresh your memory?" The photograph appeared — four distinct bruises. Renard looked at it.

"Possibly."

"Those bruises were documented approximately two hours after Mademoiselle Martel's arrest."

"Yes."

"Are those consistent with where you grabbed her?"

The prosecutor stood. "Objection. The witness has not been qualified to assess injury patterns."

"I'm asking whether he recognizes where he placed his own hand."

Neuville considered. "I will allow the limited question."

Renard shifted. "Yes."

"Thank you." I lowered the photograph. "What happened immediately afterward?"

"She pulled away."

"And the cabinet?"

“She struck it.”

“With what?”

“Her body.”

“While pulling away from you?”

“Yes.” I stopped. The room was very quiet. “So when the prosecution states that Mademoiselle Martel caused damage while resisting removal, what actually occurred is that you physically grabbed her, she pulled away, and she collided with the cabinet.”

His jaw tightened. “Yes.”

“Did she deliberately strike the cabinet?”

“I cannot know her intention.”

“Did you observe her deliberately striking it?”

“No.”

“Thank you.” I sat down.

Élodie whispered, “Oh my God.”

“Stop talking,” I whispered back. She nodded, but there was something new in her expression. Hope. Dangerous thing, hope. You had to handle it carefully.



The prosecution called Monsieur Delorme after recess. This was the witness I wanted. He took the stand with the polished confidence of somebody accustomed to answering questions from subordinates rather than advocates. The prosecutor established his credentials — operations director, twenty-two years in mechanical engineering, nine years with Martel Engineering, responsible for scheduling, staffing, budget allocation, and safety compliance across four facilities. Excellent. Thank you for making my job easier.

He acknowledged the accident. He acknowledged the warnings. He denied negligence. “Mechanical systems generate maintenance reports routinely,” he said. “A recommendation for replacement does not necessarily mean imminent danger.”

The prosecutor nodded. “And was the facility operating within legal safety certification?”

“Yes.”

“Was there any directive from Fontaine authorities requiring shutdown?”

“No.”

“Did Mademoiselle Martel have authority to remove internal records?”

“No.”

“Did she request permission?”

“No.”

“Would unauthorized removal of technical data create security risks?”

“Yes.”

The prosecutor sat. My turn. I stood slowly. “Monsieur Delorme, you oversee safety compliance?”

“Yes.”

“So you were aware of the reports.”

“Yes.”

“All six?”

“I receive many reports.”

I held one up. “This one bears your signature.”

“Yes.”

“Second?”

Signature. “Yes.”

“Third?”

“Yes.” By the fourth, he was visibly irritated. Good — not because irritation proved anything, but because irritated people often stopped performing.

“Would you agree,” I asked, “that the conduit was scheduled for replacement?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“When funding permitted.”

“Was a date assigned?”

“No.”

“So no.”

“It was under review.”

“That was not my question.”

His eyes hardened. “No.”

“Thank you.” I changed documents. “Following the maintenance warnings, did your office instruct the facility to operate under reduced load?”

“Yes.”

“How much reduction?”

“Approximately twenty percent.”

“Was that recommendation followed?”

“To my knowledge.” I placed the production records on the display.

“Then perhaps you can explain these.” He stared. Production percentages appeared across seven days — 102, 98, 104, 101, 96. No reduction. His solicitor shifted behind him.

“Monsieur Delorme?”

“I do not oversee daily production scheduling.”

“You oversee operations.”

“At an administrative level.”

“Who oversees daily scheduling?”

“Facility supervisors.”

“Who employs them?”

“Martel Engineering.”

“Who has authority to discipline them?”

“My office.”

“Were any disciplined for violating the reduced-load instruction?”

“I would have to review records.”

“So you don’t know.”

“No.”

“Were operations suspended after repeated maintenance concerns?”

“No.”

“Was production reduced?”

“I believed it was.”

“Was the damaged conduit replaced?”

“No.”

“And then it failed.” The prosecutor stood.

“Objection.”

I immediately nodded. “Withdrawn.” Neuville watched me. Yes — I knew exactly what I was doing. I moved on.

“After the accident, when did you first learn that internal maintenance files had been accessed?”

“That night.”

“By whom?”

“Mademoiselle Martel.”

“No. Who informed you?”

“My archival supervisor.”

“At what time?”

“Approximately ten.”

“And when were the missing digital files discovered?”

Silence. There — that was the question. Delorme’s gaze shifted. “I don’t know what you mean.”

I picked up Élodie’s original report to investigators. “She stated that maintenance documents had disappeared before she copied the remaining archive.”

“She has made many claims.”

“I’m asking whether records were deleted.”

“I would not use that term.”

“What term would you use?”

“Archived.”

I almost smiled. “Where?”

“Internal storage.”

“Available to investigators?”

A pause. “I would have to check.”

“Available to this court?”

“I don’t know.”

“Available to the prosecution?”

“I don’t know.” I turned toward the prosecutor. He looked considerably less pleased than before. I turned back.

“You are the operations director.”

“Yes.”

“You signed several of these maintenance warnings.”

“Yes.”

“After an accident involving the exact system identified in those warnings, certain electronic records became unavailable.”

“They were archived.”

“And yet you cannot tell the Court where they were archived.”

“Not without consulting our records department.”

“Did you order them archived?”

“No.”

“Did anyone under your authority?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would company policy permit altering maintenance records following an industrial accident?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then if someone did so—”

“Objection.”

“Sustained,” Neuville said immediately. I nodded. No problem — the answer was already hanging in the room. I looked at Delorme.

“One final question.” He waited. “If Mademoiselle Martel had not copied those reports, would the Court currently possess them?”

He stared at me. The prosecutor rose. “Objection. Speculative.”

Before Neuville answered, I said, “I’ll withdraw,” and sat down. Élodie’s hands were shaking. I placed mine over one of them beneath the table. “Breathe.” She did — slowly, one breath, then

another — while across the courtroom, Neuville called the next portion of evidence.



By late afternoon, Fontaine had stopped treating the case like entertainment. The mood had shifted. The prosecution was still correct about several things — Élodie had taken property, she had entered restricted areas, she had withheld evidence, and good intentions did not make those actions disappear. I never argued that they did. Instead, I argued proportionality. Context. Necessity. And most importantly, intent.

When closing arguments began, the sunlight through the high windows had turned gold. I stood. Élodie stared straight ahead.

“Justice becomes dangerous when it forgets context.” The courtroom quieted. “Mademoiselle Martel made mistakes.” I felt her look at me. “She should have contacted authorities. She should not have transferred evidence through her younger brother. She should not have returned alone to the facility.” Her shoulders sank. “But mistakes made under fear are not automatically equivalent to criminal intent.”

I walked toward the center. “The prosecution asks this Court to see a deliberate thief.” I looked at the maintenance reports. “I ask the Court to see the complete sequence. One apprentice repeatedly reports unsafe conditions. Nothing happens. Workers continue operating machinery. Nothing happens. The machine fails. Three people are injured.” I paused. “And then the records begin disappearing.” The prosecutor shifted. “She does something reckless — she copies them. She does something more reckless — she returns for the paper records. She is confronted. She panics. She refuses to reveal where the copied evidence is because she believes doing so will allow it to be destroyed.”

I turned toward Élodie. “Was that the legally correct course?”

“No.”

Then back toward Neuville. “But law without judgment is merely machinery.” The sentence left my mouth before I entirely decided to say it. Neuville’s eyes changed — only slightly. “The Court must decide whether punishment should reflect only the prohibited act, or also what that act was attempting to prevent.” I closed the folder. “Mademoiselle Martel did not sell these documents. She did not publish them. She did not use them for blackmail. She preserved them. And because she did, this Court now possesses evidence that might otherwise have vanished.”

I returned to my table. “The defense asks that the most serious charges be dismissed, that the remaining unauthorized access offense be considered in light of necessity and mitigating circumstances, and that this matter be referred separately for investigation of workplace safety and records handling.” I looked at Élodie, then at Neuville. “No nineteen-year-old should have believed the only way to protect injured workers was to become a criminal herself.”

I sat. The silence was complete. Even Charlotte had stopped writing.

Neuville lowered his eyes to the documents before him. “The Court will recess.” Everyone stood. “The judgment will be delivered at six.” Then he left.

Élodie immediately turned to me. “Was that good?”

I exhaled. “I don’t know.”

“What?”

“I said what needed saying.”

“But do you think—”

“I don’t predict judges.”

Her aunt looked toward the chamber exit. “You know him.”

That sentence landed harder than I wanted. Élodie looked between us; I kept my face neutral. “I know Neuville personally.” Her eyes widened. “But in that chair, he isn’t my friend.” Or *my*

husband's boyfriend. Definitely not explaining that portion right now. "He will decide based on the evidence."

"Would he ever—"

"No." I knew what she was about to ask. Would he help me? Would he favor me? Would my relationship matter? "No," I repeated. "And I wouldn't want him to."

Élodie watched me, then nodded. "Okay."

I gathered my papers. My hands were shaking now. Wonderful — apparently my body had waited until the argument was finished to remember anxiety existed.

Charlotte appeared outside the courtroom before we even made it down the stairs, stopping herself several feet away. Professional boundary. Impressive. "Can I ask for comment?"

Élodie looked terrified. I stepped slightly in front of her. "After judgment."

Charlotte nodded. "Can I photograph her?" Élodie looked at me.

"Your choice."

She hesitated, then shook her head. Charlotte lowered her Kamera immediately. "No problem." I appreciated her more for that than I would probably ever tell her.

She looked at me instead. "Can I photograph you?"

"Why?"

"You're counsel."

"I look exhausted."

"That makes it authentic."

"Charlotte." She lifted the Kamera.

"Just one." I stared at her. The shutter clicked.

"You little—"

"Beautiful." She ran. I pointed after her.

"This is why we are not close friends!"

Élodie laughed. Actually laughed. The sound surprised all of us. Good. She needed that. So did I.



At exactly six, we returned. The courtroom filled again. Neuville entered; everyone rose. My heart was beating annoyingly hard. Élodie looked pale.

“The Court has reviewed the testimony, documentary evidence, and arguments presented.” His voice gave nothing away. “Regarding destruction of company property, the evidence does not establish deliberate action beyond reasonable doubt.”

Élodie grabbed my sleeve. I didn’t move.

“Charge dismissed.”

A sound left her aunt — half sob. Not done.

“Regarding obstruction, Mademoiselle Martel knowingly withheld the location of evidence during an active investigation.” Élodie’s grip tightened. “However, the device was preserved, surrendered, and appears material to the underlying industrial accident. The Court further acknowledges the accused’s stated fear that evidence might be altered.” My pulse slowed slightly. “The obstruction charge is therefore reduced.”

Élodie whispered, “Oh.”

“Regarding unauthorized entry and removal of company materials...” Here. This was it. Neuville looked directly at her. “The Court cannot establish a precedent that private individuals may seize records whenever they independently determine wrongdoing has occurred.” Fair. “Nevertheless, circumstances matter.” My breath caught. “Mademoiselle Martel acted neither for profit nor personal advantage. Her conduct preserved documents relevant to worker safety and an ongoing investigation.” He paused. “The Court therefore declines to impose custodial punishment.”

Élodie broke. A sob escaped her; her aunt covered her mouth. I closed my eyes briefly. Not prison. Thank gods.

“Conditional discharge,” Neuville continued. “Twelve months. Community service requirement. No further unauthorized access to Martel Engineering property.” Élodie nodded frantically.

“Additionally, the Court orders immediate referral of the maintenance records, operational logs, and archival discrepancies to the appropriate regulatory authority.” Delorme went still. There it was. Neuville’s gaze moved toward him. “The allegations raised during this proceeding regarding workplace safety and record preservation are sufficiently serious to warrant independent examination.” Charlotte was writing so hard I thought the pencil might snap. “The Court further orders that no employee connected to the accident or subsequent investigation be subject to retaliation pending review.”

I looked at Élodie. Her face crumpled — not because she had escaped prison, but because somebody had finally said it. *You cannot punish them for speaking.*

“The judgment is entered accordingly.” Neuville raised his hand. “This matter is concluded.”

The room erupted. Not chaos — Fontaine had standards — but close. Élodie grabbed me. Actually grabbed me, both arms around my waist. I froze, then hugged her back.

“Thank you.”

“You did the hard part.”

“No.”

“Yes.” She was crying now. “I thought my life was over.” That sentence hit somewhere deep. I tightened my arms around her.

“It isn’t.”

Her aunt hugged both of us. Now I was trapped. Wonderful. I was going to cry — absolutely not, not in the Opera Epiclese — and looked upward, which was a terrible strategy, because my eyes immediately found Neuville. He was gathering papers, still professional, still distant. But for one brief second, he looked at me, and the smallest softness touched his expression. Not congratulations. Not favoritism. Just recognition. *You did what you came here to do.* I looked away before my face betrayed me.

Charlotte appeared approximately seven seconds later. “Now?”

Élodie wiped her eyes and looked at me. I shrugged. “Your decision.” She thought, then looked at Charlotte.

“You can ask.”

Charlotte smiled — not predatorily, gently. “Only what you’re comfortable answering.”

And just like that, journalist met story. But this time the story had not become a tragedy.



By the time I reached home, it was nearly nine. My feet hurt. My back hurt. My throat hurt. My brain had stopped producing useful thoughts approximately an hour earlier. I opened the door — warm light spilled across the floor, something smelled amazing — and dropped my bag.

“I’m home.”

From the living room: “We noticed.”

Wriothesley. I followed the voice and found him sitting on the sofa with one arm along the back, tea in hand. Clorinde sat beside him. And in the chair across from them — Neuvillelette.

I stopped. “You.”

He blinked. “Good evening.”

I pointed. “You terrified me for six hours.” Wriothesley started laughing immediately. Neuvillelette looked genuinely confused.

“I did not intend to.”

“YOU HAVE THE SAME FACE FOR EVERYTHING.”

Clorinde covered her mouth. Traitor.

Neuvillelette considered this. “I was presiding over a criminal proceeding.”

“I KNOW.”

“Would you have preferred visible emotional reactions?”

“No.”

“Then I am uncertain what correction you would recommend.”

I stared. Wriothesley was practically shaking. “Oh my god.” I kicked off my shoes; one landed sideways. Clorinde stood.

“How did she take the judgment?”

“She cried.”

“And you?”

“I did not.” Three people looked at me. “Fuck all of you.”

Wriothesley opened his arms. “Come here, counselor.” I tried to maintain dignity. I lasted approximately two seconds, then crossed the room and collapsed against him. His arms wrapped around me. There. Home. Clorinde sat beside us and touched my leg.

“You did well.” I buried my face against Wriothesley’s shoulder.

“I’m tired.”

“I know.”

Neuvillette remained quietly seated. After a moment, I looked at him. “Was I annoying?”

“Yes.” My mouth dropped open; Wriothesley nearly choked. Neuvillette continued, completely serious. “You repeatedly approached the boundary of arguments I had explicitly limited.”

“I stayed inside them.”

“Barely.”

“Inside is inside.”

Clorinde murmured, “She has a point.” Neuvillette looked betrayed. I grinned.

“Thank you, wife.”

“But,” Neuvillette continued, “your argument was effective.” I stopped. Coming from him, that meant something.

“You think?”

“I would not have said so otherwise.”

Wriothesley kissed the top of my head. “Careful. Compliment her too much and we’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Shut up.”

Then another voice came from the hallway. “Did she win?”

Furina appeared. I blinked. “How many people are in my house?”

“Our house,” Clorinde corrected.

“Not helping.” Furina marched into the room carrying a cake box.

“I brought dessert in anticipation of either triumph or emotional devastation.”

“That is surprisingly practical.”

“I am a surprisingly practical woman.” Everyone stared at her. Furina frowned. “I can be.”

I laughed, and suddenly the whole day loosened inside my chest. The trial. The fear. The documents. Élodie crying. The possibility that it could have ended differently. It was all still there. But so was this — Wriothesley warm beside me, Clorinde’s hand resting against my knee, Neuville pretending he hadn’t come over partially to check on me, Furina opening a cake box with the seriousness of a national ceremony. My ridiculous, complicated life. My home. My people. My Fontaine.

Furina lifted the cake lid. Across the top, in elaborate icing, were the words:

CONGRATULATIONS ON NOT GETTING YOUR CLIENT SENT
TO PRISON

I stared. Wriothesley burst out laughing. Clorinde actually covered her face. Neuville closed his eyes.

“Furina.”

“What?”

I started laughing so hard my stomach hurt. And for the first time since five twenty-three that morning, I finally stopped thinking about tomorrow.

Chapter Three

The Case Callas Left Behind

The morning after Élodie Martel's hearing, I woke up to silence. Actual silence. No alarm, no papers falling off the nightstand, no husband making sarcastic comments about the structural integrity of furniture, no wife informing me that I had buttoned my shirt incorrectly. Just warmth.

I opened one eye. Clorinde was asleep beside me, facing away, one hand tucked beneath her pillow. Wriothesity was behind me, his arm across my waist. For once, nobody was rushing anywhere. I closed my eye again. This was good. This was peaceful. This was—

“Shaun.”

I opened my eyes. Wriothesity's voice was far too awake.

“No.”

“You don't even know what I'm going to say.”

“You're speaking before breakfast. It can't be good.” His chest moved against my back as he laughed quietly.

Clorinde stirred. “Don't encourage her,” she murmured.

“I haven't done anything.”

“You're about to.”

Wriothesity was silent. I rolled over. He was looking at the ceiling, which was immediately suspicious — normally, when

Wriothsesley wanted to annoy me, he looked directly at me so he could enjoy the reaction. This wasn't that.

"What happened?"

He glanced down. "There's someone in Meropide I want you to meet."

Clorinde opened her eyes. I pushed myself upright. "Someone?"

"A prisoner." That woke me completely. Wriothsesley sat back against the headboard. "He's been there eleven years."

"For what?"

"Murder." I waited; his expression remained unreadable. "You don't think he did it."

"No."

Clorinde sat up beside me. "You've reviewed his case?"

"Several times."

"And?"

"The verdict bothers me." That meant something. Wriothsesley wasn't sentimental about prisoners — he cared about them, certainly, far more than many people on the surface understood, but he also didn't pretend innocence merely because somebody regretted what they'd done. If Wriothsesley said a conviction bothered him after eleven years of watching that prisoner, I listened.

"His name is Lucien Armand," he continued. "He was twenty-eight when he entered the Fortress. Dockworker from Poisson. Convicted of killing a shipping broker named Benoît Vaudin."

"Evidence?"

"Witness testimony. Blood on his clothes. A weapon found near his home."

"That sounds substantial."

"It does." There it was. "But?"

"The witness changed part of his statement after sentencing."

Clorinde frowned. "Recanted?"

"No. Died before he could."

I stared. Wriothlesley continued. "The first statement said he saw Lucien leaving the warehouse after hearing an argument. The version presented at trial said he saw Lucien standing over Vaudin's body."

"That's not a minor change."

"No."

"And nobody challenged it?"

"Lucien's advocate did. The prosecution argued the original statement was incomplete and the witness clarified under formal questioning."

"Who was the witness?"

"A cargo clerk named René Desmarais."

I reached automatically toward the nightstand for something to write with. Wriothlesley caught my wrist. "You are not working in bed."

"I'm making one note."

"You're already mentally cross-examining a dead man."

"That is not the point." Clorinde reached over me, took the notebook first, and put it on her side of the bed. Traitor. "Continue," she said. Wriothlesley smiled. I stared at both of them. "This household is hostile."

"Lucien has maintained the same story since his arrest," Wriothlesley continued. "He went to the warehouse to confront Vaudin because wages from several dockworkers had disappeared from company accounts. They argued. Lucien left. Later that night, Vaudin was killed."

"And the blood?"

"Lucien said Vaudin had cut his hand during the argument after smashing a glass."

"Was that injury documented?"

"Yes." My brain accelerated. "The weapon?"

"Industrial hook."

"Fingerprints?"

“Partial.”

“Lucien’s?”

“Inconclusive.” I looked at him. “Then why was he convicted?”

“The blood. The witness. Motive. And because prosecutors argued the hook belonged to his work crew.”

“So circumstantial.”

“Mostly.”

“But enough.”

“At the time.” Clorinde folded her arms. “What changed?”

Wriothlesley looked toward her. “Callas.”

The bedroom went silent. Not quiet — silent. Clorinde’s posture changed first, barely, but I knew her. Her shoulders went still, her face settling into that controlled expression she used when something touched a place she did not particularly enjoy opening.

Navia’s father. Callas. Former president of the Spina di Rosula. The man who had allowed himself to be publicly disgraced and ultimately died in a duel against Clorinde rather than reveal the truth behind what he had been investigating. Clorinde carried that death differently than Navia did. Navia lost her father. Clorinde had been the one holding the pistol — even knowing what Callas had intended, even knowing later what he had been protecting. That kind of knowledge didn’t erase the memory of pulling the trigger.

“What does Callas have to do with Lucien?” I asked.

Wriothlesley got out of bed. “I found a letter.”



An hour later, all three of us were sitting at the kitchen table — coffee for me, tea for Wriothlesley, something dark enough to qualify as a threat for Clorinde. The letter sat in the center. Old paper, water damage along one edge, a broken wax seal bearing the emblem of the Spina di Rosula. I hadn’t touched it yet. Wriothlesley had brought it home from the Fortress archives several days earlier.

“You removed prison records?” I asked.

“It isn’t a prison record.”

“Wriothesley.”

“It was stored with prison records.”

“That sounds suspiciously like—”

“Shaun.” Clorinde gave me a look. Fine. I picked up the letter carefully. The handwriting was strong, elegant without being decorative. The date was fourteen months before Callas died. I read aloud.

Monsieur Armand, I have reviewed what you sent through your sister. I believe there are serious problems with the evidence used against you, particularly the testimony of Monsieur Desmarais and the accounting records connected to Vaudin Shipping. I cannot promise what I have not yet proven. I can promise that I will continue looking. Do not let desperation convince you that truth no longer matters simply because it has been delayed.

I stopped. Clorinde looked down. There was more.

There are names appearing in the financial records that I recognize from another matter. Until I understand that connection, I will not place those names in writing. If anything should happen before I return, ask for the yellow ledger. — Callas

I looked up. “The yellow ledger.”

Wriothesley nodded. “Lucien has asked about it for eleven years.”

“Did anyone know what he meant?”

“No.”

“Does he?”

“He says Callas mentioned it once during a visit.”

“Callas visited Meropide?”

“Twice.” That surprised even Clorinde.

“When?” she asked.

“Within the same year as this letter.”

“Navia knows?”

“No.” I put the letter down. “Yet.”

Wriothesley looked at me. “I want Neuville to reopen the case.”

"That's not your decision."

"I know."

"So why are you telling me?"

"Because he'll listen to you longer than he'll listen to me." I stared. Clorinde stared. Wriothlesley took a sip of tea. "What?"

I nearly laughed. "You're sending your wife to persuade your boyfriend to reopen a murder conviction?"

"When you put it like that, it sounds inappropriate."

"It IS inappropriate."

"I'll be there."

"That does not improve it." Clorinde actually smirked. I pointed at her. "Don't."

Wriothlesley leaned back. "I've already requested review twice."

"And?"

"Insufficient new evidence."

"Reasonable."

"I know."

"So why now?" He nodded toward the letter. "Because that wasn't in the court file." My amusement disappeared. "What?"

"Neither were Callas's prison visits." I looked again at the date. "Was Callas officially investigating?"

"Not on behalf of the Court."

"Spina?"

"Possibly." Clorinde spoke quietly. "Callas investigated many things without recording why." I looked at her; her eyes remained on the letter. "He believed writing certain information down endangered people." That tracked painfully well with what I knew about him. "And if he connected Lucien's case to something else..." Clorinde finished my thought. "He may have hidden the evidence."

The yellow ledger. I sat back. "Okay."

Wriothlesley raised an eyebrow. "Okay?"

"I'll talk to Neuville." He smiled. "I knew marrying you was strategically valuable." I kicked him under the table.



Neuvillette's office at the Palais Mermonia was exactly what I expected an office belonging to Neuvillette to look like — large, immaculate, quiet enough that dropping a paperclip would probably require a formal apology. I sat opposite his desk with Wriothlesley beside me. Clorinde had gone to speak with Navia; that conversation would not be easy.

Neuvillette finished reading Callas's letter. Then read it again. He set it down.

"No."

Wriothlesley sighed. I hadn't said anything yet.

"Could you at least wait until she argues?" Wriothlesley asked.

"I am familiar with Advocate Martin's arguments." I leaned forward. "Oh, are you?" Neuvillette looked at me. "Yes." "Interesting." "Shaun." Wriothlesley touched my knee under the desk; I slapped his hand away.

Neuvillette continued. "The existence of a private letter expressing doubt does not establish a miscarriage of justice."

"No," I agreed. He paused; Wriothlesley looked at me, apparently neither of them expecting me to agree immediately. I continued. "But evidence being absent from the original record when it should have been disclosed might."

Neuvillette's expression sharpened. "The letter did not exist at the time of trial."

"The prison visits did."

"Callas was not acting as an officer of the Court."

"Then why aren't they in Lucien's institutional visitation history?" Silence. Wriothlesley looked at Neuvillette. Neuvillette looked at Wriothlesley. I looked between them. Finally: "His visitation history is incomplete?"

Wriothlesley nodded. "Callas's name appears in a secondary security register. Not the official prisoner log." Neuvillette's

expression changed — not dramatically, Neuvillette did very little dramatically, but the room became colder. “Why?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.”

“When was this discovered?”

“Three days ago.”

“And you removed the original?”

“No. Copy only.” Neuvillette looked mildly relieved. I resisted saying anything. Growth.

He turned to me. “What exactly are you asking?”

“Permission to investigate.”

“That does not require my permission.”

“To access archived evidence, sealed trial records, and potentially request forensic review, it does.”

“You are not counsel of record.”

“Not yet.” Wriothlesley smiled. Neuvillette noticed. “So this has already been decided between you.”

“No,” I said.

“It has been suggested aggressively.” Wriothlesley nodded. “She’s very susceptible to mysteries.”

“I hate you.”

“I know.”

Neuvillette placed both hands on the desk. “Reopening a finalized murder conviction is not a casual action.”

“I agree.”

“It may cause significant distress to the victim’s family.”

“I know.”

“It may also create false hope for Monsieur Armand.”

“I know.”

“And Callas’s involvement complicates the matter.” There. “That is precisely why we should look,” I said. Neuvillette’s gaze held mine. “Callas believed something was wrong. He connected this case to another matter strongly enough that he deliberately refused to write names down.”

"That is speculation."

"Yes."

"Then do not state it as fact."

"I didn't." Wriothlesley quietly looked toward the ceiling. I ignored him. "Let me review the original file," I said. "If there's nothing, I'll tell Lucien that."

"You would?"

"Yes."

"What if Wriothlesley disagrees?"

"I'm not Wriothlesley's employee." Wriothlesley murmured, "Thank gods." I continued. "If the conviction is sound, then it's sound. But if somebody has spent eleven years in Meropide because evidence was manipulated, buried, or misunderstood..." I stopped. Neuvillette watched me. "We don't get to leave him there because correcting it would be inconvenient."

The room stayed quiet. Then Neuvillette asked, "Would you represent him?"

"Yes."

"You have not met him."

"I'll meet him first."

"What if you dislike him?" I blinked.

"That isn't relevant."

"Good." I realized belatedly that had been a test. Asshole.

Neuvillette turned toward Wriothlesley. "I will authorize preliminary review." Wriothlesley smiled. "Thank you." "I have not reopened the conviction." "I know." "I am authorizing Advocate Martin to inspect sealed evidence and permitting independent comparison against the archived trial record." I leaned back. "That's enough."

"For now." He reached for another document, then stopped. "There is one further issue." Of course there was. "What?"

Neuvillette looked at me. "Callas's name appears nowhere in the prosecution file."

“That’s strange.”

“Not merely strange.” He opened a drawer, removed a folder, placed it on the desk. “I searched related archival indexes after Wriothesley contacted me.” I stared. “You already investigated?”

“I verified whether his claim had foundation.” Wriothesley smiled smugly. Neuvillette ignored him. “One reference appears in a separate judicial correspondence log.” He slid a page toward me.

Callas had submitted a petition. Not for Lucien. For René Desmarais. The witness. I read it twice. “Request for protective custody?”

“Yes.”

“Why would Callas request protection for the prosecution’s key witness?”

“It was submitted six months after Lucien’s conviction.”

“What reason?” Neuvillette pointed. *Risk of retaliation regarding financial testimony.* I felt something click. “The financial records.” Wriothesley leaned closer.

Neuvillette nodded. “Desmarais died seventeen days later.”

I looked up. “How?”

“Officially?” That was never a good word. Neuvillette opened another page. “Drowning.” Fontaine. Of course. “Accidental?”

“That was the conclusion.”

“Body recovered?”

“Yes.”

“Toxicology?”

“Limited.”

“Witnesses?”

“None.” I stared at him. “You’re telling me the prosecution’s key witness changed his testimony, Callas later believed he was in danger because of financial information, and then he died.”

“I am telling you only what the record says.”

“Which is exactly that.” Neuvillette’s eyes narrowed. “Advocate Martin.” “Fine.” I sat back, but my pulse had changed. This was no

longer one bad murder conviction. Something connected the witness, the victim, Callas, money — and maybe whatever Callas had discovered before his own death.

“The yellow ledger,” I said. Wriothlesley nodded. Neuville’s expression told me he hated that phrase already. Good. I intended to make him hear it frequently.



Navia was waiting at our house that evening. She wasn’t crying. That concerned me more than if she had been. Clorinde sat beside her at the dining table; no one had touched the tea. I entered slowly.

Navia looked at me. “So.”

“Hi.”

“Apparently my father secretly investigated a murder conviction, visited Meropide twice, tried to protect a witness, and left behind a mysterious ledger nobody can find.” I put my bag down. “When you summarize it like that—” “Shaun.” “Sorry.”

I sat opposite her. Wriothlesley remained standing near the doorway, giving her space. Clorinde’s hand rested near Navia’s, not touching unless Navia chose to close the distance. She eventually did. Their fingers intertwined, and that little movement made my chest hurt.

“I didn’t know,” Navia said.

“I know.”

“He never told me.”

“I know.”

“He never told me anything.” There it was — not anger at us, not really. Old anger. Old grief. The kind that didn’t disappear simply because you eventually understood why someone had hidden the truth. Callas had loved Navia enough to protect her. He had also left her carrying questions that took years to answer. Both things could be true.

“I keep finding pieces of him after he’s dead.” Navia laughed once; there was no humor in it. “A letter. Somebody who knew him.

Something he investigated. Some secret he carried alone.” Clorinde lowered her eyes; Navia noticed immediately and squeezed her hand. “Don’t.”

Clorinde looked at her. “This isn’t about you.” Clorinde said nothing. Navia’s expression softened. “Papa made his choices.” The room became painfully still. “I wish they were different,” she continued, “but they were his.” Clorinde finally nodded.

I reached across the table. Navia took my hand too. Now she had both of us — her girlfriends, one on either side of history she had never asked to inherit.

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked. Navia looked at me, and the question clearly surprised her. “If this is something you don’t want opened—”

“No.” Immediate. Firm. She sat straighter. “No.” That was Navia — grief one second, steel the next. “If Papa thought an innocent man was imprisoned, we finish it.”

I watched her. “You sure?”

“I’ve spent too much of my life learning what happens when people decide silence is safer.” Clorinde’s fingers tightened around hers. Navia continued, “If he couldn’t finish whatever he started, then we do.”

Wriothsley finally came closer. “There may be things you don’t want to know.”

Navia looked at him. “There already were.” Fair. Then she looked at me. “What do you need?”

“Anything Callas left behind.”

“There are boxes in Poisson.”

“Records?”

“Some.”

“Personal notebooks?”

“Possibly.”

“Financial ledgers?” She frowned. “Spina had several.”

“Any yellow ones?” Silence. Navia’s expression changed. “What?”

I leaned forward. "You know one?"

"Maybe."

"Navia." She stood so quickly the chair moved backward. Clorinde stood too. Navia started pacing. "When I was little, Papa had this awful yellow bookkeeping book."

My heartbeat climbed. "How awful?"

"Bright."

"How bright?"

"Why does that matter?"

"Because Callas told Lucien to ask for a yellow ledger."

Navia stopped. Everyone looked at her. She stared at me. "No."

"What?"

"No, because that ledger wasn't secret."

"Where was it kept?"

"In his office."

"Which office?"

"The old Spina office in Poisson."

"Still there?"

"No." Of course. "What happened to it?"

Navia's face slowly lost color. "When Papa died, most of his things were moved."

"To where?"

"Some came to me."

"And the rest?" She looked toward Clorinde. "The storage room beneath the old headquarters." Clorinde frowned. "That building flooded after the Primordial Sea incident."

"Yes."

"So the ledger may be gone."

"Maybe."

I stood. Navia looked at me. I looked at Wriothesley. Wriothesley looked at the clock. "No."

"I didn't say anything."

"It is nearly ten."

“So?”

“You are not going into a partially flooded underground storage facility tonight.”

“We have lamps.”

“No.”

“Clorinde?”

“No.”

“Navia?” She hesitated. Wriothesley stared at her. Navia smiled apologetically. “Tomorrow?”

“Traitor.” She came around the table and kissed my cheek. “I’m learning from your wife.” Clorinde looked almost proud. I folded my arms. “This relationship structure is becoming oppressive.”

Wriothesley kissed the top of my head as he passed. “Goodnight, counselor.”

“I am not sleeping.”

“You are.”

“I have eleven years of court transcripts.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Callas left a clue.”

“Still tomorrow.”

“An innocent man is in prison.”

“And has been for eleven years. He will still be there after you get six hours of sleep.” I hated when he used logic. Especially prison logic.



I looked toward Navia. She was still thinking about the ledger — I could see it, childhood memories rearranging themselves. Her father at a desk. Yellow book open. Numbers she hadn’t understood, names she hadn’t noticed. Maybe something had been sitting in front of her for years, something Callas expected somebody to find. Or perhaps we were chasing coincidence. That was the danger of cold cases: when enough time passed, every surviving detail started

to feel meaningful simply because so few remained. I knew better than to fall in love with a theory.

Still — the changed witness statement, the missing visitation record, Callas's letter, Desmarais's request for protection, his death, the yellow ledger. Eleven years.

I looked toward Wriothesley. "When do I meet Lucien?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"How early?"

"Ten." I smiled. He immediately looked suspicious. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Shaun."

"I'm just appreciating that I don't have to wake up at five." Clorinde muttered, "Thank the Archons." Navia laughed. Even Wriothesley smiled, and for a moment, everything felt lighter.

Then my gaze returned to the old letter lying beside my bag. Callas's handwriting. One unfinished promise to a man who had spent eleven years beneath the sea. *I cannot promise what I have not yet proven. I can promise that I will continue looking.* Callas had died before he could keep that promise.

Tomorrow, I would meet the man still waiting for him. And this time, I intended to find out why.

Chapter Four

The Man Beneath the Sea

The Fortress of Meropide had never frightened me. That probably said more about my questionable sense of self-preservation than it did about the Fortress itself. Most people approached the great underwater prison with some combination of dread, fascination, and the deeply reasonable desire never to become familiar with its interior — the descent alone was usually enough to remind visitors they were leaving the surface world behind.

The light disappeared first. Then the colour. Then, slowly, Fontaine itself vanished above us beneath layer after layer of water, until nothing remained on the other side of the glass but the sea, doing exactly what it had done since long before any of Fontaine's laws existed.

I stood near the transport lift's observation window with my satchel against my hip, watching bubbles rise past the glass. Beside me, Wriothsley drank tea.

Tea. On the descent into an underwater prison, as though this were the most ordinary errand in the world.

"You brought that from home."

"Yes."

"You could have finished it before we left."

"Yes."

"You specifically chose to carry a teacup through a secure transport."

"Yes."

I looked at him. "Why?"

He took another sip. "Because I wanted tea."

I hated that there was no argument against that.

"You're impossible."

"So I've heard."

"You know, most Dukes would try to look intimidating while escorting an advocate into their prison."

"I run the place. I don't need accessories."

"You're carrying a porcelain cup."

"Exactly."

The lift shuddered, and my hand found the railing before I'd consciously decided to reach for it. Wriothesley noticed — he noticed everything about me by now — and didn't comment. He simply stepped closer, until his shoulder was solid against mine. That was something I'd come to appreciate about him: he wasn't always asking whether I was all right. Sometimes he just made sure I had something steady beside me and let the rest take care of itself.

"Does Lucien know I'm coming?"

"Yes."

"What did you tell him?"

"That an advocate wanted to review his conviction."

"And?"

"That you're married to me."

My head snapped around. "WHY?"

Wriothesley smiled into his cup. "Because he asked why the Duke of Meropide suddenly cared whether an outside lawyer took his case."

"You could have said professional concern."

"I did."

“And?”

“He didn’t believe me.”

“Fair.”

“So I told him you’re my wife.”

I stared at him. “Anything else?”

“He asked whether that meant you’d be biased.”

“What did you say?”

“That you’re usually biased against me.”

I slapped his arm. The lift doors opened before I could retaliate properly. Two guards glanced at us; Wriothsley remained perfectly composed, and I straightened my coat as if nothing had happened. Neither guard said a word. Smart men.

Meropide smelled the way it always did — metal, machinery, oil, steam, something vaguely edible drifting from the cafeteria — and it was louder than the surface in every direction: constant machinery, boots on grated walkways, voices echoing down corridors, somewhere heavy equipment slamming into place with enough force that I felt it through the soles of my shoes. People noticed Wriothsley first. They noticed me second. Then they noticed our hands brush as we walked, which was apparently far more interesting than either of the first two things.

I ignored them.

“Do they always stare?”

“No.”

“They’re staring.”

“They’re prisoners. Entertainment options are limited.”

“That sounds like a management problem.”

“It is. I’ll schedule a theatre night.”

“With Furina?”

He looked at me.

I laughed. “Oh, she’d do it.”

“I know.”

“She would absolutely come down here and put on an entire production.”

“I know.”

“She’d demand lighting modifications.”

“Shaun.”

“Fine.”

We passed through one checkpoint, then another, and the deeper we went, the quieter Wriothsley became — not colder, more focused. Down here he wasn’t my husband, not primarily. He was the Duke. Every guard straightened a fraction. Every worker gave him room. Every prisoner seemed to know exactly where he stood in a corridor before they’d even looked up. I had seen this man half-asleep in loose trousers, hair everywhere, complaining because I’d stolen his side of the blanket, and I still sometimes forgot that hundreds of people down here knew him only as authority itself — right up until he gave one quiet instruction and five people moved at once.

Right. My husband was terrifying. Very attractive. But terrifying.

We stopped outside an interview room.

“Lucien is inside.”

I reached for the door. Wriothsley caught my wrist.

I looked at him. His expression had changed.

“Before you go in — don’t promise him anything.”

“I know.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

“He has been waiting eleven years.” The humor had gone entirely out of his voice. “He’ll hear hope in things you don’t intend as promises.”

I nodded. “I’ll be careful.”

He studied me for another second before releasing my wrist. “I’ll be outside.”

“You aren’t coming in?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because if he speaks differently with me present, I need you to hear the version he gives when I’m not in the room.”

I smiled faintly. “You’ve thought about this.”

“For eleven years.”

There was something in his voice — not guilt exactly, but the particular weight of a responsibility he’d carried quietly and never once mentioned unless asked. I touched his hand.

“I’ll talk to him.”

Then I went inside.

Lucien Armand looked older than fifty. He was thirty-nine. That alone made me angry — not because prison always aged people, but because eleven years had clearly passed between the man described in his original court file and the one sitting in front of me. His hair had gone mostly grey at the temples, one eye carried a faint scar beneath it, and his hands were enormous — dockworker’s hands, thick-fingered, old cuts, permanently calloused skin. He stood when I entered.

“Mademoiselle Martin?”

“Shaun.”

His eyebrows rose. “That’s what the Duke calls you.”

“Most people do.”

He sat again. I took the chair opposite him, no desk between us — I preferred it that way, always had, ever since I’d learned a desk gave people somewhere to perform from behind. He glanced toward the door.

“He’s not coming?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“So you can talk to me without wondering whether you’re talking to the man who controls your life down here.”

Lucien gave a short laugh. “He controls less than people think.”

“Don’t tell him that.”

“I have.”

“And?”

“He agreed.”

That sounded exactly like Wriothesley. I settled my notebook on my lap. “Before we start, I need you to understand something.”

He looked at me.

“I am not here to tell you that you’re getting out.”

His expression closed slightly. “I know.”

“No — I need you to actually hear me.” He looked away. I waited until he looked back. “I am reviewing whether there is sufficient evidence to challenge your conviction. That could result in nothing.” His jaw tightened. “It could result in the Court refusing review.” Silence. “It could result in review, and the conviction still standing.” His fingers curled against his knees. “And yes — it could eventually result in your conviction being overturned.” That got his eyes. “But I don’t know yet.”

He breathed out. “Callas said the same thing.”

There it was. I opened my notebook. “Tell me about him.”

Lucien leaned back. For several seconds he said nothing, and I let the silence sit exactly as long as it needed to.

“He was annoying.”

I blinked. “That’s your description?”

“He asked the same question six different ways.”

I almost smiled. “Sounds familiar.”

“You do that?”

“I’ve been known to.”

“He didn’t believe anybody.”

“That seems less familiar.”

“Not like that.” Lucien shook his head. “He believed people. He didn’t believe stories just because they sounded good.”

That, at least, I understood.

“He came here twice?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“The first time, about seven months after I was sentenced.”

“What did he want?”

“To know why I killed Benoît.”

“You told him you didn’t.”

“Of course.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘That wasn’t my question.’”

I stopped writing. Interesting.

“He wanted to know the prosecution’s motive theory from your perspective.”

Lucien nodded. “He asked why everyone thought I wanted Benoît dead.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That Benoît stole from people.”

“Specifically wages?”

“At first.”

“At first?”

Lucien looked toward the wall. “Benoît handled shipments for more than dockworkers.”

I leaned forward. “What kind of shipments?”

“Whatever paid.”

“Legal?”

He laughed without humor. “Some.”

“What did you know?”

“Not much.”

“That’s vague.”

“Because I didn’t know much.” His voice sharpened, and I let him get annoyed — people often stopped performing when they were irritated.

“I loaded crates,” he continued. “We weren’t supposed to open them. Most were machine parts, wine, imported fabrics,

construction materials. Normal things.”

“And the abnormal things?”

“Crates with false manifests.”

I stopped. “How did you know?”

“Weight.” Of course — dockworkers. “You pick up enough boxes, you know when twenty kilograms of ‘textiles’ weighs sixty.”

“What was inside?”

“I never saw.”

“Then why did it matter?”

“Because workers who asked questions stopped getting shifts.”

“Benoît controlled scheduling?”

“Partly.”

“What else?”

Lucien hesitated. “People came to see him.”

“Who?”

“Men in expensive coats.”

“That’s half of Fontaine.”

“No.” He leaned forward. “Not rich men. Men trying to look rich.”

That was more interesting. “How could you tell?”

“People with money don’t keep checking whether you’re noticing it.”

I smiled despite myself. “Fair.”

“One of them argued with Benoît a week before he died.”

“About?”

“I couldn’t hear everything.”

“What did you hear?”

His eyes narrowed as he searched memory. “Something about accounts. Routes. Payment. And a name.”

“What name?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ve had eleven years.”

“I know.”

“Nothing?”

He shook his head. "Started with V."

Vaudin? No. Too obvious.

"What did Callas think?"

Lucien went quiet. "The second time he came, he already knew about it."

"Knew about what?"

"The shipments."

My pen stopped. "How?"

"He didn't say."

"And the yellow ledger?"

Lucien's whole face changed — not fear, recognition. "Yes."

"What is it?"

"I don't know."

"You've been asking for it for eleven years."

"Because Callas told me to."

"Tell me exactly what he said."

Lucien closed his eyes. I waited. When he finally spoke, his voice had slowed. "He was leaving. Second visit. He stood up, walked to the door, then stopped." He opened his eyes. "He said, 'If I don't return, and someone eventually comes asking the right questions, tell them yellow ledger.'"

My skin prickled. "That exact wording?"

"As close as I remember."

"Not 'ask for the yellow ledger'?"

Lucien frowned. "The letter said that?"

I hadn't shown him the letter. Good.

"Yes."

He thought about it. "Maybe he phrased it differently in writing."

"Could be." I made a note — someone asking the right questions.

"Did he say where it was?"

"No."

"Who had it?"

"No."

“What was inside?”

“No.”

I sighed. Lucien almost smiled. “Annoying, isn’t it?”

“Deeply.”

“Now you understand why I remembered it.”

I flipped pages. “Let’s go back to the night Benoît died.”

His face closed again. “You’ve read it.”

“I want your version.”

“I’ve given my version a hundred times.”

“Give it one hundred and one.” He stared at me. I stared back, and eventually he sighed.

“I went to see him around seven.”

“Why?”

“Three men were short wages.”

“Names?”

He gave them. Two were deceased. One still lived in Poisson — I circled that name.

“Benoît said accounting error?”

“Yes.”

“You believed him?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it had happened before.”

“You argued.”

“Yes.”

“He broke a glass?”

“He threw it.”

“At you?”

“At the wall.”

“Cut himself?”

“When he slammed his hand onto the table afterward. Piece of glass.”

“Blood got on you how?”

"He grabbed my coat."

"Why?"

"I called him a thief."

"That generally improves conversations."

Lucien almost laughed. "I shoved his hand off."

"Did you hit him?"

"No."

"Threaten him?"

"I said I'd expose him."

There. The motive. "Exact words?"

"Something like, 'If you don't pay them, I'm taking everything to the Spina.'"

My pen stopped. "The Spina di Rosula?"

"Yes."

"That wasn't in your testimony."

"It was."

"No." I opened the copied transcript. "You testified: 'I told him I would report the missing wages.' No mention of the Spina."

"I said Spina."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

"Why would that be removed?"

"I don't know."

"Did your advocate ask?"

"I don't remember." I wrote in large letters: ORIGINAL
INTERVIEW RECORDING?

"Had you already contacted the Spina?"

Lucien hesitated. "Yes."

My heart sped up. "Who?"

"Somebody named Matthieu."

"Surname?"

"No idea."

"Did Callas know?"

"That's why he came." There — the connection. I leaned forward.

"You contacted the Spina before Benoît died."

"Yes."

"About stolen wages?"

"And shipments."

"And then Benoît is murdered."

"Yes."

"You're convicted."

"Yes."

"Callas investigates after sentencing."

"Yes."

"And later connects this to financial records."

"Yes." Lucien looked exhausted. "I've been saying this for eleven years."

I sat back. There was no triumph in finding a new lead when the man in front of you had spent over a decade waiting for someone to care about it.

"Tell me about René Desmarais."

His mouth tightened. "He lied."

"Maybe."

"He lied."

"You don't know that."

"I know where I was standing when I left that warehouse."

"Where?"

"Street."

"Could René have seen you?"

"Yes."

"Could he have seen inside?"

Lucien paused. "No."

"Why?"

"Shutters." I froze. "What?"

"The warehouse office shutters were closed."

"You're certain?"

“Yes.”

“Every window?”

“Benoît always closed them when discussing money.”

I started flipping through the evidence photographs — warehouse exterior, side windows, upper office. There. Shutters. Closed. But the photographs had been taken after the body was discovered.

“What time did you leave?”

“Seven forty, maybe.”

“Body discovered?”

“Ten twelve.”

“Could the shutters have been opened in between?”

“Yes.”

“Were they?”

“I don’t know.”

“René testified he saw you standing over the body through the eastern office window.”

Lucien stared at me. Then laughed — not because it was funny, but because something was so absurd that laughter became the only response available.

“There is no eastern office window.”

I stopped breathing for half a second. “What?”

“There’s a loading door east side.” I looked down at the court diagram — eastern elevation, a rectangle labeled inspection aperture. Not window. A small industrial viewing panel.

“How high?”

“Chest height.”

“Could someone see through it?”

“If you’re inside the loading corridor.”

“From outside?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Stacked crates.”

My mind exploded into motion. “Were the crates there that night?”

“Always.”

“Always is dangerous.”

“Then most nights.”

“Were they recorded in evidence photographs?”

Lucien leaned forward. “Look.”

I pulled the photographs. Exterior, east side. Crates. Three rows, stacked directly beneath and partially across the viewing panel.

Holy shit. Not proof. But enough to rip open the original testimony.

I looked at Lucien. He’d seen my expression. Hope appeared — immediately, dangerously.

“Don’t.”

His face fell. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t decide this means you’re free.”

“It means he lied.”

“It means his sightline needs reinvestigation.”

“Shaun—”

“No.” I softened my voice. “This is exactly what Wriothesley warned me about.”

Lucien looked away. I closed the photographs.

“But it matters.” His eyes came back. “It matters a lot.”

Wriothesley was waiting outside, and one look at my face was enough for him to set down his tea.

“What?”

“We need the original warehouse plans.” He stood. “Why?” “And every crime-scene photograph not included in the court packet.”

“Shaun.”

“René may not have been able to see what he testified he saw.”

His entire expression changed. “How sure?”

“Not sure.”

“Good answer.”

“There was no actual east-facing office window. There was an inspection aperture obstructed by loading crates.”

“You’re certain?”

“Lucien says so. The evidence diagram supports the aperture. Crime-scene photographs show crates obstructing it.”

“That doesn’t establish they were there when René claimed to witness the murder.”

“I know.”

“But.”

“But if those crates were routinely stored there, and if we can find any loading logs, photographs, shipping records, or another worker who remembers that night...”

Wriothlesley picked up his coat. “Archive first.”

I followed. “Also — Lucien contacted the Spina before the murder.”

He stopped walking. Slowly turned. “What?”

“About missing wages and suspicious shipments.”

“Is that in the trial record?”

“Not the Spina part.”

His jaw shifted. “And Callas?”

“Lucien thinks that’s why Callas eventually got involved.”

Wriothlesley stared down the corridor for a moment, weighing it. “You need to tell Navia.”

“I know.”

“Before anyone else.”

“I know.”

“And Neuville.”

“I KNOW.”

He looked at me. “You’re enjoying this.”

“I am professionally stimulated.”

“You look like Charlotte when someone whispers ‘scandal.’”

“That is deeply offensive.”

“Accurate.” I hit his arm, and he was still smiling about it as we left.

Neuvillette did not share my professional stimulation. By the time Wriothesley had returned to his duties in the Fortress and I’d surfaced and made my way to the archives beneath the Palais Mermonia, he’d already had someone clear a long table for us and had begun pulling boxes before I’d even sat down. He stared at the evidence photograph for almost a full minute while I sat opposite him, surrounded by two hours’ worth of dusty, ancient, badly organized boxes — records apparently filed by someone who had actively hated future generations.

My jacket was over the back of the chair. My sleeves were rolled up. Neuvillette remained immaculate, naturally, and I resented him for it.

“The obstruction is significant,” he finally said.

“Thank you.”

“I did not say conclusive.”

“I know.”

“You were preparing to react as though I had.”

“I was not.”

“You were.”

“I hate working with you.”

“So you’ve mentioned.”

I pointed at the photograph. “If Desmarais could not see into that office, his testimony collapses.”

“If.”

“Yes.”

“And if the crates had been moved?”

“Then it doesn’t.”

“If he entered the loading corridor?”

“He testified he remained outside.”

“If he misremembered the precise vantage point?”

“Then why did the prosecution permit such specific testimony?”

Neuvillette was silent. Exactly.

I leaned back. “Do you know what bothers me?”

“Several things, apparently.”

I stared at him. Was that humor? From Neuvillette? He looked completely innocent.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Wriothesley.”

“That is possible.”

I continued. “Desmarais’s first statement only says he saw Lucien leaving.”

“Yes.”

“Then later he suddenly gives the prosecution the exact image they need: Lucien standing over the body.”

“Yes.”

“Then six months after conviction, Callas asks for protective custody because Desmarais has financial testimony.”

“Yes.”

“Then Desmarais dies.”

Neuvillette’s eyes lifted. “Be careful.”

“I am.”

“No — you’re constructing a narrative.”

“I’m identifying a pattern.”

“You are emotionally inclined toward Lucien’s innocence.”

I opened my mouth. Then closed it. Damn him.

He continued, gentler than the words deserved. “That does not mean you are wrong.”

I folded my arms. “But?”

“But it means I need you to remain aware of it.” He paused. “And innocent people can still lie when frightened. People who tell the truth can still remember incorrectly.”

Also fair. I sighed. “You are very annoying.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“By Wriothesley?”

“Frequently.”

“Good.” I reached for another file, and something fell out of it — a photograph, not evidence, personal. Three men outside a warehouse. One was Benoît Vaudin. One was René Desmarais. The third—

I froze. “Neuville.” I slid the photograph toward him. “Do you recognize him?”

He examined it. “No.”

I did. Or rather, I’d seen the face before — not the man himself, but in an old Spina photograph hanging at Navia’s headquarters.

“What?” Neuville asked.

“I think he’s connected to the Spina.” “You think?”

“Old photograph. One of Callas’s people.”

“Name?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Then we verify.”

I took out my notebook. “I’m calling Navia.”

“Not from the archive.”

“Why?”

“Records confidentiality.”

“I’m calling her to ask who a man is.”

“Without transmitting the image?”

“I can describe him.”

“That would be unreliable.”

I glared. He glared back. This was apparently teamwork. I stood. “I’ll go to Navia.”

“Take a certified copy.” I blinked — he was already filling out the request. “You’re letting me remove it?”

“A copy.”

“Wow.”

“Do not make me regret it.”

“Can I tell Wriothlesley you trusted me with archival evidence?”

“No.”

"I'm absolutely telling him." Neuville sighed, but he didn't stop writing.

I didn't waste time. I took the certified copy straight to Spina di Rosula headquarters, where I found Navia and Clorinde already at a desk with the photograph between them. Navia identified the man in under five seconds.

"Marcel Vautrin."

The name hit. V.

"He worked with Papa," Navia said. "What did he do?"

"Accounts. Shipping arrangements. Donations. Some logistics." I looked at Clorinde.

"Financial records," she said, nodding.

Navia's brow furrowed. "But he left."

"When?"

"Around the time I was seventeen?"

"Before Callas died."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Did he and Callas argue?"

Navia thought. "Maybe."

"Navia."

"I was a teenager! I wasn't sitting around listening to Papa's business meetings."

"Fair." Clorinde picked up the photograph. "Do you remember Vautrin?"

"Yes." Her voice had changed. "From?"

"He attended Callas's duel preparations."

Navia went still. I looked at her, then at Clorinde. "What?"

Clorinde stared at the photograph. "He wasn't at the duel."

"But?"

"He was present the day before."

"Why?"

"I don't know." Navia came closer. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Did Papa speak to him?"

"Briefly."

"About what?"

"I wasn't close enough to hear."

I felt the case widening beneath us — not improving, widening. There was a difference. Every new connection created ten more questions.

"Lucien said a man argued with Benoît about accounts and routes," I said. Navia looked at me. "He only remembers the name beginning with V."

Her eyes dropped to the photograph. "Vautrin."

"Maybe." Clorinde gave me a look. "Maybe," I repeated firmly.

Navia touched the edge of the photograph. "What happened to him?"

"No idea."

"He disappeared." Both of us looked at her. "What?"

"Not literally. I mean he left Poisson."

"When?"

"Before Papa died."

"Where?"

"I don't know." I pulled out my notebook. Navia stared. "You carry that everywhere now?"

"Yes."

"You used to carry a Kamera."

"I carry both."

Clorinde said quietly, "She sleeps with case notes beside the bed."

I pointed at her. "Not relevant."

Navia smiled despite herself. Then her expression changed. "The storage room."

Right. The yellow ledger. We all turned. Clorinde looked toward the window — mid-afternoon, still enough daylight left that it felt almost reasonable to think about doing something reckless.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

I smiled. “FINALLY.”

Navia laughed. “She’s been waiting since last night.”

“She attempted to go at ten.”

“I was motivated.”

“You were exhausted.”

“Details.”

The old Spina storage rooms beneath Poisson smelled like wet stone, mold, and history — mostly mold. I stood at the entrance with a lantern.

“No.”

Navia looked at me. “What?”

“This is disgusting.”

“You wanted to come.”

“I did not request fungus.”

Clorinde stepped past us, already gloved. “Stay on the marked path.”

“Yes, wife.”

“The floor is unstable.”

“Yes, Champion Duelist wife.” She looked over her shoulder. I smiled sweetly. Navia laughed, and we moved deeper.

Several rooms had flooded during previous disasters. Water stains climbed halfway up the walls. Shelves leaned. Boxes had collapsed into warped stacks. My heart sank. “If the ledger was down here...”

“I know,” Navia said.

We searched for an hour and found nothing useful — receipts, old food distribution records, construction estimates, donation logs,

three boxes of letters, a broken lamp, an entire drawer of invoices for umbrellas. Fontaine, of course.

Then Navia stopped. "Wait."

She stood near a half-rotted cabinet. "What?"

"This wasn't here."

Clorinde approached. "How do you know?"

"Because I used to hide behind this wall."

I stared. "As a child?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"To scare people."

I smiled. "That is adorable."

"I was excellent."

She touched the cabinet. "This wall used to be flat." Clorinde ran her fingers along the edge.

"It's been rebuilt."

My pulse jumped. "Recently?"

"No." Clorinde crouched. "Different mortar. Older than the flood."

Navia stared at the wall. "Papa." We looked at each other, then at the cabinet.

Moving it took all three of us and several words Neuville would probably have classified as inappropriate for formal proceedings. Behind it was a narrow section of masonry, one stone with a small metal notch. Navia reached for it; Clorinde caught her hand.

"Wait."

Navia looked at her. "Could be trapped."

I stared at the wall. "Who traps a ledger?"

Clorinde looked at me. "People who don't want journalists finding it."

"Rude."

She inspected the notch — no mechanism, no wire, nothing obvious — and pulled. The stone shifted. Behind it, a metal box.

Nobody spoke. Navia reached inside; this time Clorinde let her. The box was rusted but sealed. We placed it on an old table. Navia's hands shook as she unclipped the latch.

Inside were three objects: a bundle of letters, a small black notebook, and beneath them — a ledger. Faded. Water-stained around the edges. But unmistakably yellow.

Navia stopped breathing. Clorinde went completely still. I whispered, "Holy shit."

Navia laughed once, then covered her mouth, eyes filling. "Papa..." I reached for her; she leaned into me. Clorinde came around the other side. For a moment none of us cared about evidence, or murder, or appeals — Navia held the ledger her father had hidden more than a decade ago, and suddenly Callas was no longer history. He had touched this. Hidden this. Expected someone, someday, to find it.

Navia wiped her eyes. "Open it."

I hesitated. "We should preserve it properly."

"Shaun."

"Evidence contamination—"

"Open the damn book."

"Yes, ma'am." I put on gloves and slowly opened the cover.

Numbers. Shipments. Dates. Names. Payments. Initials. Some entries were ordinary — food, construction, supplies. Others had symbols beside them: blue circles, red crosses, black triangles. And then, a name.

B. Vaudin.

Navia inhaled. Another: R. Desmarais. My heart pounded. Another: M. Vautrin.

Clorinde leaned closer. "What are the columns?"

I traced them without touching. "Shipment date. Route. Declared cargo..." Then another column, no heading, just numbers. Payments? Weights? Something else?

Navia turned the page. More names. More shipments. Then an entry underlined twice: East warehouse — 14th. Beside it: Vautrin met V. Argument. Witness: R.D.

I looked at Navia. She looked at me. Clorinde read it again. “V”

“Could be Vaudin,” I said.

Navia flipped another page. Callas had written more below: Lucien Armand conviction inconsistent with witness access. Check east loading sightline.

I stopped. He knew. Eleven years ago, he’d already identified the same problem. Navia’s eyes filled again. “He found it.”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t he reopen the case?”

I turned the page, and the answer was there — not all of it, but enough to make the room feel colder. Do not approach Court yet. Vautrin compromised. Someone inside receiving payments. Need proof before René speaks.

Silence. Clorinde read it twice. “Inside where?”

“Court?” Navia asked.

“Maybe,” I said.

“Police?”

“Maybe.”

“Spina?”

I hated that possibility. “Maybe.”

Then I saw the final line, written darker, harder, as though Callas had pressed the pen into the paper: If René dies, it was not an accident.

Nobody moved. Water dripped somewhere behind us. Once. Twice. Three times. I closed the ledger.

“We’re leaving.”

Navia stared. “What?”

“Now.”

“Why?”

“Because this isn’t a cold-case curiosity anymore.” Clorinde was already looking toward the corridor, her whole body shifting into alertness.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“Callas believed someone with institutional access was being paid.”

“Eleven years ago.”

“Yes.”

“That person may be dead.”

“Or retired.”

“Or gone.”

“Or still working.”

Navia looked between us. “You think someone might care that we found this?”

“I don’t know.”

“And you hate not knowing,” Clorinde said.

“Deeply.” I picked up the metal box. “We take everything directly to Neuville.”

Navia’s face hardened. “No.”

I stopped. “What?”

“The ledger belonged to Papa.”

“And it may contain evidence in a murder investigation.”

“I know.”

“Navia—”

“I said no because we’re not taking it to the Palais until we know who Callas meant by ‘someone inside.’” That shut me up. Clorinde looked at Navia, then at me. Damn — she was right. If Callas believed someone inside the justice system was compromised, walking the ledger through the front doors might be exactly what he’d tried to avoid.

“But Neuville needs it,” I said.

“Yes.”

“I trust him.”

“So do I.” Navia looked down at the ledger. “But Papa trusted somebody once too.”

That hurt because it was true.

I thought. Then smiled slowly.

Clorinde noticed immediately. “No.”

“I haven’t said anything.”

“That expression means something.”

Navia looked at me. “What?”

“We don’t take the ledger to Neuville.” Clorinde narrowed her eyes.

“We take Neuville to the ledger.”

Silence. Navia smiled. “Oh.”

Clorinde sighed. “That is actually reasonable.”

I looked offended. “Why do you sound surprised?”

“Experience.”

I pulled out my notebook. “I’ll send him a message.”

Navia immediately grabbed my wrist. “Not mentioning the ledger.”

“Obviously.”

“What are you going to say?” I thought, then wrote: Need you in Poisson. Private. Do not bring court staff. Tell Wriothesley where you’re going. I showed them. Clorinde nodded. Navia nodded. I sent it.

Less than a minute later, my communicator buzzed.

Neuville: Is anyone in immediate danger?

I replied: Not currently.

Three dots. Then: Your wording is not reassuring.

I smiled. Navia looked over my shoulder. “What did he say?”

“He knows me too well.” Another message: I will arrive within the hour. Do not disturb anything further.

I stared at it. Clorinde read it. Navia read it. I put my communicator away.

“Bossy.”

“He is the Chief Justice.”

“I am aware.” Navia smiled. “You’re going to touch something else just because he told you not to, aren’t you?”

“No.” They both stared. “...Probably not.”

And somewhere beneath the ruins of Poisson, with Callas’s yellow ledger sitting between us and eleven years of secrets beginning to crack open, I realized something. Lucien Armand’s case had never truly gone cold. Someone had simply buried the fire, and Callas had left us the match.



Chapter Five

The Names Between the Lines



Neuville arrived in Poisson fifty-two minutes later. I knew because I checked the time three times — not because I was impatient, but because fifty-two minutes was significantly longer than the roughly thirty-five I'd estimated it would take him to get there. Which meant one of two things: he had been delayed, or he'd spent seventeen additional minutes deciding whether I was about to hand him a judicial crisis. Given our history, probably the second.

Navia was sitting on an overturned crate with her arms crossed when footsteps finally echoed through the underground corridor. Clorinde looked toward the entrance. I stood, then immediately remembered Neuville's message — do not disturb anything further. Technically, standing did not qualify. Probably.

A figure appeared beneath the archway. Neuville — long coat, perfect posture, an expression caught somewhere between concern and resignation. Behind him: Wriothesley.

I pointed. "You brought Wriothesley."

Neuville stopped. "You explicitly instructed me to tell him where I was going."

"I did not instruct you to bring him."

Wriothesley stepped around him. “I invited myself.”

“That sounds more accurate.” He looked at the three of us, then at the metal box on the table, then at my gloves. His eyes narrowed. “What did you find?”

Navia stood. “Papa.” That ended the joking entirely. Wriothesley looked at her. She swallowed. “Or at least what Papa left.” She moved aside. The yellow ledger sat beneath the lantern.

For several seconds, Neuvillette simply stared at it. I’d half expected some kind of reaction — a widening of the eyes, a sharp inhale, a single whispered so it exists. Nothing. He walked to the table.

“Who opened it?”

I raised my hand. Clorinde said, “All three of us were present.” Navia added, “I told her to.” I looked at her. “Thank you?”

Neuvillette ignored the exchange entirely. “Who handled the exterior?”

“Navia,” Clorinde said. “Then Shaun, after putting on gloves.”

“Original location?”

I pointed toward the wall. “Inside a sealed metal box behind that section of masonry.”

“Who moved the cabinet?”

“All three of us.” His eyes went to the displaced cabinet. “Did you photograph the site before moving it?”

Silence. My stomach dropped. Fuck. I looked at Navia. Navia looked at Clorinde. Clorinde looked at me. I carried a Kamera everywhere — everywhere — and we had moved the cabinet without photographing the original position.

Neuvillette’s eyes settled on me. I slowly closed mine.

“You may say it.”

“I had no intention of saying anything.”

“That is worse.” Wriothesley coughed into his fist, and it sounded suspiciously like laughter.

I turned. “Do not.”

“I didn’t say anything either.”

“You’re both communicating judgment psychically.” Navia actually smiled. That helped, a little.

Neuvillette removed gloves from his coat. “Fortunately, the wall cavity itself remains intact.” He crouched near it. Clorinde joined him.

“Different mortar,” she said.

“I noticed.”

“Likely constructed deliberately around the box.”

“Yes.”

I stood behind them. “Can we date the mortar?”

“Approximately, perhaps.”

“Fingerprints?”

“Possibly.”

“Could Callas’s still survive?”

“Unlikely, after this length of time and environmental exposure.”

“What about—”

Neuvillette looked up. “Shaun.”

“Yes?”

“One question at a time.” I shut my mouth. For approximately seven seconds.

“Do you want to see the ledger?”

Wriothesley laughed. Neuvillette stood. “Yes.”

Finally. We gathered around the table, Navia staying closest — it felt right; it was her father’s handwriting, his secret, his unfinished work. Neuvillette opened the ledger carefully. No one spoke as he moved through the first several pages — shipments, payments, names, symbols, dates — and then reached the entries we’d already found. B. Vaudin. R. Desmarais. M. Vautrin. His eyes slowed, then stopped completely on the note.

Lucien Armand conviction inconsistent with witness access. Check east loading sightline.

Wriothesley leaned forward. “So Callas found the same problem.”

“Yes,” Neuville said.

I folded my arms. “Which means Lucien wasn’t imagining the sightline issue.”

“It establishes that Callas independently questioned it.”

“Which is significant.”

“Yes.” I smiled. Neuville looked at me. “What?”

“You said yes without immediately adding six reasons why I shouldn’t get excited.”

“I can provide them if you prefer.”

“No.” Wriothesley murmured, “Progress.”

Neuville turned another page, then reached the line: Vautrin compromised. Someone inside receiving payments. Need proof before René speaks.

His face changed — this time visibly, only a little, but enough. Wriothesley saw it too. “What?”

Neuville didn’t answer immediately, his finger hovering above the entry without touching it. “Callas may have been referring to the Maison Gardiennage.”

Navia frowned. “The Gardes?”

“Possibly.”

I leaned closer. “Why?”

“The phrasing.”

“That’s vague.”

“Because the Court itself would have been an unusual target for direct bribery concerning shipping enforcement. The Maison Gardiennage, customs inspectors, harbor administration, or regulatory offices would have had more immediate operational access.”

“But he wrote ‘someone inside,’” I said.

“Yes.”

“Inside what?”

“Precisely.”

Clorinde studied another page. “What do the symbols mean?” Neuville turned back — blue circles, red crosses, black triangles. Navia shook her head.

“I’ve never seen Papa use those.”

Wriothesley pointed at several entries. “Blue appears next to completed shipments.”

“Not all,” I said.

“Red?”

“Only some names.”

Clorinde traced the pattern visually. “Black triangles correspond to routes.” We all looked. She was right — each black triangle appeared beside an entry involving the same three shipping corridors: Poisson, Fleuve Cendre, and the eastern commercial docks.

I looked at Navia. “Spina territory.”

“Some of it.”

“Were those normal Spina routes?”

“Food, supplies, construction, relief work. Yes.”

“So somebody could hide shipments inside legitimate Spina logistics.”

Navia’s face hardened. “If Vautrin had access to scheduling.”

“He did,” she said. That landed heavily. Navia stepped back from the table, and for the first time since we’d found the ledger, anger overtook grief.

“He used Papa.”

“Maybe,” Clorinde said.

Navia turned. “Clorinde.”

“We don’t know yet.”

“He handled shipping.”

“Yes.”

“He appears in Papa’s secret ledger.”

“Yes.”

“He was arguing with the murder victim.”

“Possibly.”

“And then disappeared before Papa died.”

Clorinde held her gaze. “That still doesn’t tell us what he did.” Navia’s jaw tightened, and I understood the anger — it was easier than the alternative. If Vautrin had betrayed Callas, Navia had someone new to blame. If he hadn’t, the mystery stayed shapeless, and shapeless grief was harder to carry than righteous anger.

Wriothesley quietly asked, “What do we know about Vautrin after he left Poisson?”

“Nothing,” Navia said.

Neuvillette looked up. “I can search civil records.”

“Quietly?” I asked. He gave me a look.

“Yes, Shaun.”

“No broad requests.”

“I understand the concept of discretion.”

“I’m just making sure.” Wriothesley rubbed his face. “She’s going to supervise the Chief Justice now.”

“I supervise everyone.”

“You do not.”

“I try.”

“That,” Clorinde said, “is unfortunately true.”

I pointed at her. “You are supposed to be on my side.”

“I am.”

“Doesn’t feel like it.” Navia laughed quietly, then stopped when she looked again at her father’s handwriting. I reached for her hand; she let me take it.

Neuvillette continued turning pages. Suddenly he stopped. “There is another name.” We leaned forward. The entry was abbreviated: C. Marceau. Beside it: Clerk — records access — 800 mora.

I felt the room change. Wriothesley read it again. “Clerk.” Neuvillette’s face became completely still.

“Do you know the name?” I asked.

"Yes." Nobody breathed. "Who?"

"Cyril Marceau."

"And?"

"He worked in judicial archives."

There it was. Someone inside. Navia whispered, "Oh."

"Still alive?" Wriothsley's voice had lowered.

"Yes."

My pulse jumped. "Where?"

"Retired."

"Where?" Neuville's eyes narrowed. "Shaun."

"That's a reasonable question."

"And you are not visiting him tonight."

"I didn't say—"

"Tonight," Clorinde repeated.

I turned. "You too?"

Wriothsley crossed his arms. "Absolutely not." Navia gave me an apologetic look. Traitors, all of them.

I stared at Neuville. "Fine." He clearly didn't believe me. Correctly.

"But tomorrow."

"After I verify his status and determine whether he remains connected to the matter."

"I can interview him."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because if Callas believed Marceau accepted payments to manipulate records, approaching him without understanding what records he could access may alert him to exactly what we know."

I stopped. That was annoyingly correct.

"So what do we do?"

"First, identify which records were altered." Wriothsley nodded toward the ledger.

"Lucien's?"

“Possibly.”

“The missing Spina reference in his testimony,” I said.

“The visitation logs,” Wriothlesley added.

“The changed witness statement,” Navia said.

Clorinde looked at Neuville. “And maybe Desmarais’s protection request.”

Silence. Neuville closed the ledger. “Nothing leaves this room tonight.”

Navia stiffened. “I’m not leaving Papa’s ledger here.”

“No.” His voice softened slightly. “This location is compromised by our discovery. The evidence should be secured elsewhere.”

“Where?” Navia asked.

He thought. “Not the Palais.” I blinked — that surprised me. “You agree?”

“If Callas believed an archives clerk was compromised, I cannot assume the historic problem was limited to one man until we understand its scope.”

Wriothlesley smiled faintly. “Meropide.”

Neuville looked at him. “Yes.” I laughed once. Everyone turned. “Of course.”

“What?” Wriothlesley asked.

“The safest place in Fontaine for evidence potentially implicating the justice system is apparently prison.”

“That does seem ironic.”

“Extremely.”

Navia looked uncertain. “Can we trust the Fortress?”

Wriothlesley answered immediately. “You can trust where I put it.” Something in his tone settled the question. Navia nodded. “Then it stays with you.” He gave a small nod back — no joke, no teasing, just a promise. I loved him a little harder for that.

We left Poisson after midnight — technically my fault, according to everyone. I disagreed. The ledger had existed before I found it. Time was therefore Callas’s fault. This argument convinced nobody.

Navia stayed behind at the Spina headquarters; Clorinde wanted to stay with her. I understood, so I kissed them both goodbye and left with Wriothlesley and Neuvillette.

The ride back toward the Court was quieter than usual. Neuvillette sat opposite us, Wriothlesley beside me, the evidence box resting between Neuvillette's feet. I stared at it. Wriothlesley noticed.

"No."

"I haven't moved."

"You're thinking loudly."

"I want to read the letters."

"Tomorrow."

"They could contain—"

"Tomorrow." Neuvillette added, "I agree."

I looked between them. "This relationship has become structurally unfair."

Wriothlesley smiled. "Two votes."

"Polyamory is not a democracy."

Neuvillette considered that. "A sensible principle."

I pointed at him. "Don't encourage him."

"I was agreeing with you."

I paused. "Oh." Wriothlesley laughed.

I leaned back and watched Fontaine pass outside the window, dark blue and silver, and thought about Lucien. Eleven years. He'd spent eleven years below the surface while evidence disappeared, witnesses died, records changed, and the man investigating him eventually died too.

"How do I tell Lucien?"

Wriothlesley's smile vanished. Neuvillette looked at me. "Tell him what?"

"That Callas found evidence supporting him."

"Carefully."

"I know."

“No,” Wriothsesley said. “You don’t.” I turned. He looked tired — not physically. Something deeper.

“You met him once,” he said. “I’ve watched him wait.” The carriage grew quiet. “He used to ask about appeals every month.” I listened. “Then every few months.” He looked out the window. “Then once a year.” My chest tightened. “Eventually he stopped asking.”

Neuvillette lowered his gaze.

“He stopped telling new guards he was innocent because he realized nobody cared.”

I swallowed. “And then?”

“He started helping new prisoners.”

“What?”

“Teaching them how Meropide works. How to earn coupons. Which jobs are safest. Who to avoid.” That sounded painfully familiar — people who gave others the help nobody had given them.

I looked down. “He built a life there.”

“As much as anyone can.”

“And if we overturn his conviction...” Wriothsesley looked at me.

“You assume he’ll know how to leave.” I hadn’t thought about that. Eleven years — his entire thirties, relationships gone, work gone, the world changed. Freedom was not automatically simple just because someone deserved it.

Neuvillette spoke quietly. “If the conviction is unsound, those consequences cannot justify maintaining it.”

“No,” Wriothsesley said. “I know.” “But?” “But don’t turn Lucien into a victory.” I looked at him. His expression held mine. “He isn’t a case you win.” That landed. “He’s a man who lost eleven years.”

I nodded. “I know.” This time I actually did.

The next morning, I met Lucien alone — no courtroom, no photographs, no dramatic reveal. Just the same small interview room. He sat across from me.

“You found something.” Not a question.

I placed my hands together. “Yes.” His body changed immediately — shoulders straighter, eyes sharper. Hope. Again. Too fast.

“What?”

“We found Callas’s ledger.” Lucien stared at me. For several seconds, I couldn’t tell whether he’d understood. Then he whispered, “The yellow one?”

“Yes.” He looked down. His hands started trembling. I waited.

“Where?”

“Poisson.” A laugh escaped him — a single broken sound. “Of course.”

“What?”

“He always said the answer was closer to home than people thought.” I hadn’t known that. I filed it away.

“Lucien.” He looked up. “There are notes about your case.” His face changed. “What notes?”

“He questioned René’s ability to see into the warehouse.” Lucien closed his eyes. I continued carefully. “He also recorded concerns regarding shipments connected to Benoît Vaudin and a former Spina logistics worker.”

“Vautrin.” I stopped. “You remember the name?”

His eyes opened. “That’s it.” My pulse jumped. “Marcel Vautrin?”

“Yes.”

“You’re certain?” He leaned forward. “That was the man.”

“The one arguing with Benoît?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know now?”

“Because you said it.” I frowned. “That is not enough.”

“I know the name.”

“You didn’t yesterday.”

“I remembered the sound.”

“That can be suggestion.” His frustration appeared. “Shaun.”

“I believe you remember something. That doesn’t mean I’m putting your identification into a filing until I test it.” He leaned back

— angry. Good. Better angry than falsely certain.

“What else?” he asked.

“Callas believed someone inside an institution was receiving payments.” His face went still. “Who?”

“We don’t know.” I did not mention Marceau yet — not because I distrusted Lucien, but because every new fact created risk.

“And René?” I hesitated. “Callas wrote that if René died, he did not believe it would be accidental.” Lucien stared at me, then turned his face away, jaw tightening.

“You knew him?”

“Since we were boys.” I hadn’t expected that.

“He testified against you.”

“I know.”

“You still cared?” Lucien looked at me like the question offended him.

“He was scared.”

“How do you know?”

“Because René was always scared.”

I leaned forward. “Of what?”

“Everything.” He rubbed his face. “He wasn’t built for fighting. He had a wife. Daughter. He counted everything — every mora, every hour, every crate.” My journalist brain woke.

“Counted?”

“Yes.”

“Meaning?”

“He wrote everything down.”

My heartbeat changed. “What kind of things?”

“Shipments. Work. People who owed him.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“Notebook?”

“Probably.”

"Was one recovered when he died?" Lucien laughed bitterly. "You're asking the wrong man." I wrote quickly: René kept records. Potential independent ledger.

"Did Callas know?"

"Maybe."

"Did René tell you anything before trial?"

"No."

"After?" He looked down. "He wrote once."

My pen stopped. "What?"

"Letter."

"Where is it?"

"Gone."

"Gone how?"

"I burned it." I stared. He looked almost ashamed.

"Why?"

"Because it said he was sorry."

"That is exactly the kind of thing you don't burn when convicted of murder."

"I KNOW." His voice echoed. A guard outside shifted. I waited. He lowered his voice. "I was angry."

"What exactly did it say?"

"I don't remember every word."

"Try." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Something like... 'They said you were already finished. They said my statement wouldn't change anything except whether my family was safe.'"

My skin went cold. "Oh my god."

"He said he couldn't fix it."

"And you burned this."

"Yes."

"Lucien."

"I KNOW." He slammed his hand against the table. I didn't flinch, and his anger collapsed almost immediately.

"I read it every day for three weeks." His voice cracked. "Then I burned it because every time I looked at it, I wanted to kill him." Silence. "I thought he chose them."

I softened. "And now?"

"Now I think somebody chose for him." That sentence sat between us. I wrote one final note: Find René's family.

Charlotte was waiting outside my office when I returned to the surface. Of course she was. She held two coffees. That concerned me — one meant friendship, two meant manipulation.

"No."

She handed me one. "I haven't asked anything."

"You've started doing that too."

"Doing what?"

"Saying that before asking something."

"Working with you has taught me many things." I unlocked the office. She followed.

"What do you want?"

"I have a story."

"Congratulations."

"It might involve your case." I stopped. She smiled — not playfully. Reporter smile. Focused.

I opened the door. "Inside."

She sat. I closed the door behind us. "What?"

She removed several folded papers from her bag. "After yesterday's hearing, I started looking into Martel Engineering."

"Why would that involve Lucien Armand?"

"It doesn't."

"Then?"

"While searching old industrial safety notices, I found an archive reference to Vaudin Shipping." My body went still. She noticed. "Thought so."

"Continue."

“Vaudin Shipping lost a municipal transport contract twelve years ago.”

“One year before Benoît died.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Officially, bidding irregularities.”

“And unofficially?”

“I found a retired procurement officer.” I sat. “Charlotte.”

“He remembers the company because somebody tried to bribe him.”

“Who?”

“He never identified them.”

“Why not?”

“He reported it internally.”

“And?”

“The report disappeared.” There it was again. Records. Always records.

She leaned forward. “But he kept a personal copy.”

I stared. “Where is it?”

She smiled. “In my bag.”

“Charlotte.”

“What?” She hugged the bag slightly closer. “I will — after you tell me why your face changed when I said Vaudin.”

“No.”

“Shaun.”

“No.”

“Off the record.”

“No.”

“I brought you coffee.”

“Attorney-client privilege remains undefeated by caffeine.” She frowned. “You are no fun since becoming a lawyer.”

“You say that weekly.” She handed me the paper. I opened it.

The report was old, handwritten, simple — a procurement officer describing an offer of five thousand mora in exchange for ensuring Vaudin Shipping remained eligible for municipal transport work. No name. But there was a description: male, approximately thirty-five, dark hair, scar near left ear, represented himself as a logistics consultant.

I felt my pulse pick up. “Anything?” Charlotte asked.

“Maybe.”

“That’s lawyer language.”

“Yes.” She leaned forward. “I found something else.”

“Of course.”

“Same man appears in a society photograph three months later.” My eyes lifted. “What photograph?” She pulled it out — a Fontaine charity event, dozens of people, government officials, business owners, Spina representatives. She pointed.

My stomach dropped. Marcel Vautrin. Older photograph, same face, same small scar near the ear.

Charlotte watched me recognize him. “You know him.”

I said nothing.

“You definitely know him.” I picked up the photograph. “Where did you get this?”

“Steambird archive.”

“Who captioned it?” She flipped it over. Typed label: Marcel Vautrin — logistics coordinator, Spina di Rosula.

Fuck. “Charlotte.”

“Yes?”

“This does not get published.”

Her expression changed. “Why?”

“Because someone may have spent more than a decade covering this up.” She stopped moving. “And if they know we’re looking—”

“They may run.”

“Or destroy evidence.”

“Yes.”

“Or hurt someone.” I hated saying it.

“Yes.” Charlotte sat back. For once, she didn’t argue. Then: “So what do you need?”

I stared at her. “What?”

“You’re investigating something involving historic records, shipping, old society photographs, and probably corruption.” She gestured at herself. “I work at a newspaper.” I almost laughed.

“You are impossible.”

“And useful.” Also true.

I looked at the report again. “Can you search The Steambird archive without triggering attention?”

“Yes.”

“Every mention of Marcel Vautrin.” Her smile started. I pointed. “No contacting him.” Smile disappeared. “No interviewing his former associates without checking with me.” Frown. “No publishing.” Bigger frown. “No telling anyone we’re looking at Lucien Armand.”

“Shaun.”

“Charlotte.” She folded her arms. “Fine.”

“And René Desmarais.”

“What about him?”

“Find everything.”

“Everything?”

“Obituary. Family notices. Employment history. Any letters to editors. Community events. Court reporting. Shipping records. Anything with his name.” Charlotte started writing.

“Anything else?”

“Yes.” I thought of Lucien’s face — a frightened witness, a burned letter, a dead father, Callas’s handwriting, one yellow ledger beneath a flooded city.

“Find his daughter.” Charlotte looked up.

“Why?”

“Because if René Desmarais kept records...” I stared at the photograph of Vautrin. “...there may be a second ledger.”

Chapter Six

The Magician's Secret

By three in the afternoon, I had learned three things. First, Charlotte could locate information that had apparently escaped the attention of the entire Fontaine justice system for over a decade. Second, she became increasingly unbearable every time she knew she was useful. And third — there were entirely too many Marcel Vautrins in Fontaine.

“Six,” Charlotte announced.

I looked up from my desk. “What?”

“Six Marcel Vautrins.”

“That is offensive.”

“I don’t think they’re doing it deliberately.”

“One is already more than enough.” She dropped another stack of records onto my desk. My office had ceased resembling a respectable legal practice sometime around noon. Old Steambird editions covered one side of the floor. The original Lucien Armand trial transcript occupied most of my desk. Photographs were arranged across the small conference table — Benoît Vaudin, René Desmarais, Callas, Marcel Vautrin, the warehouse, the obstructed eastern viewing aperture, and the charity event where Vautrin had appeared three months after somebody matching his description had allegedly tried to bribe a procurement officer.

Then there were the names. So many names. I'd pinned a sheet of paper to the wall and begun connecting them.

LUCIEN ARMAND. Convicted. Eleven years imprisoned.

BENOÎT VAUDIN. Murder victim. Shipping broker. Possible smuggling connections.

RENÉ DESMARAIS. Key witness. Changed testimony. Later expressed remorse. Requested protection. Drowned seventeen days later.

MARCEL VAUTRIN. Former Spina logistics coordinator. Possible connection to Vaudin. Possible bribery attempt. Disappeared from Poisson.

CYRIL MARCEAU. Former judicial archives clerk. Possible payments. Retired.

And, in larger writing: CALLAS. Because somehow Navia's father sat in the middle of all of it.

Charlotte looked at the wall. "You've become one of those people."

"What people?"

"The ones with string."

"There is no string."

"Yet."

"I am not using string."

"You have four different colours of ink."

"That is organization."

"You drew an angry face beside Marceau."

"That was commentary." She opened her mouth to say something else — and something struck the window.

Tap.

We both stopped. Another tap. I turned. A playing card was pressed against the outside of the glass. My office was on the second floor.

"Is that—" The card disappeared. Then the window opened.

I jumped. "WHAT THE FUCK—"

A gloved hand appeared, then a hat, then a pair of familiar violet eyes. Lyney pulled himself gracefully through my office window as though entering legal offices through the architecture rather than the door were a completely ordinary social behavior.

I stood there with one hand against my chest. “LYNEY.”

He landed perfectly. “Hello, darling.”

Charlotte’s mouth dropped open. I pointed toward the door. “There is a staircase.”

“Yes.”

“There is a hallway.”

“Yes.”

“There is a DOOR.”

“Also yes.”

“USE IT.”

Lyney smiled. “I missed you too.” And just like that, all of my irritation betrayed me — because he was here, actually here, not a letter, not some vague message delivered through somebody else about a mission that had been extended, not three lines telling me he was safe but couldn’t say where. Lyney. My second boyfriend. Home.

My face must have changed because his theatrical smile softened. “There she is.”

I crossed the room. He opened his arms just in time for me to walk directly into them. “Don’t disappear for that long again.”

His arms tightened around me. “I’ll do my best.”

“That is not a promise.”

“No.” I pulled back. “Annoying.”

“I’ve been told.” I kissed him — not dramatic, not one of his exaggerated stage kisses where he dipped me because an audience happened to exist. Just something warm, familiar, a little longer than I’d intended.

Then Charlotte cleared her throat. Very loudly.

I turned. She sat behind my desk with both eyebrows raised. "I am still here."

"Unfortunately."

"This is the best day I've had at work all month."

"You are not putting this in The Steambird?"

"I wasn't going to." Lyney smiled at her. "Good afternoon, Charlotte."

"Lyney." Her eyes narrowed. "Did you seriously climb the building?"

"I prefer the word 'ascend.'"

I stared at him. "You prefer the word 'door' from now on."

Another voice came from the hallway. "He won't."

Lynette walked through the perfectly functional doorway. I pointed at her. "THANK YOU." She nodded. Behind her came Freminet, carrying a large case against his chest, offering me a small wave.

"Hi, Shaun."

"Hey, Freminet." I looked at Lyney. "You brought the whole family?"

"I thought you might enjoy seeing us."

"I do." Lynette looked around the office, then at the wall, then at Charlotte, then at the photographs. Her expression changed. Very slightly. But I noticed.

"What?"

Lynette said nothing.

"Lynette." She walked toward the wall. Charlotte sat straighter. Lyney followed his sister's gaze. Freminet did too. All three went quiet. My stomach tightened.

Lynette stopped in front of Marcel Vautrin's photograph. "Where did you get this?" The room changed instantly.

I looked at Lyney. He wasn't smiling anymore. "Why?"

Lynette turned. "Shaun."

"No." I moved closer. "You first."

Lyney glanced toward Charlotte, then toward the closed office door. Charlotte noticed. “Do I need to leave?”

“Yes,” Lyney said.

“No,” I said, at the same time. He looked at me. I looked at him. Charlotte slowly sat back down.

“This seems healthy.”

“Quiet, Charlotte.” Lyney lowered his voice. “What are you investigating?”

“A wrongful conviction.” His eyes returned to Vautrin. “How old?”

“Eleven years.”

“Victim?”

“Benoît Vaudin.” Freminet inhaled — tiny, but audible. I turned.

“You know that name too?” Freminet looked toward Lyney. Lyney’s jaw tightened, and that was when I realized something. This wasn’t coincidence. Not entirely. The three of them had walked into my office already carrying information they hadn’t intended to give me.

“Everybody sit down.”

Lyney sighed. “Shaun—”

“Sit.” Charlotte grinned. I pointed at her. “Not one word.” She mimed locking her mouth. Lynette sat. Freminet sat. Lyney remained standing. I stared. He eventually pulled out the chair.

“Thank you.”

“I feel oddly interrogated.”

“You climbed through my window and recognized a man connected to an eleven-year-old murder case. You are absolutely being interrogated.”

“Fair.” I sat opposite them. “What do you know about Marcel Vautrin?”

Lyney’s gaze changed. “I can’t tell you everything.” There it was — the sentence I hated most about dating somebody connected to the House of the Hearth.

I leaned back. "Mission?"

"Yes."

"Current?"

"Recently concluded."

"Concluded-concluded?" A tiny pause. "Mostly."

"Lyney."

He smiled weakly. "Complicated." I rubbed my face. "Of course."

Lynette looked at him. "You can tell her part."

He looked at his sister. "Father—"

"Did not prohibit us from sharing information relevant to an active threat to Fontaine." Charlotte's eyes widened.

I looked at Lynette. "Active threat?"

Lyney sighed. "Thank you, Lynette."

"You're welcome." Freminet looked deeply interested in the floor. I softened. "Freminet, you don't have to say anything you're uncomfortable with." He nodded gratefully.

Lyney looked at me. "Our last assignment concerned forged customs authorizations." My reporter brain activated instantly. "Shipping?"

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"Maritime cargo."

"From where?"

"Several locations."

"Poisson?" He hesitated. "Yes."

I stood and went directly to the wall. "What else?"

"The eastern commercial docks." I circled them. "Fleuve Cendre?" Another hesitation. "Yes."

I stopped. Those were the same three routes marked with black triangles in Callas's ledger. I turned. "Did your mission use route symbols?"

Lyney frowned. "Sometimes."

"Black triangle." Silence. Lynette answered first. "Yes."

My heartbeat jumped. Charlotte whispered, “Oh, shit.” I looked at her. “Appropriate response.”

Lyney leaned forward. “Where did you see it?” I hesitated — now I was the one holding confidential information. Wonderful.

“Callas’s records.” Navia’s father. Lyney knew enough about my life to immediately understand why that mattered. “Navia’s Callas?”

“Yes.”

“What records?”

“I can’t tell you everything.” He stared at me. I stared back. Lynette looked between us.

“Cute.” Neither of us acknowledged her. Lyney finally smiled. “Point taken.”

“Good.” I returned to my chair. “What does the triangle mean?”

“It appears on shipments connected to an old transport network.”

“How old?”

“Older than our investigation.”

“How much older?”

“We don’t know.”

“Eleven years?”

“Possibly.”

My stomach sank. “Contraband?” Lyney nodded. “What kind?”

“Originally?”

“Yes.”

“We’re not certain.”

“And currently?” He glanced toward Lynette, who answered. “Forged documents. Restricted meka components. Stolen customs seals. Several objects taken from government storage.”

Not good. “People?”

All three went quiet. Freminet finally said, “Not that we found.” Good — at least that.

“But,” Lyney continued, “the network appears to have been dormant for years before recently becoming active again.”

“How recently?”

“Several months.”

“Who’s running it?”

“We don’t know.”

“Vautrin?”

“We don’t know.”

“Then why did Lynette recognize him?” Lynette reached into her pocket and removed a folded piece of paper, placing it on my desk. A sketch — not perfect, but unmistakable. Older now, more lines around his face, hair thinner. Still Marcel Vautrin.

“When?” I asked.

“Seven weeks ago.” Charlotte sat forward. “Where?” Lyney looked at her. She raised both hands. “Sorry.”

I picked up the sketch. “He’s alive.”

“As of seven weeks ago,” Lynette said.

“Where did you see him?”

“A private gathering near the eastern docks.”

“What kind of gathering?”

“People pretending not to conduct business.”

“That sounds like Fontaine.” Lynette nodded. “He used another name.”

“What name?”

“Marius Valenne.” M.V. I wrote it immediately.

“Was he running the meeting?”

“No.”

“Who was?”

“We couldn’t identify them.”

“Male? Female?”

“Unknown.” I looked up. “How can you not know?”

Lyney smiled faintly. “Masked event.”

“Of course it was.” Fontaine — everything had to have theatre. “What were they discussing?”

“Routes reopening.” My pulse accelerated. “Old routes?”

“Yes.”

“Records?” Lynette’s eyes sharpened. “Yes.”

“What about them?”

“Recovering things left behind.” The room went silent. Callas’s yellow ledger. René’s possible notebook. Old judicial records.

Charlotte leaned forward. “Maybe they’re cleaning up.” Lyney turned toward her. “What?” I answered. “If this network existed eleven years ago, then records from that period could identify whoever was involved.”

Lynette understood immediately. “And if the network recently restarted...”

“They might be trying to find whatever survived.” Charlotte looked toward Vautrin’s photograph. “That explains why he came back.”

“Maybe,” I said. I hated how often I had to say that, but maybe mattered. It kept theories from turning into facts just because they were exciting.

Freminet shifted. “I found something.” Everyone turned. He looked uncomfortable with the attention. Lyney softened immediately. “You don’t have to—”

“No.” Freminet placed the case he’d been carrying onto the floor. “This part isn’t classified anymore.” He opened it — diving equipment, tools, and a small waterproof container. I stared. “What is that?”

“We found it beneath the old eastern channel.”

“When?”

“During the mission.” He removed the container carefully. “The smugglers were using submerged maintenance tunnels. I was mapping them.” Of course he was — if anybody in Fontaine could navigate some horrible underwater route nobody sane wanted to enter, it was Freminet.

“There was an old wreck near one of the drainage channels.”

“A ship?”

“Small transport boat.”

“Age?”

“Maybe ten or fifteen years.” I sat straighter. “What did you find?”

Freminet opened the container. Inside was a brass tag, black corrosion marking the edges, stamped with V.S.C. — 417 and, beneath that, a black triangle. I stopped breathing.

“What is V.S.C.?”

“We don’t know,” Lyney said.

“Vaudin Shipping Company?” Everyone froze. Charlotte whispered, “Holy shit.” Again, appropriately.

Lyney looked at the brass tag. “That’s possible.”

“Where exactly was the boat?” Freminet hesitated. “In a channel connected to the Aquabus maintenance reservoir.”

“Near where René Desmarais drowned?” Nobody answered. They didn’t know. I did.

I grabbed the case file, pages flying, Charlotte moving papers out of my way. “Come on...” Police report. Recovery location. I found it. René Desmarais, body recovered near — my stomach dropped — eastern drainage outlet.

Freminet looked up sharply. “What?”

I rotated the report. “René was recovered less than a kilometer from where you found that wreck.” Silence.

Lyney stood. “That doesn’t mean he was on the boat.”

“No.”

“Shaun.”

“I know.”

“It could have been there years earlier.”

“I know.”

“Or later.”

“I know.” Freminet looked at the map, then frowned.

“What?”

“The current.”

“What about it?”

“If he entered the water where the official report says...” He traced the waterways with his finger. “This channel pulls south during normal operation. The recovery point is northwest.”

“Could water controls change it?”

“Yes.”

“Were there maintenance disruptions that night?”

“I don’t know.” I wrote it immediately: check water-control logs — date of René’s death.

Lyney rubbed the back of his neck. “This has become significantly more serious than when I climbed through your window.”

“Yes.”

“That was twenty minutes ago.”

“Yes.” Charlotte smiled. “Welcome to Shaun’s office.”

“Don’t encourage him.”

A knock came from the door. Everyone froze. I looked toward it. Another knock. Charlotte whispered, “Are we expecting someone?”

“No.” Lyney stood, and the playful magician disappeared. Lynette’s entire posture changed. Freminet quietly closed his case. I walked toward the door.

Lyney caught my wrist. “Wait.” I looked at him. He moved ahead of me. I frowned.

“This is my office.”

“And I’m your boyfriend.”

“That doesn’t grant you door privileges.”

“Today it does.” Charlotte whispered, “This is adorable.” I glared.

Lyney reached the door and opened it. Neuville stood outside.

I exhaled so hard I almost became angry. “NEUVILLE.” He blinked. “Good afternoon.”

“Do you know how terrifying it is when people knock during conspiracy discussions?” His eyes moved past Lyney — Charlotte, Lynette, Freminet, documents everywhere, a waterproof case, a brass tag, the wall. His gaze slowly returned to me.

“I was gone for three hours.”

I folded my arms. “This happened very quickly.”

“So I see.” Lyney stepped aside. Neuvillette entered, then stopped beside me.

“Wriothesley told me you intended to spend today reviewing transcripts.”

“I did review transcripts.”

He looked around. “That statement appears incomplete.”

I pointed toward Lyney. “He came through the window.”

Neuvillette looked at Lyney. Lyney smiled. “Hello, Monsieur Neuvillette.”

“Why?” Lyney considered. “Habit?”

Neuvillette closed his eyes, briefly. I felt deeply validated.

“Sit,” I said. He looked at me. “We need to talk.”

Twenty minutes later, Neuvillette had become even quieter than usual — never a good sign. The brass tag sat on the table, the sketch of Vautrin beside it. Freminet had carefully explained the wreck. Lynette had explained the masked gathering. Lyney had disclosed only what he could from the House of the Hearth investigation. I’d explained René’s recovery site. Charlotte had produced the historical bribery report.

Neuvillette listened. No interruptions, no lectures, no warnings about speculative narratives. When we finished, he looked at Freminet. “You are familiar with the waterways surrounding the recovery site?”

Freminet nodded. “Yes.”

“Could you determine whether the recorded water-control configuration on that date would permit a body entering at the documented location to reach the recovery point?”

“If the operational logs still exist.”

“They should.” I snorted. Neuvillette looked at me. “Should?”

“Considering this case, I no longer trust the phrase.” Fair. He returned to Freminet. “Would you be willing to assist if requested

formally?"

Freminet glanced at Lyney, then nodded. "Yes."

"Thank you." Then he looked at Lynette. "You saw Monsieur Vautrin seven weeks ago."

"Yes."

"You are confident in the identification?"

"No." Interesting. Lynette continued, "I had never seen his younger photographs until today."

"Then what are you confident about?"

"That the man in my sketch called himself Marius Valenne, attended the meeting, and discussed recovering old records." Excellent distinction. Neuville nodded. "Good."

I smiled. Lynette looked toward me. "What?"

"That was a very lawyer answer."

"I'll try not to take offense." Lyney laughed.

Then Neuville turned to Charlotte. "You will not publish this." She straightened.

"Not until—"

"You will not publish this." There was something about the way he said it. She swallowed. "Understood."

Finally, he looked at me. Uh-oh. "What?"

"You will not contact Vautrin."

"I wasn't planning to."

"You will not contact Marceau."

"I know."

"You will not independently visit the submerged wreck." I stared. "Why would I—" Everyone looked at me. I looked around. "Okay, fuck all of you." Lyney covered his mouth.

Neuville continued. "You will also inform Clorinde and Navia before taking further action involving Callas's records."

"Obviously."

"Good." I folded my arms. "Anything else, Dad?" Silence. Charlotte made a choking noise. Lyney looked down. Lynette

showed no expression whatsoever, which somehow made it worse. Freminet appeared to want the floor to open.

Neuvillette stared at me. "I am going to disregard that."

"Probably wise."

Then my office communicator rang. We all looked at it. I picked it up. "Shaun Martin."

A woman's voice — older, cautious. "Advocate Martin?"

"Yes."

"My name is Camille Desmarais." My entire body went still. Charlotte immediately recognized the surname, her eyes widening.

"René Desmarais was my father."

I put the communicator on the desk. Everyone leaned in.

"Madame Desmarais, how did you get my number?"

"A reporter contacted me." Every head turned slowly toward Charlotte. She mouthed: I only left a message. I pointed at her threateningly.

"Charlotte mentioned you were looking into my father's death."

I answered carefully. "We're reviewing a case in which your father was a witness."

Silence. Then: "Lucien Armand."

"Yes." The woman breathed out. "My father lied about him."

Nobody moved. My heart started pounding. "Madame Desmarais, I think we should speak in person."

"I agree."

"Where are you?" Another pause. "Not at home."

Something in her voice changed everything. "Why?"

"I went back yesterday." I looked at Neuvillette. He was already listening intently. "My house had been searched."

My stomach dropped. "Did you report it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because nothing valuable was taken."

"That doesn't mean—"

"They weren't looking for valuables." I stopped. "What were they looking for?" Silence. Then: "My father's notebook"

Charlotte's hand went over her mouth. There it was. The second ledger.

"Do you have it?" Another pause. "Yes." Every person in the room went still.

"Madame Desmarais."

"Yes?"

"Do not tell me where you are over this line." Neuville looked at me approvingly. Good.

"Is anyone with you?"

"My husband."

"Do you feel safe?"

"For now."

"Good. Stay where you are." She hesitated. "There's something else."

Of course there was. "What?"

"I opened the notebook." My pulse jumped. "What did you find?"

"My father wrote names." I closed my eyes. Names.

"Which names?"

"I don't recognize most of them."

"Don't read them over the line."

"One I recognize."

I opened my eyes. "Who?" She inhaled. "Callas." Navia's father. Again. "And another."

I looked at Neuville. "Who?" The woman answered. "Marcel Vautrin."

Nobody breathed. Then Camille said, "And there is one name written beside Lucien Armand's trial."

My fingers tightened around the communicator. "Madame Desmarais?"

"Yes?"

“What name?” Her voice dropped. “Cyril Marceau.” The retired court clerk. My stomach turned. But she wasn’t finished. “Next to his name, my father wrote one sentence.”

“What sentence?” There was a pause, long enough that I could hear my own heartbeat. Then Camille read it. “Marceau changed the statement. Vautrin paid him. I let them bury an innocent man.”

Silence. Absolute. Complete — the kind where the world seems to stop moving around a single sentence. Lucien. Eleven years. A frightened witness. A corrupt clerk. A dead shipping broker. Callas trying to expose it. René trying too late to undo what he had done. And Marcel Vautrin, alive, back in Fontaine, looking for old records.

I looked at Neuville. For the first time since this case began, there was no caution in his expression, no reminder about speculation, no warning about premature conclusions. Only cold certainty.

“Shaun,” he said quietly. I knew. This was enough — not to prove Lucien innocent, not yet, but enough to tear the old conviction wide open.

I returned to the communicator. “Madame Desmarais?”

“Yes?”

“Keep that notebook with you.”

“I will.”

“And don’t open your door for anyone you aren’t expecting.” My eyes moved to Lyney. His expression had changed too — not boyfriend, not magician. House of the Hearth. He understood before I asked.

“I can have someone watching the area without approaching her,” he said.

Neuville looked at him. “Discreetly?”

Lyney smiled without humor. “That’s rather the point of my profession.” Neuville nodded.

I spoke into the communicator. “We’re going to arrange somewhere secure to meet.” Camille was quiet. Then: “Advocate

Martin?"

"Yes?"

"Is Lucien still alive?" The question hit me harder than I expected.

"Yes." She started crying, quietly. "Oh, thank god." I closed my eyes. "He's alive."

"My father..." She couldn't finish. I waited. Eventually she whispered, "He wanted to tell the truth."

"I think he did."

"Too late." I thought about the burned letter, Lucien reading it every day for three weeks, René terrified for his family, Callas trying to protect him, eleven years lost.

"Maybe," I said. "But we're listening now."

When the call ended, nobody spoke for several seconds. Then Charlotte whispered, "Shaun." I looked at her. "This isn't a story anymore."

I looked around the room — at Neuville, at Lyney, Lynette, Freminet, the brass tag, the photograph, the wall covered in names.

"No," I said. "It still is." I looked at Lucien Armand's name in the center. "But this time, we're finding the ending before we print it."

Lyney came beside me, his hand finding mine. I looked at him. "When did you get back?"

"This morning."

"And you're already in a murder conspiracy." He smiled. "You missed me." I laughed despite everything, then rested my forehead briefly against his shoulder. "I did."

His lips touched my hair. "I missed you too."

Neuville cleared his throat. I looked over. "What?"

"We still have an endangered witness, a potentially corrupt former judicial employee, an active smuggling network, and a man who may have spent eleven years imprisoned based on falsified testimony."

"Yes." A pause. "Perhaps the reunion can continue later."

Lyney looked offended. “Romance waits for no judicial investigation.”

Lynette said flatly, “It can.” Freminet nodded. Charlotte laughed. Even Neuville looked like he was fighting something dangerously close to amusement.

I squeezed Lyney’s hand. “Later.”

He smiled. “Later.”

Then Neuville reached for the old Lucien Armand case file, his expression hardening. “I’m reopening the case.”

Everything inside me stopped. I stared at him. “Officially?”

“Yes.” No preliminary review. No maybe. No waiting. The conviction was being challenged. Wriothsley had wanted this for years. Lucien had waited eleven. Navia’s father had died before he could see it. And now—

Neuville looked at me. “Advocate Martin.”

I straightened. “Yes, Your Honour?”

“For the duration of the reinvestigation, you will act as Monsieur Armand’s counsel.”

My heart pounded. “I accept.”

“Good.” He looked at Lyney and his siblings. “I will also require a formal statement concerning the House of the Hearth’s investigation, limited to information your organization authorizes you to disclose.”

Lyney nodded. “I’ll arrange it.”

“Charlotte.” She looked up. “Nothing is published until doing so will not endanger witnesses or compromise the investigation.” She groaned, but nodded. “Understood.”

“Freminet, I will have the water-control records sent for your assessment.” He looked surprised, then determined. “Okay.”

“Lynette, I will require a complete description of Marius Valenne.”

“Yes.” Then Neuville looked at me again. “And Shaun.”

“What?” His expression became painfully familiar — the one that meant he already knew exactly what I was going to do.

“Do not attempt to locate Marcel Vautrin yourself.”

I smiled. “I wouldn’t dream of it.” Every single person in my office said, “No,” simultaneously.

I stared at them. “This is bullying.” Lyney kissed my temple. “It’s love.”

I looked at the wall — at Vautrin’s face, at Callas, at René, at Lucien — and despite Neuville’s warning, one thought settled firmly into my mind.

Marcel Vautrin had spent eleven years believing the past was buried. He had no idea how many people were digging now.

And this time, we weren’t going to let him disappear.

Chapter Seven

The Witness Who Survived

Wriothesley took the news that Neuville had officially reopened Lucien Armand's case in two parts. The first was relief. "About damn time." The second, delivered before I'd even gotten my coat off, was considerably less welcome. "You are not leaving this house tonight."

I stood in the middle of our kitchen, coat still half-buttoned, and stared at him. "That escalated quickly."

Clorinde didn't look up from the notebook in front of her. "He's right."

"Whose wife are you?"

"Yours."

"Could've fooled me."

Wriothesley crossed to the front door and turned the lock. I heard it catch — actually catch.

"Did you just lock me in?"

"No. I locked everyone else out."

"That is not what the symbolism suggested."

Navia, sitting beside Clorinde with a cup halfway to her mouth, failed spectacularly at hiding a smile. I pointed at her. "You're enjoying this."

"A little."

"This entire polycule has become oppressive."

Wriothsley lifted my satchel off my shoulder before I could stop him and began listing the day's discoveries like a man reading a charge sheet — evidence of judicial corruption, an eleven-year-old falsified witness statement, a smuggling organization that might still be operating, and, as of an hour ago, the daughter of a dead witness informing me that someone had searched her home. "And?" he said, when he'd finished.

"And I'm perfectly capable of—"

"No."

I opened my mouth. Clorinde got there first. "No."

I turned to Navia, my last hope. She hesitated exactly long enough for me to feel briefly optimistic, and then folded. "...No."

"Navia!"

"I'm sorry."

"You're not."

"I'm a little sorry."

Wriothsley kissed my forehead on his way past. "I'll accept your gratitude later."

"You'll be waiting."

Probably not long. Annoyingly.

I took off my coat and asked where everyone else was. Neuville was making arrangements for Camille. Lyney was still coordinating with his siblings — he'd barely made it back to Fontaine before I dragged him into my professional chaos, which was, to be fair, probably less alarming than whatever the House of the Hearth usually asked of him. I still missed him. I'd gotten exactly one proper kiss before Neuville effectively drafted him into an investigation, and that felt like it should be actionable somehow. Later, maybe.

Navia pushed a plate toward me. "Eat."

"Why does everybody keep feeding me like I'm a stray cat?"

"Because when you're working, you forget," Clorinde said.

"I do not forget."

Wriothesley opened a cabinet without looking at me. “What did you eat today?”

I paused long enough that three separate people turned to look at me. “...Coffee.”

“Remarkable meal.”

“And half a croissant.”

“When?”

“Morning.”

“It is almost nine.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Eat.” I sat. “You’re all very controlling.”

Navia leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Yes, darling.” I immediately felt far less inclined to complain — effective manipulation, all of it — and took a bite while Wriothesley finally sat down across from me, his whole demeanor shifting into something quieter and harder. “Tell me exactly what Camille said.”

So I did. Not the abbreviated version I’d sent by message that afternoon — everything. The searched house. The names inside René’s notebook: Marcel Vautrin, Cyril Marceau. And the sentence that had gone through me like ice water the first time Camille read it aloud. *Marceau changed the statement. Vautrin paid him. I let them bury an innocent man.*

Wriothesley didn’t interrupt once. By the time I finished, his expression had gone unnervingly calm — the same stillness I’d seen him carry through Meropide when something had gone very wrong and somebody was about to learn exactly why the Duke had authority.

“How soon can Lucien’s conviction be suspended?”

“Not immediately.”

His jaw tightened. “We have a confession.”

“We have a deceased witness’s private notes describing misconduct. That’s evidence. It isn’t the same thing.”

“Shaun.”

“I know.”

“No. Eleven years.”

“I know.” His hand flattened against the table. “Eleven.” I stopped eating. Clorinde watched him carefully — Wriothesley rarely lost his temper loudly, and that almost made it worse. He didn’t need volume.

“You’ve known him a long time,” Navia said gently.

Wriothesley looked down at the table. “He was already there when I took control of Meropide. One of the first things I did was review several long-term prisoner files. His was among them.”

“You suspected the conviction that early?”

“Not enough.” That answer carried guilt, and I recognized it immediately.

“Wriothesley.”

“If I’d pushed harder—”

“No.” His eyes met mine. “You didn’t falsify his evidence. You didn’t change René’s testimony. You didn’t take Vautrin’s money.”

“No.”

“You reviewed what existed. The same record everybody else reviewed.”

“I had eleven years to find this.”

“And Callas had evidence hidden in a fucking wall.” Navia looked at me. I winced. “Sorry.” “No,” she said. “Accurate.”

I turned back to Wriothesley. “You cannot make yourself responsible for not finding evidence somebody deliberately concealed from the entire system.”

He looked away. “Lucien won’t see it that way.”

“Actually, I think he might. He asked why the Duke cared enough to get him an outside lawyer.” That silenced him. I reached across the table, and he let me take his hand.

“You did care.”

His thumb moved across my knuckles. “Yes.”

“Then help me get him out.” That landed differently — not erase the eleven years, not undo them, but something actionable, something now. His grip tightened. “What do you need?”

There he was. My husband. The Duke.

“Everything Meropide has on Lucien from intake onward. Visitor logs. Work records. Correspondence requests. Disciplinary reports. And access to any archival material that predates your administration.”

“Done. Done. Done.”

“Also...” I hesitated. His eyes narrowed. “I need you not to intimidate Cyril Marceau.”

He stared at me. Navia choked on her drink. Clorinde lowered her eyes.

Wriothsley leaned back. “Why would I intimidate him?”

“Because you’re currently doing that thing.”

“What thing?”

“The thing where you look like you’ve already planned how to dispose of the body.”

“I run a prison.”

“Exactly.”

“I am capable of professional restraint.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.” Then, because I couldn’t resist: “But I’m still taking Clorinde with me when we interview him.”

Clorinde nodded. “Reasonable.” Wriothsley looked betrayed. I smiled.



The plan for Camille was simple, which meant it immediately became complicated. Neuvillelette didn’t want her brought to the Palais — I agreed. Wriothsley didn’t want her brought to Meropide until the notebook had been copied and authenticated — also reasonable. The House of the Hearth had secure locations, but

formally involving them risked turning a judicial witness into an operational asset of another organization entirely, which nobody wanted. Somehow, by process of elimination, the safest neutral location in Fontaine became Navia's house.

"Absolutely not," she said, when I suggested it.

We were in the sitting room by then. "You just said my house was secure."

"It is."

"Then?"

"I don't want to bring danger to you." I realized my mistake half a second too late — Navia had gone very still, and Clorinde had visibly braced for what was coming.

"You don't want to bring danger to me." She stood. "I am currently investigating something my father died in the middle of."

"Yes."

"My father's former associate may be involved."

"Yes."

"The notebook may explain what Papa was trying to uncover."

"Yes."

"And you think I am staying outside this?"

"No."

"That sounded very much like no."

I stood too. "I'm not excluding you."

"Then stop deciding which risks I'm allowed to take." That hit hard, because I'd said almost the exact same thing to Lyney once, about his habit of withholding things to protect people. Damn.

"Okay," I said. "You're right. I don't want anything happening to you."

"I know."

"That doesn't give me authority to decide for you."

"No." Her anger eased, just slightly. "I hate when people use my arguments against me."

"Useful arguments."

She crossed the room and kissed me, which ended the discussion far more effectively than anything I could have said. “If we use your house, security changes,” I told her once I could think again. “Clorinde stays. Nobody opens the door without confirmation.”

“Anything else, counsel?”

“Don’t get smug.”

She kissed me again.



Camille Desmarais arrived just after eleven the next morning, not alone. Her husband came with her. So did Lyney, standing behind them looking infuriatingly elegant for someone who’d apparently spent the night arranging covert surveillance.

“You.”

He smiled. “Me.”

Camille was mid-thirties, dark-haired, a little pale, holding her handbag against her chest tightly enough that I already knew what was inside. Her husband stood close, protective and nervous. She hesitated at the threshold, then recognized Clorinde standing several feet behind me — off duty, unmistakable anyway — and her shoulders relaxed in a way I’d seen before. Clorinde had that effect on some people. Terror on others. Comfort, when you actually wanted someone dangerous nearby.

Then Navia came in from the kitchen, and Camille froze all over again.

“Navia?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” Something horrified crossed her face. “I didn’t realize — your father—”

“You don’t owe me an apology,” Navia said, crossing the room. “My father was trying to help yours.”

Camille’s eyes filled instantly. Navia’s softened to match. “So let’s find out what happened to both of them.”

Camille nodded. That was Navia — no courtroom, no technique, just the exact human thing to say. I loved her. Lyney caught my expression and smiled slightly; I gave him a look that said *don't*, and his smile only widened.

Neuvillette arrived eight minutes later, through the front door, like a civilized person. I made sure Lyney noticed. “Less dramatic,” he murmured. “More legal,” I murmured back. Neuvillette heard both and ignored them, which I was fairly sure was a professional survival strategy at this point.

We settled around the dining table. Camille placed the notebook down — smaller than I'd expected, brown leather, its elastic strap broken, pages swollen from age. René Desmarais had carried his guilt in something small enough to fit in a coat pocket. Neuvillette didn't touch it until he'd established its history: her mother had kept it after René's death; Camille didn't think her mother knew its contents; it had come to Camille when her mother died four years ago, stored in a box in the attic until yesterday; only her husband had handled it since. I wrote all of it down before Neuvillette asked me to, and he noticed, and I smiled smugly, and his expression didn't change at all. Rude.

Camille opened the notebook herself.



The first pages were ordinary — shift schedules, crate counts, mora owed, small observations about coworkers. *Lucien late — says tram. Liar. Probably Elise.* I almost smiled at that. He'd had a normal life once, apparently, a girlfriend maybe — I made a mental note to ask.

Then the entries changed. The handwriting tightened. *Vaudin — Route 3 after midnight. Not on manifest. Vautrin met B.V. again. Blue crates. No customs seal. Marceau came warehouse. Why is court clerk here?* I felt Neuvillette go very still beside me.

Then the murder. The entry the morning after was almost illegible: Benoît dead. Lucien arrested. They asked what I saw. I saw Lucien leave. That's all.

Original truth. One sentence. Everyone in the room went quiet.

Then, the next day: V came to house. Said Lucien threatened B. Said I should remember better. “V,” I whispered.

“Vautrin?” Camille asked.

“Probably,” I said, and Neuville immediately corrected: “Not established.” I nodded. Fair.

Marceau says investigators need clarity. Says if I saw Lucien leave, maybe I saw more. I told him no. Then, a page later: *Someone followed Elise to school.* Camille stopped breathing. “My mother.” I looked up. “Your mother’s name was Elise?” She nodded — apparently not Lucien’s girlfriend after all. Good I hadn’t assumed.

The writing darkened. *V said accidents happen near water.* Camille covered her mouth; her husband’s arm went around her. My own anger came fast and hot, and Clorinde’s hand found my shoulder once — grounding, keep reading.

Changed statement. Told them I saw Lucien through east side. Marceau wrote it. I signed. The room seemed to shrink around that sentence. Lucien looked at me in court. I couldn’t look back. Then, on a page by itself, four words: They convicted him.

Not the Court. Not the jury. *They.* I wondered, and not for the last time, who René had meant. Marceau? Vautrin? The whole system? Himself, included?



Several pages later, a new name entered the story. *Callas came.* Navia inhaled sharply. *Asked why statement changed. Told him I remembered more. He said he didn’t believe me.* Despite herself, Navia smiled. “That sounds like Papa.” Lucien had said almost the same thing once — Callas didn’t believe stories just because they sounded good.

Callas knows about routes. Asked about triangle. I lied. Navia whispered, “Why?” Nobody knew. Weeks later: *Told Callas everything.* Her fingers tightened around the table edge. *He says Lucien may be innocent. I told him I know.* Camille started crying

silently; her husband took her hand, and Navia reached across the table and took the other one. Two daughters. Two dead fathers. One secret sitting between them.

The notebook tracked at least four meetings between Callas and René. Names Callas had gathered — Vautrin, Marceau, a shipping company called Vaudin, several we'd never seen — and one name that appeared again and again.

Augustin Roche.

I circled it. "Who is that?" Navia shook her head. Neuville didn't know. Clorinde didn't. Camille didn't. But Lyney, standing near the window, went completely still, and I caught it immediately.

"Lyney. You know that name."

Silence.

"Lyney."

"Not personally."

"But?"

He looked toward Neuville, then Camille. "This might not be the place."

Camille sat straighter. "If it involves my father, it is exactly the place."

He studied her for a moment, then nodded. "Augustin Roche was affiliated with the House of the Hearth."

The room went very quiet. Even Neuville looked surprised.

"When?" I asked.

"Years ago. Long before my current assignments."

"Alive?"

His expression became difficult to read. "Officially? Dead. Unofficially — we aren't sure." I hated that word more every time it came up in this case. He'd been an operative, logistics and intelligence, believed killed twelve years ago during a mission — investigating cargo routes being used without authorization — one year before Vaudin's murder. Logistics. Again.

I looked at the notebook, then at the wall of connections building itself in my head: black triangles, Vaudin Shipping, Vautrin, Marceau, Callas, René. And now the House of the Hearth.

“How much of this can you tell us?”

“Not much more without permission.”

“Can permission be obtained?” Neuville asked.

“I can ask Father.”

The room went a little colder at the word. Arlecchino. Somewhere along the way, my wrongful-conviction case had gotten important enough that we might need to involve the Knave. Totally normal week. “My life was simpler when I was just stopping companies from framing teenage mechanics,” I said. Lyney smiled. “You seemed bored.” “I was not bored.” “You enjoy mysteries.” “I enjoy solving them, not discovering an international conspiracy under every floorboard.” “Technically,” Navia said sweetly, “this one was behind a wall.” I looked at her. Traitor.



The final entries were the worst.

Callas thinks Roche may be alive. Lyney stepped closer, sharp. A.R. connected to new name. M.V. frightened of him. “New name?” Neuville asked. I turned the page. Nothing. Callas told me not to write it. “I am beginning to resent your father’s commitment to operational security,” I told Navia, and she laughed despite everything — Papa would consider that a compliment, apparently.

Protection arranged. Need testify again. That matched Callas’s petition. Saw M.V. outside house. And then: Elise took Camille to sister. Camille inhaled. “I remember that. I was ten. My mother woke me up at night and said we were going to Aunt Sophie’s. She said Papa had work.” Her eyes filled. “That was the last time I saw him.”

Camille turned the final page herself. The date was one day before René died. Meeting Callas tomorrow. Have proof. If he gets this, Lucien can go home. Below it: Boat 417. East channel. Triangle

cargo. Roche. Everyone looked at Freminet's brass tag sitting on the table — V.S.C. — 417 — the same wreck, and my skin went cold.

"René intended to give Callas evidence from that vessel," Neuville said quietly.

"And died before the meeting," I said.

"If René died before he could tell him," Navia said, "Callas may have continued searching."

Clorinde looked at Lyney. "And if Roche was connected to that vessel—"

"The House of the Hearth may have records that explain why."

There was one last line, written sideways in the margin, almost missed — I only caught it because photography had trained me to look at the edges of things. *Not safe in Court. Not safe Spina. C knows.*

"C?" Navia frowned.

"Callas?" Camille guessed.

I studied it. "If C means Callas, why write 'C knows' when every other entry uses his full name?" Neuville looked at me. "Good observation." I resisted looking smug and failed slightly. "What other C?" Clorinde. Callas. Camille. Cyril. My heart stopped. "Cyril."

Everyone went silent. But René had always written Marceau, never Cyril. "Maybe not," Neuville said, and then, considering the page: "What if it isn't a person? What if it's a location?"

Navia sat up straight. "The Confrérie. Old Spina terminology — when Papa was younger, some Spina members called the original headquarters *la Confrérie*. The Brotherhood, roughly. It could mean the old headquarters knows. Unless it means something was stored there." Callas's ledger had been stored at the old headquarters. My pulse climbed. "René gave Callas something."

"Maybe," Neuville said. I stared at him. "Yes. Maybe." Growth. I was learning, slowly.



Then Lyney's gaze snapped toward the window, and he went completely still. So did Clorinde. I noticed them noticing.

"What?"

Neither answered at first. Clorinde stood; Lyney moved to the side of the window instead of in front of it, and every hair on my arms rose. "A man across the street," he said finally, all the performance gone from his voice. "Grey coat. Dark hat. Reading a newspaper — same page since I got here. Almost an hour."

"You didn't say anything?"

"I wanted to know if he was waiting for someone."

Clorinde checked another angle. "He's looking toward the house." Camille went pale. Her husband stood. Neuvillette became authority instantly. "Everyone remain inside. Especially you," he added, before I'd even opened my mouth.

Lyney slid a card free from his sleeve. "What exactly do you plan to do with that?" "Hopefully nothing." Clorinde reached beneath her coat. Suddenly Navia's cozy house contained entirely too many armed or weapon-adjacent people, and I went to Camille instead, crouching in front of her, trembling.

"Is it him? Did they follow me?"

"We don't know. You're not alone." I nodded toward the room. "We have Clorinde." A faint laugh escaped her. "That's reassuring." "Exactly. We also have Neuvillette." He inclined his head. "And Lyney." He gave a little wave without looking away from the window. "Less reassuring if you know him personally," I said, and it worked — barely, but it worked. Camille's breathing slowed.

"He's moving," Clorinde said. "Toward the corner." Lyney opened the side door; Neuvillette turned sharply. "Do not engage." "I won't. Observing." "Lyney." He looked back at Neuvillette, then at me, and I said the one word that mattered. "Don't." Something softened in him. He closed the door. Stayed.

A few seconds later, someone knocked. We all froze. Navia whispered, “If this is another friend, I’m changing houses.” Clorinde asked through the door, and the muffled answer came back: “Freminet.” Lyney relaxed instantly. I nearly collapsed. Navia opened the door, and Freminet walked in holding a rolled map, visibly confused by the fact that everyone in the room looked ready for war.

“Did I come at a bad time?”

I laughed, possibly a little hysterically. “No.”



Freminet unrolled the map on the table — historical water-control logs, requested by Neuville. On the night René Desmarais died, he explained, the standard current had been reversed. A maintenance override, he said, pointing to a signature on a second sheet: C. Marceau — *judicial evidence transport authorization*. My stomach turned. A judicial archives clerk had no authority whatsoever to alter municipal water flow, Neuville said — which meant the authorization was forged, or accepted improperly, and either way, René’s body hadn’t drifted to where it was found by accident. Someone had manipulated the waterway.

Don’t fall in love with a theory, Wriothesley had told me once. Fine. Facts: René planned to meet Callas with evidence. René referenced boat 417. Boat 417 existed. René died. The water flow changed that night. The authorization bore the name of the same clerk accused of falsifying René’s testimony. That was enough.

“This isn’t just reopening Lucien’s conviction anymore,” I said. “No,” Neuville agreed. “René was murdered.” “We have grounds to investigate that possibility.” Close enough.

Navia looked down at her father’s handwriting. “And Papa knew.” “Some of it.” Clorinde, watching my face carefully, said only, “Don’t,” before I could follow that thought any further toward Callas’s own death. “Not without evidence.” She was right. One case at a time. One truth at a time.

Then Lyney said, “The man is back,” and every head turned. Same grey coat, across the street, no longer reading. Looking directly at the house. He raised one hand — not waving. Holding a small black card, a triangle stamped in silver, and pressed it against the café window across the way before walking off. Nobody followed him. For once, even I knew better.

Five minutes later, a Garde retrieved the card under Neuville’s direct instruction. No fingerprints, no writing on the front, only the triangle. On the back, one sentence.

Neuville read it silently first, and his expression changed before he handed it to me.

THE DEAD SHOULD REMAIN BURIED.

My entire body went cold. Camille started crying. Navia went still. Clorinde’s jaw tightened. I held the card for one more second than I needed to — not because I wanted to, but because anger had already replaced fear. Eleven years Lucien had sat under the sea. René had died carrying guilt and evidence. Callas had died without finishing what he started. Camille had grown up without her father. And whoever had sent this thought one threatening sentence would be enough to make everybody stop looking.

“Wrong move,” I said, and handed the card back.

“Shaun,” Neuville started.

“No. They were safe when we didn’t know. They were safe when Lucien was just another convicted murderer nobody believed. They were safe when René was just another drowning.” Navia stood beside me. “And when Papa’s notes were behind a wall.” I nodded. “But now they know we’re looking.”

“Which means we proceed more carefully,” Neuville said.

“Yes. But we proceed.” No argument. No caution. Just yes.



Everyone had a piece to carry after that. Camille would be moved somewhere secure — Wriothesley would arrange it, Clorinde would likely escort her, Lyney and Lynette could watch for tails, Freminet

had the waterways, Charlotte had the archives, Navia had Callas's history, Neuville had the authority to reopen what others had buried. I had Lucien — my client, the man sitting under the sea waiting to learn whether the justice system that failed him was finally willing to admit it.

I picked up my coat. "Where are you going?" Neuville asked. "Meropide." "Now?" "Yes. Before this turns into another operation, Lucien deserves to know his case has changed." Wriothesley would understand that. Neuville considered it, then said, "I'll accompany you." I blinked. "To speak with him?" "Yes." My expression must have betrayed me, because he asked what was wrong. "You're the Chief Justice who presided over the system that convicted him." The room went quiet. "That," Neuville said, "is precisely why I should go." Oh. I hadn't expected that — not Wriothesley's boyfriend, not Furina's partner, not the man I annoyed regularly at City Hall, but the Iudex of Fontaine, willing to walk into a prison and face someone whose life his justice might have stolen.

"Okay."

Lyney caught my hand before I could leave. "Come back tonight." His thumb brushed across my fingers. "Not lawyer Shaun." I understood — for all his teasing, there was something vulnerable underneath it. He'd only just come home, and the moment he had, danger had swallowed our time together. "I'll come back," I said, and kissed him, longer than usual, no audience mattering. "Later?" "Later." "Promise?" "Promise." Then I followed Neuville out.



Lucien was brought into the interview room forty minutes after we reached Meropide. He'd been expecting me. Seeing Neuville stopped him cold.

Wriothesley stood near the wall — not as Duke this time, but as the man who'd waited eleven years alongside him, insisting on being there.

"What happened?" Lucien asked, once he'd sat.

"We found René's notebook." His face emptied — not disbelief, something deeper. "It survived." I placed a certified copy of the relevant page on the table. He read it once, twice, hands beginning to shake. *Marceau changed the statement. Vautrin paid him. I let them bury an innocent man.*

"He wrote it." "Yes." "He fucking wrote it." "Yes." "He admitted it." "Yes." His eyes filled, and then the anger came, fast — both hands slamming against the table hard enough that the guard outside shifted and Wriothsley raised one hand to keep him back.

"ELEVEN YEARS." He stood, chair scraping violently backward. "He knew. He knew I didn't do it." Then he looked at Neuville. "You. Your Court."

"Yes," Neuville said. No defense, no distancing. "The system I represent convicted you."

Lucien laughed bitterly. "You going to apologize?"

Neuville was quiet for a moment. "If this investigation establishes that your conviction resulted from falsified evidence, an apology would be profoundly insufficient." Lucien stared. Good answer. "But," he continued, "I will still owe you one."

The room went silent. Even I felt that. Lucien's anger hadn't disappeared — it shouldn't — but something in him shifted.

"There's more," I said. I told him about René's plan to meet Callas the next day, about boat 417, about the possibility that his death hadn't been accidental after all.

"Murder?" Lucien asked.

"Possible homicide."

"Shaun."

"That's the accurate term."

He rubbed his face, then looked at Wriothsley. "When do I get out?" There it was — the question none of us wanted. Wriothsley looked at Neuville; Neuville looked at me. "Not today," I said, and watched his face collapse.

"You have proof!"

“We have powerful evidence that a witness statement was altered through corruption. We’re retesting preserved evidence — the hook. We need to establish whether the remaining evidence can independently sustain your conviction.” His fist hit the table. “My blood wasn’t on him. His was on me.” “I know.” “Then what the hell else—” “I KNOW,” I said, louder than I meant to, and he stopped. I softened. “I want you out. Very badly. But I want you out because your conviction is legally destroyed, not because we rushed and gave somebody grounds to put you right back here.” He looked down, breathing hard. “That takes time.” “How much?” “I don’t know.” “Days? Weeks?” “Possible.” “Months?” I hesitated, and he laughed — no humor in it at all.

Wriothsley finally spoke. “I’ll make sure the review moves.” “How?” “By doing my job.” “And if they keep me here?” “Then I keep showing up until they don’t.” Lucien looked away, eyes wet. “You two are annoying.” “I’ve heard,” I said, and he actually laughed — small, broken, but real. “Callas said that too. That people asking the right questions are annoying.” Navia would like that. I made a mental note to tell her.

He asked about Camille — whether she’d seen the notebook, whether she remembered him. She’d been a kid, he said; René used to bring her to the docks sometimes. “Tell her—” He stopped. “What?” “Tell her I’m angry. But not at her.” My throat tightened. “I’ll tell her.” “And if René really tried to fix it... I don’t know if I forgive him. But I’m glad he tried.” “That sounds fair,” I said.

He folded the copied page carefully and looked at Neuvillette one more time. “You really think I might get out?”

“I believe your conviction now faces serious legal doubt,” Neuvillette said, with the precision I’d come to expect from him.

Lucien stared at him. “That is the most Chief Justice answer I’ve ever heard.” I burst out laughing. Wriothsley covered his mouth. Even Neuvillette looked briefly caught off guard, and Lucien smiled — for the first time since I’d met him, looking younger. Not twenty-

eight; nothing could give him that back. But younger. Hope again, still dangerous, still fragile — this time, supported by evidence.

Wriothesley stayed behind when we left; Lucien had asked him to, and whatever they needed to say to each other wasn't mine to hear.



Neuvillette and I walked toward the lift in silence. “You handled that well,” he said eventually.

“Are you complimenting me twice in one week?”

“Do not make me reconsider.”

I was still smiling when my communicator buzzed. Lyney. I expected something ridiculous. Instead: *Come directly home. Do not stop at your office.*

My smile disappeared. Neuvillette noticed immediately. “What?”

I opened the next message — a photograph. My office door, splintered around the lock. Papers scattered across the floor. My wall of names torn apart. And in the center of my desk, a black triangle. Beneath it, one photograph — not Callas, not René, not Lucien. Me, taken from across the street.

A final message from Lyney appeared as I stared at it.

They weren't looking for the notebook.

Then: They were looking for you.

Chapter Eight

The Photograph on My Desk

For several seconds, I forgot how to breathe. Not metaphorically — actually. My lungs simply stopped cooperating while I stared at the photograph on my communicator. Me, walking down the street outside my office, camera against my hip, coffee in one hand, headphones around my neck, completely unaware that somewhere across the road, somebody had raised a camera and decided I was worth documenting.

There was no date printed on the photograph, and that bothered me more than anything else. If it had been taken today, fine — terrifying, but explainable. We'd stirred up an eleven-year-old murder, found Callas's hidden ledger, uncovered corruption, located René's surviving notebook, identified an active smuggling network. Obviously somebody might start watching me now. But if it was older—

"Shaun." Neuville's voice brought me back. We were still standing inside the Fortress, halfway to the lift. He'd read Lyney's message over my shoulder, and his expression had gone from judicial neutrality to something cold and focused — dangerous, in a way people sometimes forgot Neuville could be.

"Do not return to the office."

"I wasn't planning to."

My hands had started shaking, and I hated that more than the fear itself — fear made sense, but the shaking felt like my body had made a decision before I had. I zoomed in on the photograph, searching the background. Storefront. Waterway railing. Flower cart. And a banner, strung across the street: *Fontaine Cultural Week*.

My stomach dropped. “This isn’t from today.”

“How old?”

I did the math. “Almost two months.”

Silence. “They were watching me before Lucien’s case reopened,” I said. “Before Callas’s ledger. Before Camille. Before I even met Lucien.” Which meant this might not have started with Lucien at all.

“Why would they have been watching me?” I asked.

“We do not know.”

“Another case? Journalism? My relationship with Wriothsley? Navia? House of the Hearth, because of Lyney?”

“Possible,” he said, to all of it, which was not remotely helpful.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor, and Wriothsley appeared. One look at our faces was enough to sharpen his expression immediately. He read the message, then the photograph, and went completely still — not frozen. Stopped. There was a difference. Wriothsley angry was rarely loud. Wriothsley truly angry became incredibly still.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Home.”

“No.”

“My home.”

“No.” His jaw was tight. “Whoever entered your office knows your routine. They may know where you live.” “They obviously know who I’m married to.” “Exactly.” “And you think they’re going to attack the Duke of Meropide’s house?” “I think people willing to murder a witness, corrupt court records, threaten Camille, and break into a

lawyer's office stopped behaving rationally eleven years ago." Fair. Annoyingly fair.

"A secure location should be arranged," Neuville said.

"Meropide," said Wriothesley.

I stared at both of them. "No. I am not moving into prison because someone took a photograph of me."

"For one night," Wriothesley said.

"No."

"Shaun."

"No." I folded my arms. "This is exactly what I was talking about with Navia. You don't get to decide my movements because you're scared."

That landed. I meant it to. "I will take precautions," I said. "Clorinde. Lyney. Lynette. Freminet, if needed." Wriothesley lifted an eyebrow at that last one. "He has a diving helmet." "That is not normally considered home security." "You'd be surprised." Neuville almost sighed.

"I won't be alone," I said.

Wriothesley studied me for a long moment. "I'm coming too."

"I wasn't stopping you."

"And Neuville."

Neuville looked at him. "Apparently."

"We are not turning the house into a judicial sleepover," I said, but Wriothesley had already taken my hand, thumb pressed lightly against my knuckles — anger still there, but fear underneath it, for me, and that softened mine right back.

"Fine."

"Thank you."

"But if Furina shows up with cake again, I'm locking her outside."

"She is already there," Neuville said.

"WHAT? WHY?"

"She heard something happened."

"WHO TOLD HER?"

A pause. “Wriothesley.”

My husband suddenly found the industrial ceiling deeply fascinating. “Unbelievable.”



Two plainclothes officers from the Maison Gardiennage were waiting when we reached the surface — no uniforms, which told me Neuville was taking the threat seriously enough not to advertise the protection. Good. I still hated it. The Court of Fontaine looked completely, obscenely normal: people along the waterways, children chasing each other near a fountain, a woman carrying flowers home, somebody arguing with a vendor over fruit — as if my office hadn’t just been broken into and my own face left as a threat on my desk. Danger should look dangerous. It rarely did.

The carriage stopped several streets short of my office. I frowned. “This isn’t home.”

“No,” said Neuville. “I told you not to go to the office.” “We are not entering it.” Lyney appeared from an alley before I could ask anything else, his face changing the moment he saw me — no smile at all, none of the usual theatre. He crossed the distance fast and pulled me in, hard, and held on like he was confirming with his own hands that I was still there.

“You’re okay.”

“Yes.”

“You weren’t there.”

“No.”

“Good.” I pulled back. “Were you?” “At the office? For three minutes.” “Lyney.” “Lynette was with me.” “That is not comforting.” “It should be.” “It is slightly comforting.” He smiled, faintly, then his eyes moved to Wriothesley — something passed between them, not rivalry, just two men who cared about the same woman realizing somebody had put her photograph on a desk as a threat.

“Did you find anything?” Wriothesley asked.

“A few things. Show you upstairs.”

He led us to a café across the street from my office, in through the back, to a storage room some very persuadable owner had apparently agreed to lend to several important people. Lynette was already there, photographs arranged across a table — my office, the broken lock, the scattered files, the torn wall, the black triangle, my surveillance photograph, and a set of shoe prints.

“Hello,” Lynette said. I stared at her. “Did you photograph my crime scene before touching anything?” “Yes.” I looked at Neuville; he looked back; I held up both hands. “I learned.”

Two intruders, probably — one heavier set of prints, one with a narrower heel. Man and woman? Not necessarily, Lynette said, and I filed that away and didn’t assume. Nothing obvious had been taken — client files, camera equipment, money, all still there. What was gone were the photographs and notes from my wall: Callas, René, Vautrin, Marceau. “So they wanted a specific item,” Wriothsley said. “Probably.”

Then Lynette slid something toward me — an empty pinhole in one of the crime scene photos, showing where another photograph had once hung. I knew exactly what had been there before she even asked.

“That was Navia,” I said. Silence. Wriothsley’s expression hardened. “What kind of photograph?” “Just us. Me, Navia, and Clorinde. Charlotte took it months ago, after an interview.” “They took Navia’s image specifically?” Lynette asked. “Was Clorinde in it? Were you?” “Yes to all of it.” “And they took the whole photograph.”

“They may be mapping relationships,” Wriothsley said quietly. Nobody spoke, because that thought was worse than anything else in the room. Once you started mapping me, you got Wriothsley. Clorinde. Navia. Lyney. Through Wriothsley, Neuville. Through Neuville, Furina. Through Lyney, the House of the Hearth. My personal life wasn’t small, and whoever had been watching me might have realized that too.

I sat down. “They don’t know what they’re getting into.”

Wriothesley stared. "That's your reaction?"

"Yes." Lyney laughed once, short and humorless. "No, darling. They threatened the wrong polycule." "He's been waiting to say that," Lynette said flatly, and I laughed despite myself, and even Neuvillelette looked mildly defeated by the whole situation.

Then Lynette slid another photograph across the table — the inside of my office door, near the broken lock, a tiny piece of dark blue fabric with an embroidered edge caught against the splintered wood, and an evidence bag beside it.

"Uniform cloth," she said.

My stomach dropped. "Maison Gardiennage?" "No." "Court?" "No." "Meropide?" "No." Lyney said nothing, which was answer enough.

"Lyney."

He hated the words before he said them. "House of the Hearth."

Silence. He shook his head immediately — old uniforms circulate, materials get stolen, people imitate the House — and I told him I knew, I knew, I knew, until his shoulders eased slightly, though the concern didn't leave his face. Lynette pointed out that the stitching wasn't current — older than anything the House used now.

Neuvillelette's eyes sharpened. "Roche."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Augustin Roche, House operative, believed dead twelve years ago. Callas had suspected he was alive. René's notebook connected him to boat 417 and the same smuggling network. If Roche had survived, he might have retained old House materials — or somebody working with him had.

"We need Arlecchino," Neuvillelette said. The room went very still.

"Father won't appreciate being summoned," Lyney said.

"I am not summoning her. Requesting cooperation."

"That sounds better." He looked at the old cloth. "If somebody is using the House of the Hearth to cover murders and threaten people under her name?" A small, entirely unamused smile. "No."

I understood. “They’re fucked.”
“Essentially.”



Home no longer felt like home with two officers positioned outside it, and I hated that. The moment I stepped through the door, Furina came rushing out of the sitting room and hugged me before I could get a word out. “Are you injured? Threatened? Followed? Shot?” “No — technically — possibly — what?” Wriothesley clarified that no one had been shot, thank goodness, and Furina slapped my arm for frightening everyone, and I informed her, with dignity, that I hadn’t broken into my own office, and she called that victim blaming, and somehow the argument continued for a full thirty seconds before Neuville walked in and she immediately redirected. “Tell her.” “I suspect she has already received several lectures.” “Not enough.”

Navia and Clorinde were on the sofa. My chest loosened at the sight of them. There. Home — my actual home. Navia hugged me next; Clorinde waited until she’d finished, then took my face between her hands and looked at me carefully. Checking. Not just for injury — eyes, breathing, whether I was pretending. “I’m okay.” She kept looking. “Mostly.” Her thumbs brushed my cheeks. “Better.” Then she kissed me, quiet and brief and grounding, and I leaned into it half a second longer than necessary.

Furina still wanted to relocate everyone to the Palais. I still refused to sleep at City Hall, no matter how many times Neuville pointed out that it technically wasn’t City Hall. It felt like City Hall, and that was the end of the discussion, as far as I was concerned.

Wriothesley set down the evidence photographs and explained, without sugarcoating, that whoever entered my office had taken a photograph of Navia, Clorinde, and me together. Navia froze, then listened to the whole thing, and by the end she looked furious — not scared. Furious.

“They’re trying to scare us.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

I blinked. “What?”

She stood. “If they’re frightened enough to threaten you, then Papa found something worth hiding. They searched your office. They searched Camille’s house. And now they’re showing themselves.” She looked at me. “Then they are nervous.”

I stared. That was exactly where my own brain had already gone. Furina looked between us. “Oh dear.” “What?” Neuville asked. “They have the same expression.” Clorinde sighed. “No.” “Absolutely not,” said Wriothesley. Navia and I said, simultaneously, “We haven’t said anything,” and then looked at each other and smiled, and Clorinde stood up entirely. “I dislike this. Whenever the two of you agree this quickly, something becomes structurally unsafe.”

Fair.

Navia opened Callas’s copied notes. “What if the break-in wasn’t only a threat? What if they took specific material to check what we already know? But they left the photograph of Shaun.” My smile disappeared. Right — they hadn’t needed to do that, if evidence recovery was the only goal. A message. “What if that one wasn’t taken because of Shaun,” Navia went on. “What if it’s because of me. My father.”

That made terrible sense. Callas’s daughter finds his ledger; somebody realizes she’s directly involved; they take the photograph — maybe not to threaten me, but to identify Navia. Or Clorinde. Or both.

Furina asked if they knew where the ledger was. “Probably now,” I said. “But not where,” Wriothesley added, with the first real smile I’d seen from him in hours. Meropide. Safe. Good.

“Assume all known relationships are now compromised,” Neuville said. I hated the phrase, but he was right. I asked where Camille had been relocated to. “Not information you require.” “I am her lawyer.” “She is not your client.” “Connected witness.” “Still no.”

“This is a terrible household,” I said. Clorinde said, “He’s right,” which didn’t help.

Then Lyney walked in. “Good news. Father is coming.”

Nobody spoke. Furina looked around the room. “Here?” “Yes.” “Do we have enough tea?” That was somehow her first concern. “Probably,” Wriothesley said, and Neuvillelette looked mildly resigned to the entire evening.

“How soon?” I asked.

Lyney checked the clock. “Soon.”

I’d met powerful people by then. Neuvillelette. Wriothesley. Clorinde. Judges, criminals, community leaders, performers who thought their own importance affected gravity. Arlecchino was different — not because she was Lyney’s mother, but because when Lyney spoke about her, something in his voice always changed. Respect. Loyalty. Fear. Complication. Love, in its own difficult shape. And now she was coming to my home because somebody wearing fabric tied to the House of the Hearth had broken into my office.

Wonderful.

I looked down at my clothes. “Are you checking your outfit?” Navia asked. “No.” “You are.” “I’m meeting the Knave.” “You’re dating her son.” “THAT DOES NOT MAKE IT BETTER.” Lyney laughed. “It may actually make it worse.” I stared at him. “Thank you.” He kissed my cheek. “My pleasure.”



Arlecchino arrived twenty-seven minutes later — no entourage, no announcement, just three knocks. Clorinde opened the door, and the atmosphere in the room changed the moment she stepped inside. Black and white, red accents, perfectly composed. Her gaze moved once across the room — Wriothesley, Neuvillelette, Furina, Navia, Clorinde, me, Lyney — and settled back on me.

“So.”

I hated that one word immediately.

Lyney stepped forward. “Father.”

“Lyney. You’ve been home less than a day, and already you’ve involved yourself in a reopened murder investigation.” “I missed Fontaine.” She stared at him until he stopped smiling.

Her eyes moved to me. “Advocate Martin.” “Shaun is fine.” A tiny pause. “Shaun.” Somehow worse. “Thank you for coming,” I said, straightening. “I was told someone entered your office wearing material associated with my organization.” “We don’t know that they were affiliated.” “Good. At least one person in this room understands the distinction between evidence and assumption.” I looked at Neuville, who looked back at me, and I mouthed, *She likes me*, and his expression said, very clearly, *do not*.

She walked to the evidence table and picked up the photograph of the fabric, examined it once, then twice, while Lyney watched her closely. “Augustin Roche wore this uniform.”

Silence. “So Callas was right,” Lyney said. “Perhaps.” Even Arlecchino used *perhaps*. I felt vindicated.

She laid it out for us plainly. Roche had served the House twelve years ago — logistics, maritime routes, intelligence — investigating shipping companies used to move contraband through Fontaine. Not people, she clarified, when Wriothesley’s expression darkened — information, weapons components, restricted materials, stolen identities, which somehow wasn’t much more reassuring. Vaudin’s company had been one of them; Roche had believed someone inside Fontaine’s administrative system was clearing altered manifests. Marceau, maybe, though she’d never had a name at the time. And then his team had been attacked near the eastern channels, on a vessel assigned to him: number 417.

I stared at her. “How do you know that number?” Everyone went very still. “René Desmarais wrote it in his notebook,” I said carefully, and something shifted in her face — not shock, recognition.

“Show me.” Neuville handed her the certified copy. She read it silently, then said the official report had stated the vessel was destroyed by explosion — no wreck recovered, two bodies, and

enough blood evidence to declare Roche dead without a body to prove it.

“Then the vessel survived long enough to sink elsewhere,” Neuville said.

“Where was this recovered?” Arlecchino asked, of Freminet’s photograph.

“A submerged wreck. Freminet located it.”

She considered that for a moment, and then said what mattered: if Roche was alive, he possessed operational knowledge of the House from that era — including uniforms, routes, safe locations. “Would he know your current ones?” Lyney asked. “No.” A pause. “Unless someone told him.” Silence. An internal leak. Again. Different institution. Same pattern. Somebody inside — I was starting to hate that phrase more than any other in this entire case.

“Do you have reason to believe your current organization is compromised?” Neuville asked.

“No.”

“Can you verify that?”

“Yes.”

“Quick answer,” Wriothesley murmured. She looked at him. “I know my house.” He held her gaze, then nodded. Fair enough.

Then she picked up my surveillance photograph. “You said this was taken two months ago.” “Yes.” “Where?” “Outside my office.” “What were you working on then?” I froze, ran the timeline, and my stomach dropped.

“Two months ago I covered a Steambird feature. Dock rehabilitation. Eastern commercial docks.” Silence. “What did you photograph?” “Workers. Facilities. Old warehouses. New construction. Ships. Cargo, in the background.” “Did you publish all the images?” “No.” “Where are the originals?”

My blood ran cold. My office. My camera archive. “Were my photo drives there?” I asked Lyney. He froze, then reached for his communicator to check with Lynette — who wasn’t in the room.

“Which drives?” “The black case under my editing desk.” His face changed. “That case was open.”

I grabbed my coat, and Neuville said, immediately, “No.” “Those photographs might be what they wanted.” “Yes.” “Then we need to check.” “Not you. It’s MY OFFICE.” Clorinde stood. “I’ll go.” “I’m coming.” “No.” She came close, lowering her voice. “If somebody has been monitoring you for two months, you are now the least objective person in this room.” Ouch. Accurate. “I need those images.” “And you’ll get them. You don’t need to physically retrieve them.”

Meanwhile Lyney was already reaching Lynette. Arlecchino, unbothered by any of it, asked what exactly I’d photographed that day. I closed my eyes and pulled the memory apart: workers, water, metal, cargo cranes, a red ship, an old warehouse. Charlotte had been with me. And there had been an argument — two men near a storage gate, caught accidentally while I focused on dockworkers behind them. One had turned toward my camera. I remembered because I’d thought he was going to complain.

He hadn’t.

“Oh shit.”

“What?” Neuville asked.

“I photographed someone. Older. Grey hair, tall, dark coat. Maybe a scar. I need the photographs.”

Lyney’s communicator buzzed. He read the message, and his face drained. “The drives are gone.”

Silence. My office hadn’t been searched randomly. They’d known exactly what they wanted, and it wasn’t Callas’s ledger, or René’s notebook. It was my photographs.

“You photographed the network before you knew it existed,” Arlecchino said. Two months. They’d been watching me because I’d accidentally captured something — a meeting, cargo, someone — and waited, to see whether I noticed, whether I published, whether Charlotte did. Then Lucien’s case reopened, and suddenly the

photographer who'd unknowingly documented them was also the lawyer digging into their eleven-year-old crimes. From their side, I'd become a catastrophe.

"They thought you knew," Navia said quietly. "When they started watching." Right — they hadn't known the photographs were accidental. They'd probably assumed I'd been investigating them all along, and every step I'd taken since had only confirmed it.

"They think you're further ahead than you are," Lyney said.

"That makes you more dangerous to them," Wriothsley said.

"And more valuable," Arlecchino added. Nobody spoke. "If they believe you possess information they need, killing you immediately would be irrational." Not exactly comforting. "Could we perhaps not discuss killing Shaun as an efficiency calculation," Furina said, and I told her she was right, and she told me that was not helping.

"They entered while you were away," Arlecchino continued. "They removed the drives. They left a threat. They want you frightened. Why not simply destroy everything and disappear? Because they don't know what you already copied."

My backups. Of course. I was a photographer — I backed up everything, multiple times.

"Where?" Lyney asked. I said nothing. Everyone in the room — Arlecchino, Neuville, Wriothsley, Clorinde, Navia, Furina — watched me, and I smiled. "Nice try." Wriothsley blinked. "You won't tell us?" "No. The less everybody knows, the safer the backup." Arlecchino's mouth moved, barely — was that approval? — and she looked at Lyney. "I like her." "I know." Wriothsley looked mildly offended. "I've been saying this." "This is not the time to brag about marrying me." "Seems appropriate."

I took out my communicator. "Charlotte has copies. Not all, but she helped edit the feature." Neuville stood immediately. "Contact her." I called. No answer. Called again. Nothing. My pulse changed. Lyney sent Lynette to check The Steambird. Then my communicator buzzed — Charlotte, finally. *Shaun where are you?* I

typed back fast: *Home. Are you safe? Yes. Why? Do you still have copies from the eastern docks feature?* A long pause. *Some. Why?*

I typed: Do NOT open them. Do not send them. Do not tell anyone. Stay at work. Lynette is coming.

No response. Then: Uh Shaun. What. I already opened them. Of course she had. And I think you need to see this.

An image loaded — my own photograph, dockworkers in the foreground, and through a warehouse opening behind them, three men. Marcel Vautrin, older, matching Lynette's sketch. A man I didn't recognize. And the third —

Everyone leaned closer. Arlecchino went completely still. "Who?" I asked. She answered before Lyney could. "Augustin Roche."

Silence. Alive. There. Photographed two months ago. Not speculation, not Callas's suspicion, not House rumor — a face, in my own photograph. Roche, Vautrin, together. Then a second image, cropped closer, showed a crate behind them stamped V.S.C. 417 and the same black triangle. Impossible, unless 417 wasn't only a vessel. A shipment designation. A route. A code.

There's more, Charlotte wrote. A third image, slightly blurred — a man leaving through a side gate that afternoon, older, shorter, hat low. I didn't recognize him. Neuville did.

"Cyril Marceau."

All three, together, two months ago. The supposedly unrelated corruption of an eleven-year-old murder case wasn't historical at all. They were still working together.

"You can arrest them," I said to Neuville. "No." "What do you mean, no?" "This photograph establishes association." "It establishes three suspects connected to witness tampering and smuggling meeting secretly." "Yes." "That's enough to question them." "Questioning is not arrest." I hated when the law argued back.

"Do not move yet," Arlecchino said. "Why?" "Because now we know something they do not." She tapped the image. "We have the

photograph.” They’d stolen my drives, believing they’d erased the evidence — they had no idea Charlotte had copies. Meaning they thought they’d won. For the first time since this began, we were ahead.

“If they believe the photographs were destroyed,” Neuville said, “they may relax.” “Move,” said Wriothsley. “Communicate,” said Lyney. “Return to wherever they’ve been hiding.” “And we can follow them,” Clorinde said. I smiled. Every single person in the room said, “No,” at once. “OH COME ON.” Navia laughed — even in this, even now.

I looked at the photograph one more time. Three men who’d destroyed lives for more than a decade. Men who thought they’d erased the evidence. Men who’d watched me for two months, broken into my office, threatened my family, stolen what they believed were the only photographs connecting them. They didn’t know Charlotte had copies. They didn’t know I backed up everything. They didn’t know Callas’s ledger survived, or René’s notebook, or that boat 417 had been found, or that Lucien’s case was officially reopened. And most importantly, they didn’t understand what they’d done when they threatened me — because until now, everyone involved had been investigating separate pieces. Neuville. Wriothsley. Navia. Clorinde. Lyney. Lynette. Freminet. Charlotte. Arlecchino. Me.

Whoever had left that black triangle on my desk had just given all of us the same enemy.

I looked around my living room — my husband, my wife, my girlfriend, my boyfriend, my husband’s boyfriend, my stage partner, the Chief Justice, the Champion Duelist, the Duke of Meropide, the president of the Spina di Rosula, House of the Hearth operatives, and the Knave herself, all standing around one table — and I started laughing.

“That laugh concerns me,” Wriothsley said.

“I rather like it,” said Lyney.

“What are you thinking?” Clorinde asked.

I looked at the photograph. “They wanted to scare the lawyer.”

Navia smiled. “Yes?”

“They probably should have checked who she comes home to.”

Arlecchino looked at me, and this time, she definitely smiled.

Chapter Nine

Bait

The next morning, my living room looked like somebody had combined a war room, a courtroom, and the backstage of an exceptionally expensive theatrical production — which, considering the people involved, was more or less exactly what had happened. Callas's ledger sat inside its protective case on the dining table, René Desmarais's certified notebook pages arranged beside it. Charlotte had delivered enlarged copies of my own dock photographs shortly after sunrise, including the three that mattered most: Marcel Vautrin, Augustin Roche, and Cyril Marceau, alive and together, two months ago — and blissfully unaware that Charlotte had kept copies after somebody broke into my office to steal what they thought were the originals.

Neuville stood at the head of the table. Wriothsley sat beside me with tea. Clorinde stood near the windows. Navia sat across from me, Lyney close enough that his knee stayed against mine. Lynette leaned against the wall; Freminet occupied the quietest corner with his waterway maps. Furina had claimed the largest chair despite having contributed nothing to the investigation so far, and Arlecchino stood behind Lyney — nobody had offered her a seat. I suspected everyone had instinctively decided that asking the Knave

whether she wanted to sit was somehow more intimidating than simply letting her stand.

Charlotte arrived last, carrying newspapers. “Good morning.”

“You were instructed to tell no one about the photographs,” Neuville said.

“I told no one. I also did not publish them.” I checked the front page — nothing related to the case. “Good.” “You sound surprised.” “I know you.” “Rude.” “Accurate.” She sat beside Navia.

Once everyone had settled, Neuville laid out the working assumption: Vautrin, Roche, and Marceau believed my photographs had been destroyed. They didn’t know The Steambird had copies, or the full contents of the ledger or the notebook. “They will eventually realize the break-in failed,” Arlecchino said. “How quickly?” “If they monitor publication,” Charlotte said, “not until we print something.” “Which we aren’t doing,” I said. “Yes, counsel.” “Then there is a window,” Arlecchino said. “Exactly.” “The problem,” Wriothesley said, “is finding them before that window closes.”

We knew Vautrin used the alias Marius Valenne, that he’d attended meetings near the eastern docks. Freminet tapped one of his maps — the submerged tunnels were still being used. He’d checked water disturbance near the wreck using maintenance records only, without going back down himself, which earned a sharp look from Neuville until Freminet clarified. Three pressure changes this week, consistent with underwater doors opening: one near the eastern docks, one farther south, and one beneath an old drainage station — in Poisson.

“They’re moving between the Court and Poisson,” Wriothesley said.

“Possibly,” said Freminet, and Neuville looked almost pleased with the qualification, and I noticed him noticing, and neither of us said anything about it.

“If they’re still moving materials,” Lyney said, “we can watch the routes.”

“No,” Arlecchino said immediately. “They already know Advocate Martin is connected to you. Placing you openly around the docks risks confirming the House is involved.” “They may already know,” Lynette pointed out. “They may. But you don’t want to prove it.” I looked between them. “So Lyney stays invisible.” “I prefer discreet.” “You entered my office through a second-floor window.” “That was romantic.” “That was trespassing.” “You kissed me.” “Those facts are unrelated.” Furina whispered to Navia that we flirted during investigations; Navia whispered back, constantly; I informed both of them I could hear everything, and Wriothesley added, so could everyone, and I kicked him lightly under the table while Neuville waited us all out with the patience of a man questioning every decision that had led him here.

Eventually I said what I’d been turning over since the night before. “We need movement.” “Explain,” said Arlecchino. “They’re hiding because they think they’ve removed the threat. So we change that.” “No,” Wriothesley said, before I’d said anything else. “I haven’t said anything yet.” “I recognize your face.” “What face?” “The one immediately preceding a terrible idea.”

I pointed at Charlotte. “We deliberately let them know one copy survived. Not the actual photograph — a story. A Steambird retrospective about the eastern commercial docks. Photography feature. Urban redevelopment. Old industry. Before-and-after images.” Furina found that terribly boring. “Exactly.” I pointed to the harmless dock photo on the table. “We use a crop that shows nothing — no Vautrin, no Roche, no Marceau, no triangle cargo, no warehouse meeting — and mention the feature includes unpublished photographs from my original assignment.”

Charlotte was already writing. “You are advertising that you still have photographs,” Wriothesley said. “The article is bait.” “Why did you point at me?” Charlotte asked. “Because you’re publishing it.” “That doesn’t answer the question.” “They won’t care about

Charlotte,” Lyney said. “I mean they’ll assume Shaun still has the source material.” “Still offensive,” Charlotte muttered.

“They’ve already broken into my office once,” I said. “They can’t repeat the same tactic without expecting security.” “So they might approach you elsewhere,” Clorinde said. “Yes.” “No.” “Clorinde.” “No.” “Everyone keeps saying no without offering an alternative.” Arlecchino finally spoke. “The idea has merit.” Silence. Wriothesley turned to her slowly. “No.” “You are allowing personal attachment to interfere with strategic judgment.” “She’s my wife.” “Precisely.” I looked at her. “So you’re saying I’m right.” “I said the idea has merit. Do not become excited.” Lyney smiled quietly. I liked her. Terrifying woman, but I liked her.

Neuvillette considered it properly. “If the story is sufficiently innocuous, it may create uncertainty without disclosing investigative progress.” I pointed at him. “Exactly.” “However.” “There it is.” “You will not independently respond to contact. Any meeting will occur under surveillance. You will carry no original evidence. You will not deviate from the agreed location.” I hesitated at that last one, and every person in the room stared at me until I gave in. “...Fine.”

“You hated that,” Wriothesley said. “I enjoy flexibility.” “You enjoy causing problems.” “Sometimes problems need causing.” “Put that on her business card,” Navia told Charlotte. “Already writing it down.” “Don’t.”

Furina stood suddenly. “I have an idea.” She placed a dramatic hand over her heart. “The stage.” Oh no. Lyney smiled. Oh no. “We already planned the benefit performance.” I’d genuinely forgotten — an eleven-year-old judicial conspiracy had a way of interfering with rehearsal schedules. Two weeks earlier, Furina and I had agreed to perform at a fundraiser for restoration work in Poisson; half of Fontaine already knew about it.

“You want to use a public event as bait,” Clorinde said. “When you say it like that, it sounds irresponsible.” “It is irresponsible.” “But

everyone already expects Shaun there.” Unfortunately true. Charlotte pointed out the story could run tomorrow morning; Neuvillette looked increasingly unhappy, visibly weighing public safety, legal liability, operational security, and how much he hated all of us at once. Furina walked through it methodically: she’d perform, I’d perform, Lyney was already on the programme — a surprise to me, apparently he was “resting theatrically,” which was not, I informed him, a real thing, and he informed me it was now. Navia would naturally attend since the fundraiser benefited Poisson; Clorinde was already going; Neuvillette usually attended charitable functions.

“And Wriothesley,” Furina said, and everyone turned to look at him.

“I wasn’t.”

“You are now.” He stared at her. “So nobody’s presence is suspicious,” she finished.

“The audience provides cover,” Arlecchino said. “It also provides civilian risk,” Neuvillette said. There it was — the actual problem. “If we think they’re likely to attack, we don’t do it,” I said. “They’re not likely to attack openly,” Arlecchino said. “You’re certain?” Wriothesley asked. “No.” Good answer, at least. “But their behavior indicates concealment. The break-in occurred while Shaun was away. Surveillance was distant. The threat was indirect.” “So they avoid exposure,” Lynette said. “They’re more likely to send someone to contact her,” Lyney said. “Or search backstage,” Clorinde added. “Or follow her after,” said Wriothesley.

I smiled. “There we go.” “No one said it stopped being terrible,” he said, but Navia was already laughing.



The Steambird article ran the next morning under a headline so boring it was almost beautiful — THE EASTERN DOCKS: FONTAINE’S WORKING WATERFRONT IN TRANSITION — beneath one of my old photographs of repair crews beside a crane,

nothing interesting in the frame at all. The final paragraph carried the hook, buried where only someone looking for it would find it: mention of an expanded photographic retrospective, using previously unpublished images from the original assignment. Harmless, unless you happened to be one of three men who appeared somewhere in those images.

I read it over breakfast, Wriiothesley across from me, Clorinde beside him, nobody speaking. “What?” I finally asked. “Nothing,” Wriiothesley said, drinking his tea. “You’re doing the silent judgment thing.” “I’ve accepted the plan.” “You haven’t emotionally accepted the plan.” “No.” “Neither have I,” Clorinde said. I told them I’d have more security around me than the Palais Mermonia. “Don’t challenge fate.” “I wasn’t.” “You practically invited it to dinner.” Clorinde leaned over and fixed my collar. “You will follow the plan. No improvising. No chasing anyone. No disappearing backstage without telling somebody.” “Yes.” “Shaun.” “I said yes.” “She means yes until something interesting happens,” Wriiothesley told her. “I know.”

Then his expression softened, and he pulled me between his knees, arms settling around my waist, and suddenly none of it was funny anymore. “I know why you’re doing this,” he said quietly. “But?” “But I’m allowed to hate it. I don’t like you being scared.” “I’m not scared.” His look told me exactly what he thought of that. “Okay. I am scared.” Clorinde watched from the table; I looked at her too. “But I’m more pissed off.” “That,” Wriiothesley said, “I believe.” They watched me for two months. They walked into my office. They touched my work. They put my photograph on a desk like a warning label. “And now I’m supposed to hide?” “No,” he said. “You’re supposed to survive.” That silenced me. Clorinde came around and touched my shoulder. “Those are not opposites. You can fight and still protect yourself.” I looked at both of them — my husband, my wife, my home. “Fine.” Wriiothesley laughed right in my face. “I hate you.” “No, you don’t.” Unfortunately true.



Nothing happened all day. At noon: nothing. At one: nothing. At two, Charlotte texted that she was disappointed by the lack of mysterious men and dramatic letters; I told her she needed healthier hobbies. At three, Lyney sent that Lynette wanted me to stop checking the window — apparently she'd noticed, which meant I stopped, mostly.

By four thirty I'd arrived at the Opera Epiclese — the same building where, only days earlier, I'd defended Élodie Martel, now transformed for an evening of theatre instead of trial. Only in Fontaine could one building comfortably handle both. Backstage was its usual chaos of costumes, flowers, tuning instruments, and Furina in the middle of an argument about curtain color.

"This curtain is beige!"

"It is cream, Mademoiselle Furina."

"Cream is merely beige with ambition!"

I tried to walk past. "Don't involve me." "You haven't heard the problem." "I heard enough." "It clashes with the lighting." "I am here to sing." "You are here to participate in art." "I am also currently bait in a murder investigation." A stagehand froze mid-step; Furina's eyes went wide; I added, sweetly, "Metaphorically," and the stagehand left very quickly indeed.

Lyney found me a moment later, already dressed and looking, as always, entirely unbothered by stress in any visible way. His hand settled at my waist. "Still behaving?" "Everyone keeps asking me that." "That doesn't answer the question." "Yes." He kissed my forehead, then dropped his voice to something meant only for me, performer's trick, talking while looking perfectly normal. "Two unfamiliar men entered thirty minutes ago. Upper east seating. One matches no known suspect. The other's possibly connected to Vautrin's dock meeting." My pulse climbed while my face stayed still. "Lynette's watching. Clorinde knows. Neuville knows. Wriothesley knows." "Why unfortunately?" I asked, because he'd said

it like there was a joke coming. “Because he looks like he’d prefer to arrest the entire audience preemptively.” I laughed, and across the corridor, Wriothesley — in formal black, looking exactly like a man ready to arrest an audience — caught my eye and raised one eyebrow. Fair.

Navia appeared beside him a moment later, gold and black and white, elegant and bright, and my heart did something stupid when she caught me staring and smiled. Clorinde followed a few steps behind in purple and dark blue, composed as ever, and I remembered, all over again, that both of them were mine. Furina snapped her fingers in front of my face. “Focus.” “I am focused.” “You were staring.” “I have two attractive girlfriends.” “We heard that,” Navia called across the hall. Clorinde’s mouth curved. I covered my face. Lyney laughed. “This is my favorite investigation.”



The performance began at seven, and for nearly an hour, nothing happened — which meant I had the genuinely strange experience of singing in front of hundreds of people while knowing that several members of Fontaine’s government, its criminal intelligence networks, its law enforcement, and my own relationship structure were strategically distributed around the room. Completely normal. Furina and I performed first, and once the music started, something changed, the way it always did. The case disappeared. Vautrin, Roche, Marceau — all of it, gone for four minutes, replaced by stage light and piano and strings and Furina’s voice rising beside mine, her theatrical clarity against my warmer register, her hand finding mine on the bridge. The audience dissolved into darkness beyond the lights, and for just a moment I remembered why I loved performing — not because people watched, but because the stage let feeling become something you could hand to somebody else. When the final note ended, the applause hit like weather.

Backstage, Furina whispered that the second harmony had been better than rehearsal. “I know.” “Insufferable.” “Learned from you.”

Then Lyney went on, and Lyney was Lyney — cards, light, illusions, an audience member pulled into the act, a bouquet produced from nowhere and handed to a woman in the front row with a look toward me backstage that I felt from across the room. Show-off. I rolled my eyes; he saw; he smiled; he vanished in a cloud of light, and the audience gasped, and a second later his voice came from directly behind me. “Miss me?” “FUCK.” He caught me before I could swing at him properly, and Furina lost it laughing.

Then his expression changed, mid-laugh, and the joke was over. “The man moved.” “Which?” “Unknown contact.” “Where?” “Backstage corridor.” My humor vanished. “Now?” “Yes.” “Clorinde? Lynette? Wriothesley? Neuvillette?” “Following. Other side. Covering the exit. Still visible in the audience.” Good — nothing obvious yet. “Do I continue?” I asked, and he said yes, and that surprised me, but that was the plan. I went back out and let the mirror show me exactly what I needed it to: stage makeup, red lipstick, performance clothes, nobody looking at me seeing a lawyer, an investigator, or a terrified woman whose photograph had been left on a desk. Good. Let them see a performer.

At nine twenty-three the fundraiser ended. At nine thirty-one, the first contact came — not backstage, not through a hidden corridor, not from either of the suspicious men. A little girl, no older than eight, handed me an envelope.

“My uncle said this is for you.”

Every muscle in my body went tight. I crouched to her level. “Which uncle?” She pointed. Nobody there — just people leaving. “Did he say his name?” She shook her head. “He gave me five mora.” “Did you know him?” “No.”

Lyney appeared instantly, soft smile for the child’s benefit. “Thank you,” I told her, and she ran back toward her mother while Lyney and I carried the envelope, untouched, to a secure room. Clorinde followed almost as fast. “Don’t open it.” “I know.”

Neuvillette, Wriothsley, Lynette, Navia, and Freminet arrived in quick succession; Furina tried to force her way in and was told to wait outside, protested for exactly forty seconds, and eventually accepted Navia's promise to relay anything safe to share.

Inside the envelope was a single card, no fingerprint, no triangle — just handwriting.

Tomorrow. Noon. Café Lutece. Come alone if you want to know why Callas stopped investigating Lucien Armand.

Silence. My heartbeat sounded enormous in the quiet. Navia went pale; Clorinde reached for her hand. Wriothsley read it twice. “No.” “I know.” “You’re not going alone,” he said. “I know.” Neuvillette looked almost suspicious of how quickly I’d agreed. “You agree?” “Yes.” Lyney smiled. “She’s learning.”

Navia stared at the card. “Why Papa stopped?” “We assumed he died before finishing,” I said. “What if he didn’t? What if something made him stop — threats, compromise, another case?” “Maybe,” I said, to all of it. “Or they’re lying,” Clorinde said. That too.

“They want Shaun isolated,” Neuvillette said. “Which means the meeting location may be surveillance rather than genuine contact.” “Someone watches whether she comes alone,” Lynette said. “If she arrives with obvious security, they disappear,” Lyney added. Wriothsley looked at him. “I assume you’re about to suggest something I dislike.” “Yes.” “Wonderful.” “She goes alone.” Wriothsley stood. “No.” “Visibly.” A pause. I smiled, and Wriothsley saw it and said no again, more firmly, and I pointed out I wasn’t physically alone if everyone was positioned nearby.

Clorinde asked whether Lyney and Lynette could be inside; he said no — they might be recognized. Freminet nearly choked when I suggested him instead, then agreed once he’d recovered. Navia offered to be nearby, naturally, and I told her no immediately — if this was about Callas, she was exactly who they might be watching for. She hated it, but she nodded.

Neuvillette offered plainclothes officers. “Too visible,” said a voice from the doorway, and everyone turned. Arlecchino, apparently having let herself in without anyone hearing.

“Does nobody knock anymore?” She had. I simply hadn’t heard.

She took the card, read it, and said, “Go.” Wriothesley stared at her. “You are becoming my least favorite person.” She ignored him entirely. “But do not attempt to arrest the contact.” “I don’t arrest people.” “You attempt many things beyond your authority.” Fair. “Let them believe they have control.” That was harder, but smarter. “I’m a terrible actor,” I said. Furina shouted through the door, “ABSOLUTELY FALSE,” and everyone paused; I closed my eyes; Arlecchino looked, genuinely, amused.

“More importantly,” she continued, “do not reveal what you know.” No Callas ledger, no René notebook, no photographs, no boat 417. “So I become the ignorant lawyer who accidentally photographed something,” I said. “Yes.” “That won’t be difficult.” Wriothesley looked at me; I glared before he’d said anything.

“The objective is information,” Neuvillette said. Not arrest. Not confrontation. One controlled meeting, simple — except nothing in this case had stayed simple for longer than five minutes. I looked at Navia, still watching her father’s name on the card, and took her hand. “I’ll find out what they mean.”

“No heroics.”

“That’s rich, coming from you.”

“Shaun.”

“Fine. No improvising. No chasing mysterious men through alleys. No climbing anything.” “That feels unnecessarily specific.” “Shaun.” “Fine.” Wriothesley sighed. Clorinde shook her head. Lyney smiled. Neuvillette looked exhausted. Arlecchino simply watched.

Then Navia pulled me close and kissed me, resting her forehead against mine when she let go. “Come back.” Those two words carried more weight than any warning in the room. I touched her cheek. “I will.”

"That's what she promised me yesterday," Lyney said from somewhere behind us.

"Good," said Navia.

Clorinde stepped forward. "Then she has two promises to keep."

"Three," said Wriothsley, arms folded. I looked at him. "You didn't ask." "I am now." I laughed softly. "Fine."

Then Neuville said, with complete seriousness, "Four."

Everyone turned. Even he seemed to realize, half a second too late, exactly how personal that had sounded. Wriothsley smiled. Oh no. I smiled too. "Do not interpret that expression incorrectly," Neuville said. "Too late." "Shaun." "Fine." But I was still smiling.

Tomorrow at noon, somebody connected to an eleven-year-old conspiracy wanted me alone, to tell me why Callas had stopped. Maybe it was a lie. Maybe a trap. Maybe the missing piece we'd been looking for all along.

Whatever waited at Café Lutece, I knew one thing for certain now. I would walk into that meeting alone.

But I would not be alone. Not anymore.

Chapter Ten

The Man Who Changed the Statement

I woke up before my alarm, which never happened, and for several long seconds I simply lay there between Wriothesley and Clorinde, watching grey-blue light seep in around the curtains. No rushing. No knocking things over. No accidentally kicking Clorinde's boots across the bedroom, no husband muttering insults at five in the morning because I'd opened six drawers looking for something that had been on the chair the whole time. Just silence — and underneath it, the knowledge that at noon I was going to walk voluntarily into a café to meet someone connected to an eleven-year-old conspiracy that had already gotten at least one man killed. Possibly more.

I closed my eyes again.

"Awake?" Wriothesley's voice came from behind me, far too alert for the hour.

"No."

His arm tightened around my waist. "You're very convincing."

"Thank you."

"You're thinking."

"No."

“Also convincing.”

On my other side, Clorinde opened one eye. “She’s been awake for twelve minutes.”

I turned my head. “How do you know that?”

“Your breathing changed.” She closed the eye again. “Occupational habit.”

“That is unsettling.”

I stared at the ceiling and sighed. “I hate waiting.”

Wriothesley kissed the back of my head. “We know.”

“It’s ten hours since they sent the message.”

“Eight.”

I looked toward the clock. 6:07. “That’s worse.”

“You were supposed to sleep.”

“I did.”

“Barely.”

Clorinde opened both eyes this time. “You are not going to spend the next six hours rehearsing every possible version of the conversation.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were.”

“Why does everyone know what I’m thinking?”

“Volume,” Wriothesley murmured against my hair, and I elbowed him hard enough that he laughed.

For a few minutes nobody moved, and I let myself stay there — which was becoming something I had to consciously practice, this business of stillness, the idea that not every quiet moment needed to be spent preparing for the next emergency. Eventually Clorinde reached across me and touched Wriothesley’s arm.

“We should get up.”

“No,” he said immediately.

“Finally, somebody sensible,” I said.

“You have a meeting with a possible criminal conspirator in six hours.”

“Exactly. Rest is important.”

Clorinde stared at both of us. “You two are impossible.”

“Marriage,” I said.

“Apparently,” Wriothlesley agreed, pulling me closer, and she sighed but didn’t get up either. For five more minutes I wasn’t Advocate Martin. I wasn’t anybody’s bait, or the woman in the surveillance photograph. I was just Shaun, at home, between my husband and my wife — and then my communicator buzzed, and all three of us groaned at once.

By eleven-thirty, Café Lutece looked completely ordinary, which was the point. People sat beneath the awning drinking coffee; a musician played somewhere a few streets over; waiters wove between tables while a knot of tourists argued about which direction led to the Opera Epiclese. Nothing about it suggested that the Chief Justice of Fontaine currently had plainclothes officers stationed several streets away, that the Champion Duelist had been somewhere nearby for the last forty minutes, or that two House of the Hearth operatives were watching the surrounding streets from locations I wasn’t permitted to know.

Apparently that last part was important. I’d asked Lyney where he’d be. He’d smiled. I’d asked again. He’d kissed me. So I’d threatened to bill him for wasting an advocate’s time, and he’d found that delightful. Asshole.

Wriothlesley had it worse — he wasn’t allowed anywhere near the café at all, since he was approximately as discreet as a thunderstorm to anyone who already knew his face, and he’d spent the walk to his designated corner complaining about it for a solid twenty minutes. Neuville had let Navia anywhere near the operation either; she’d complained for thirty. Furina had wanted to come on the theory that her talent for theatrical disguise qualified her for covert surveillance. Everyone had said no. She’d complained for forty-five.

And now I sat alone. Visibly. At the small table nearest the window, coffee untouched, a copy of that morning's Steambird open in front of me — Charlotte's harmless little feature on the eastern docks — doing my very best impression of a woman killing time before lunch. Every muscle in my body had been tense for twenty minutes. My communicator was buried in my bag. No visible security, no obvious weapons, no evidence — no Callas ledger, no René notebook, no copies of the photographs. Just me.

I checked the clock. 11:58. No one. 11:59. Still no one. Noon came and went; a waiter passed, a couple stood to leave, a man across the street adjusted his hat and my pulse spiked before he simply walked away. Not him. By 12:04 I'd started getting genuinely angry — being threatened was one thing, but being threatened and then made to wait was rude.

At 12:07, someone pulled out the chair across from me.

He was elderly, late sixties or perhaps seventy, thin, grey-haired, wearing a dark brown coat that seemed too heavy for the weather. One hand trembled slightly as he set it on the table. He didn't look dangerous, which meant absolutely nothing anymore.

"Advocate Martin."

I closed the newspaper. "Cyril Marceau."

Something small shifted in his face — tiny, but enough. "So you know."

"We've been busy."

He glanced toward the street; I followed his eyes and saw nothing obvious. "You came alone?"

"Yes." Technically.

"I don't believe you."

"Then why ask?"

He almost smiled at that, which I supposed was fair. I offered him coffee, then food; he refused both.

"You chose a café," I said.

"I needed somewhere public."

That, at least, I understood. I leaned back and started with the easy questions, the ones I already knew the answers to, just to watch how he handled them. Had he broken into my office? No. Sent the photograph? No. Left the black triangle? No. Searched Camille Desmarais's home? No — and his eyes widened on that one, genuine surprise breaking through the careful composure.

"Then somebody is working considerably harder than you," I said.

His face went pale. "Camille? You didn't know?" I asked, and he shook his head, and that reaction felt real, though real wasn't the same as proof.

"Why did you contact me?"

He looked at the newspaper between us and tapped it, not literally, just the implication — the unpublished dock photographs, the ones nobody had seen but me. "My photograph is still out there. You were at the eastern docks two months ago," I said. "With Marcel Vautrin. Augustin Roche."

His hand stopped trembling. That name mattered more than the others.

"So you know about him too?"

"I know enough."

"No." He leaned slightly forward. "You don't."

That annoyed me more than it should have. "Then enlighten me."

He looked around first — no one close — before he spoke again, quieter this time. "Callas did not stop investigating Lucien Armand because he gave up. He stopped because I told him Navia would die."

Every thought in my head simply stopped. Not slowed. Stopped.

"What?"

"I told him they would kill his daughter."

"You have approximately five seconds to explain that sentence before I forget every promise I made this morning."

"I wasn't threatening her. I was warning him. Vautrin had photographs."

My stomach dropped. “Of Navia? How old?”

“Thirteen.”

Fuck. My fingers tightened beneath the table. Thirteen — a child, followed for who knew how long, through school, through Poisson, through the market. There was a photograph, he said, quietly, that I didn’t ask him to describe twice — her asleep, taken through a window, proof that someone had gotten close enough to a child’s own bedroom to document it. My anger went so clean it almost felt calm.

“Callas knew?”

“Eventually. I told him. Because I couldn’t lie anymore.”

“René’s statement. You changed it.”

“Yes.” The word landed quietly. Eleven years of a man’s life, answered in one syllable.

I wanted to hit him. Genuinely, not theatrically. Instead I sat still and made myself listen, because that was the job.

“Why?”

“Money, at first.” There was shame in his voice, at least. Vautrin had approached him months before Vaudin died — Marceau handled archival access requests, and Vautrin needed records changed. Shipping disputes, customs judgments, seizure orders. Nothing enormous, he said, and I told him I knew exactly how that sounded. Eight hundred mora, the first payment, though he claimed not to remember how many followed — he’d been afraid to keep records, which was rich, considering René had kept his.

After Vaudin was killed, Vautrin had come back — not to claim Lucien was innocent, only that the case wasn’t strong enough, and Marceau had believed him, at the time. He’d reviewed René’s original statement, which said only that René had seen Lucien leaving the warehouse. Vautrin supplied the revised language himself; Marceau inserted most of it into the formal record and pressured René to sign. He didn’t know if the prosecutor had

known, or investigators. Only Vautrin. And — his face changed here, something new crossing it — Roche.

“What about Roche?”

“Roche wasn’t part of that. He wasn’t supposed to be. Nobody understood Roche.”

“I am becoming deeply tired of mysterious men.”

He almost laughed, then stopped himself and told me the rest. Augustin Roche had infiltrated Vautrin’s network — undercover, House of the Hearth — and Vautrin hadn’t known, not at first. When he found out, there was Boat 417. Roche had been tracing shipments along the black-triangle routes, the ones customs never inspected because the network had paid for silence at every checkpoint — inspectors, altered documents, false judicial release orders. He’d used 417 to move evidence: manifests, payment records, names. Vautrin found out. There was an explosion. Roche survived it, and Vautrin kept him — alive, for reasons Marceau claimed not to fully understand, beyond the certainty that Vautrin owned something Roche couldn’t afford to lose. A person, maybe. He didn’t know who.

“Then how do you know he’s coerced?”

“Because Roche tried to kill Vautrin twice. Years apart. He failed. That’s why Vautrin’s still alive.”

“Does Arlecchino know?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

I filed that away and steered us back. “Callas found René.”

“Yes. René confessed. Callas confronted me — walked straight into my office, put the original statement and the revised one on my desk, and asked which was true.”

“And?”

“I told him the first.” His breathing changed; here it was, finally, the reason he’d asked me here. “He didn’t do anything. Just looked at me. I would have preferred shouting.” He shivered slightly. “Then I told him about Vautrin. The routes. And then I told him about Navia, because Vautrin had shown me the photographs to remind

me what happened to people who suddenly became honest.” A quiet threat, aimed at a child — that was the network’s particular talent, finding the pressure point that mattered most and leaning on it.

“Did he threaten your family too?”

“My son.”

“Where is he?”

“Dead.” A pause, before I could feel anything about it. “Years later. Illness. Not connected.” So Vautrin’s threat had never actually been carried out — but fear didn’t need to become reality to control someone.

“What did you tell Callas?”

“That if he went public immediately, Navia would be next. He didn’t believe me, so I showed him a copy.”

Marceau reached into his coat, and every muscle in my body tightened; I nearly went for my bag before he slowly drew out an envelope instead and set it on the table.

“Open it.”

I didn’t touch it yet. “What’s inside?”

“What they showed Callas.”

I looked around, then pulled on the thin gloves I’d hidden in my pocket — apparently I’d learned something, after all — and opened it. Three photographs. Navia, thirteen, walking through Poisson. Another outside a bakery. And the third made my chest go tight in a way I wasn’t prepared for: Navia asleep, photographed through a window into her own room. I closed my eyes for a second and thought about her father discovering that someone had watched his daughter sleep. I understood Callas, suddenly — not all of his choices, but that one. You could be brave for yourself. Bravery became a different animal entirely once somebody put your child on the table.

“What did Callas do?”

“He sat down.” That image hurt more than I expected. “He asked what they wanted. Stop investigating Vaudin. Stop asking about

Lucien. Stop talking to René.”

“And he agreed?”

“No.” Marceau almost smiled. “He pretended to. He told Vautrin he’d stop, and then he moved everything — divided his evidence, so one discovery wouldn’t destroy all of it. René’s notebook stayed with René. The ledger, he hid — I didn’t know exactly where.”

“The yellow ledger.”

His eyes widened; so he hadn’t known that either.

“There was one more thing,” he said. “A final file. I don’t know what was inside. He didn’t trust me enough to tell me. He called it the red file.”

Of course he had. Yellow ledger, red file — my investigation was apparently becoming color-coded without my consent.

“About?”

“Vautrin’s employer.” Everything inside me went still. “Marcel Vautrin was not running the network.”

“Who was?”

“I don’t know. I never met them. Only the name they used. The Director.”

“You are joking.”

“We didn’t choose it,” he said, almost defensive. Vautrin had reported to this Director; Roche might have known who, and Callas had eventually found out too — that was why he’d made the red file in the first place.

“Then what happened to it?”

“That’s why I contacted you. Callas gave it to someone.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. But I know what he said, if things went wrong.” Marceau leaned in, and for the first time his voice steadied, like a man finally getting to the sentence he’d rehearsed. “If I don’t survive this, the file goes to the one person in Fontaine who understands what it means to be condemned by everyone and still

choose what is right.' He didn't name them. But he said one more thing. 'She won't know she has it.'

She. I sat back. That could describe half a dozen people I knew, and none of my guesses — Navia, Clorinde, someone in the Spina — got anything but the same three words in return. I don't know. I wanted to put my head through the table. Instead I drank my now-cold coffee, which felt appropriately punishing.

"Why wait eleven years to tell anyone?"

"Cowardice," he said, and at least he didn't dress it up. "Then you reopened the case, and I saw your name in *The Steambird*, and I realized you'd photographed me without knowing it. When someone broke into your office, I knew Vautrin was scared. So I contacted you."

"Why not Neuville?"

He laughed, short and humorless. "I spent twelve years corrupting records under the nose of Fontaine's institutions. You expect me to walk into the Palais and say hello?"

"Actually, yes."

He stared. "No."

"Yes. You just confessed to falsifying testimony that helped imprison an innocent man."

"You don't understand. They'll kill me."

"We can protect you."

"You couldn't protect René."

That hit — not because it was fair, but because it was historically true. I let the silence sit for a moment before I answered it. "René didn't have what you have."

"What?"

"Us. We know how the network operates now. Neuville knows. Wriothesley knows. Clorinde knows. The Spina knows. The House of the Hearth knows." His face changed with each name, and when I added, "Arlecchino knows Roche is alive," he went completely white.

"She knows?"

“Yes.”

He sat very still. “Why does that frighten you more than Vautrin?”

He didn’t answer. Instead he stood.

“Sit down.”

“No. We’re running out of time.”

“What does that mean?” He didn’t answer that either. He reached into his pocket again, and this time it wasn’t an envelope — a small brass key, stamped 27, set gently on the table.

“Callas gave it to me.”

“You just said he didn’t trust you.”

“He didn’t. He said guilt might keep me alive longer than courage.” Brutally plausible, honestly. It opened a box, he said — Old Fontainian Trust, closed for years after flooding damaged the lower district. Box twenty-seven. He’d never opened it himself; Callas had told him not to, unless someone reopened Lucien’s case, and if they did, to give them the key.

Finally. Something direct. I reached toward it, then stopped myself — chain of custody, evidence, damn Neuville — and opened my bag instead for my communicator.

His eyes went wide. “You said alone.”

“I am sitting alone.”

He stood, backing away. “You lied.”

“Yes.” Attorney-client privilege didn’t apply, and neither, at that particular moment, did my guilt.

“You’re a material witness to a wrongful conviction and possible homicide.”

“I trusted you.”

“No — you contacted me because you were scared and needed somebody else to carry the consequences.” His face changed at that, and it hurt him, and I let it, because it was true.

“Sit down.”

For one second I thought he'd run. Then my communicator vibrated once — a message from Lyney. DO NOT MOVE. I looked up toward the window and something had shifted outside, not obviously, just too many people suddenly not moving naturally.

Marceau saw my expression change. "What?"

"Sit down."

"What is it?"

I didn't know yet. He looked toward the street himself and went pale. "Grey hat." I searched the sidewalk until I found him — grey coat, dark hat, too far away to place clearly, looking directly at our table.

"Vautrin?" I asked.

"No." My stomach dropped. "Who?"

His lips barely moved. "Roche."

I stared across the street at a man too distant to see clearly, and Marceau knew him anyway. Augustin Roche, alive, watching us. Then Roche lifted one hand — not toward me. Toward Marceau. Two fingers, small, deliberate.

Marceau froze. "What does that mean?"

No answer.

"Marceau."

His breathing changed. "Down." Then, louder: "GET DOWN."

He hit the table before I fully understood why, and I moved without thinking. Coffee exploded across the floor, the café window shattered, people screamed, something struck the wall behind us with a sound too soft for a bullet — a dart, thin and metal, embedded in the wood. Fuck. Marceau crawled behind the overturned table; I stayed low while everything became noise, chairs scraping, glass, a waiter shouting somewhere.

Then Clorinde came through the side door, fast, weapon already drawn. "SHAUN."

"I'm fine!"

"Stay down." For once, I listened.

Lyney appeared from somewhere I hadn't seen him enter, Lynette right behind him — no performance now, no smiles. He crouched beside me and checked me over with his hands, quick and thorough, until I finally shoved his hands off. "I'M FINE." He exhaled and turned to Marceau instead, who was staring at the dart, terrified.

Neuvillette arrived moments later with officers, and controlled chaos followed — the café cleared, the street secured, no sign of Roche. Of course. Wriothsley reached us thirty seconds after Neuvillette, which for him counted as instantaneous. He crossed the room like he intended to end somebody with his bare hands, then caught me by both shoulders instead, checking me the same way Lyney had.

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Shaun."

"I'm not." He looked at Lyney, who nodded — she isn't — and something in Wriothsley's face closed and reopened all at once, anger and fear and relief arriving together. I touched his arm. "I'm okay," and he pulled me against him, and I let him.

Behind us, Neuvillette examined the dart without touching it while Marceau sat shaking against the wall, Clorinde watched the entrance, and Lynette had already started studying the shattered window. After a moment Neuvillette spoke.

"This was not intended for Shaun." Everyone looked over; he pointed to the angle. The dart had crossed exactly where Marceau's chest would have been, before he shoved the table.

Marceau went paler still. Wriothsley looked at him. "So somebody wanted you dead."

"I told you."

Neuvillette turned toward him properly. "Cyril Marceau. I am placing you in protective custody as a material witness in the

investigation of Lucien Armand's conviction and René Desmarais's death."

Marceau closed his eyes, then nodded. Finally.

I looked back toward the street, where Roche had stood. He could have killed Marceau. He hadn't. "Wait," I said, and everyone turned. "If that was Roche — he warned Marceau."

"He didn't fire the dart," Marceau said quietly.

Clorinde looked toward the shattered window. "Someone else did."

"I saw the angle," Lynette said. "Shooter was north."

"Roche was west," I said, and my pulse jumped. He hadn't come to kill Marceau. He'd come to warn him. "He's not with them," I whispered.

"Not entirely," Lyney said.

Marceau looked at all of us. "You don't understand. The network thinks Roche belongs to them. He's been trying to destroy them from inside for twelve years."

Silence. Lyney went completely still — a House of the Hearth operative, alive, never returned, still fighting after all this time. Arlecchino needed to hear that.

"Who fired the dart?" Neuville asked.

"I don't know."

"You said we're running out of time. Why?"

Marceau looked at me, then Lyney, then finally Neuville. "Because Vautrin isn't afraid of the photographs anymore. He found something else."

My stomach tightened. "What?"

His eyes moved, involuntarily, toward the brass key still lying beneath the overturned table. Box twenty-seven. Callas. The red file. "What did he find?" I asked, and Marceau swallowed hard.

"The woman Callas gave the red file to."

Every person in the café went silent.

"Who?"

"I don't know her name. But Vautrin does."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. He said she was close to Callas."

Navia. My mind went there immediately, then pulled back — too obvious, and Callas had said she wouldn't know she had it. Navia would know if her father had handed her a file outright. Someone else, then. Someone condemned by everyone and still choosing what was right.

I turned toward Wriothsesley, who understood the question before I'd finished forming it. "Woman," he said, simply. Right. Not him.

Lyney spoke up. "Could Callas have meant the file wasn't literally a file? What if he hid information inside something he gave her?" A photograph. Jewelry. A book. A weapon. Anything at all — and Navia had boxes of her father's belongings, but Callas had said the woman was someone condemned by everyone and still chose what was right.

Something clicked, quiet and cold, and I turned to look at Clorinde. She was already looking back at me.

No.

His final duel. Clorinde. The woman who'd killed him, the woman Fontaine could so easily have blamed, the woman who'd carried his last decision ever since. The one person in Fontaine who understood what it meant to be condemned by everyone and still choose what was right.

Clorinde's face lost its color. "No."

I moved toward her. "Callas gave you something. Before the duel."

"No."

"Think."

"I have."

"Letter? Case? Book? Jewelry? Weapon—" She froze, and everyone noticed.

“Clorinde.”

Her eyes lifted slowly. “The pistol?”

Silence.

“The one he used in the duel?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to it?”

“I kept it.”

The weapon her husband — her dead friend — had died holding, carried by the woman who’d fired the shot, all these years. Not suspicious in the slightest, to anyone who didn’t know what to look for. Not a file. Something Callas could give her without her ever realizing she’d been entrusted with evidence.

“Where is it?”

“At home.”

Our home. My blood went cold. The place everyone had agreed was secure, the place someone had already mapped through my relationships, and Neuville was already reaching for his communicator when Clorinde beat him to it, already moving.

We didn’t reach anyone by the time we spilled out onto the street, the operation collapsing into open urgency, and my communicator buzzed as we walked. Unknown sender. One image loaded — my own bedroom, drawers open, the bed overturned, the wall beside the wardrobe broken apart. Lying at the center of the mattress: Clorinde’s pistol case, empty. Beneath it, one sentence.

THANK CALLAS FOR KEEPING IT SAFE.

I stopped walking. Lyney caught my shoulder. “What?” I showed him. Clorinde stared at the screen with no expression at all, which was worse than if she’d screamed.

“They have it,” she said, barely audible.

I looked at the photograph again, and then I saw it — tiny, near the bottom edge. Not a playing card. A white card, marked with a small black symbol. Lyney took the communicator and zoomed in.

“That isn’t theirs.” A tiny flame. House of the Hearth. “No,” he said, before I could ask. “Old mark. Roche.” Meaning someone else had been inside our house — someone who’d known the burglars were coming, and had left us something in their wake.

The card carried writing, almost too small to see. Lyney enlarged it. Three words.

NOT THE PISTOL.

Beneath it, another line.

CHECK THE GRIP.

Clorinde’s eyes widened. “The grip.”

“What?”

“Callas changed it. Before the duel.” His pistol had carried ivory grips for years, she said — the one he’d brought to the duel was black. Not the pistol. The grip. A small, replaceable piece, something no one would ever think twice about, something she could carry for over a decade without knowing what it held.

And Vautrin had just stolen it.

I looked at the photograph of our ruined bedroom, then at Lyney, then Neuville, then Clorinde. “They don’t have the red file.”

Everyone stared.

“How do you know?” Wriothsley asked.

I pointed to Roche’s message. NOT THE PISTOL. CHECK THE GRIP. “If Roche knew what they were actually looking for, and left that card anyway — then he knows where the real evidence is.” My heart started racing. Clorinde looked at me.

“Where?”

I smiled slowly, because I’d just remembered something — something she’d told me casually, months ago, without either of us understanding what it meant. After the duel, the pistol had been repaired, the damaged grip removed. She hadn’t thrown it away. She couldn’t. Too much guilt, too much history. She’d given it somewhere else instead.

“You gave the original grip to Navia.”

Her eyes went wide. Navia. Poisson. Callas's daughter. The old Spina headquarters, the same place we'd found the yellow ledger.

Clorinde whispered, “Oh no.”

Because if I'd remembered it, someone else might have too — and somewhere across Fontaine, Navia was currently alone at the Spina di Rosula, with the one piece of evidence her father had apparently died to protect.

Chapter Eleven

The Grip

“Call Navia.” Clorinde already had her communicator in hand before I’d finished saying it. No answer. She called again. Nothing.

Wriothesley was moving before anybody else spoke. “Carriage. Now.”

Neuvillette turned to one of the officers. “Alert Poisson discreetly. No public mobilization unless necessary.”

“Understood.”

“No sirens,” I added.

Neuvillette looked at me. “I am aware.”

“Just saying.”

“Shaun.”

“Right.”

Lyney was already messaging Lynette; I tried Navia myself, once, twice, and got nothing but silence both times. “Come on, babe.” Still nothing. Clorinde’s composure was beginning to crack at the edges — not dramatically, which would have frightened me less, but into something almost blank. She walked fast enough that the rest of us had to work to keep pace, and I caught her hand anyway.

“Clorinde.”

She didn’t look at me. “She could just be busy.”

“She always answers when I call twice.”

That was true, and we both knew it. "She may have left the communicator somewhere," I tried anyway.

"Shaun."

"I know."

We reached the street and Wriothsley had the carriage door open before we got there. Clorinde climbed in first, then me, then Lyney; Neuvillette took the opposite seat, Wriothsley beside him. Nobody said a word until we were moving.

"Where exactly would Navia have put the grip?" Lyney asked eventually.

I tried to remember — months ago, maybe longer, one of those quiet nights where conversation had wandered somewhere painful. Callas. The duel. The weapon.

"Navia has some of Callas's things in a memorial cabinet," Clorinde said finally. "She asked for the damaged grip."

"When?"

"Years ago."

"Why?"

"She said it belonged with him."

I closed my eyes briefly. Of course she had. "Where is the cabinet?"

"Private room at the Spina headquarters." Navia's office.

"Does anyone besides Navia have access?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Several." Not good.

Wriothsley leaned forward. "Would Vautrin know?"

"Possibly. He used to work for the Spina."

"Would he know what she kept?"

"No idea."

Neuvillette's gaze sharpened. "If Roche knew enough to leave the warning at your home, he may have anticipated Vautrin's next move."

“He could already be in Poisson,” Lyney said.

“Helping?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

I hated maybe. I’d apparently created a monster in myself.

The carriage hit a rough stretch of road and my hand shot out for the seat. Clorinde looked toward me immediately. “I’m fine.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“You were about to.”

“No.”

“You had the face.”

“She does that,” Wriothesley murmured, and Clorinde gave him a look that loosened the tension in the carriage for half a second before my communicator buzzed and I nearly dropped it.

Unknown number. Everyone stared. One line. SHE IS NOT ALONE.

My heart stopped. Lyney leaned over. “Roche?”

“No signature.” Another message arrived before he could answer: DO NOT ENTER THROUGH THE FRONT.

“Could be a trap,” Wriothesley said.

“Yes.”

“Can the sender be traced?” Neuville asked.

“Probably not quickly.” A third message: OLD CELLAR ACCESS. EAST WALL. 3 MINUTES.

Clorinde looked at me. “You know it?”

Navia had mentioned old Spina tunnels before. “The old headquarters has storage below it,” I said. “We were there.”

“The cellar entrance?”

“Different area.”

Lyney leaned back. “Three minutes means someone is watching our approach.”

“We have not announced our destination,” Neuville said.

“Which means whoever sent this either followed us,” Wriothesley said, “or knew where we were going.” No one liked

either option.

Then Lyney's communicator buzzed. He read it and said, "Lynette is already in Poisson."

"How?"

"She was closer."

"Of course she was."

He kept reading. "She sees two unfamiliar men near the Spina headquarters. One by the front entrance. One on the roofline."

"Vautrin?"

"No visual confirmation."

"Navia?"

"No." Clorinde's fingers curled into her palm and I took her hand again, and this time she squeezed hard enough to hurt. Good — I wanted to feel something solid. "We're getting her."

"Yes." No hesitation.

We stopped two streets away. No grand entrance, no guards spilling into the square, no Fontaine spectacle — for once, everyone involved understood subtlety, which I personally hated because subtlety moved too slowly. Lyney got out first, and Wriothsley caught his shoulder. "No heroics."

Lyney smiled faintly. "I was going to tell Shaun the same thing."

"Good luck."

"Rude."

I climbed out next, and Wriothsley immediately said, "No."

"We discussed this."

"We discussed me not going alone."

"This is different."

"It is literally the same case."

"This is an active threat."

"To my girlfriend."

"Our girlfriend," Clorinde said quietly, and that ended it. Wriothsley exhaled. "Fine. But you stay behind Clorinde."

"Excuse me?"

“She is the Champion Duelist.”

“I am aware.”

“And Lyney.”

“I am dating him.”

“That doesn’t make him less trained.”

“Okay, everyone stop arranging me like luggage.”

Neuvillette stepped out behind us and handed me a small emergency flare. I stared at it. “What do I do with this?”

“Use it if separated.”

“Why would I be—” Everyone looked at me. “Fine.” I put it in my coat.

Old Poisson had layers, the way every city did — new stone over old foundations, rebuilt alleys, collapsed rooms, Spina hideaways that predated half the people currently using them. Navia had joked once that you could walk through three generations of family history without ever leaving the basement. It felt considerably less charming today.

Lynette met us behind a ruined masonry wall, no greeting. “Front entrance is compromised.”

“How?” Lyney asked.

“Two men. Neither Spina.”

“Roof?”

“One more.”

“Inside?”

“Unknown.” Clorinde asked about Navia, and Lynette shook her head. “Not visible.” My chest tightened.

Then a faint sound came from the wall — three taps, and we all froze. Tap. Tap. Tap. “Behind us,” Lyney said, and there it was — an old cellar door, almost invisible beneath ivy and damaged stone. He moved toward it and Clorinde stopped him. “Could be trapped.” He nodded, and we waited while Lynette examined the frame. “No wire.”

Wriothesley stayed slightly behind us with Neuville — not out of fear, I understood, but because this was Clorinde's terrain, close quarters, possible armed contact, and he trusted her completely. So did I. Clorinde opened the door onto darkness, cold air, stone stairs. My entire body said absolutely not. My brain said Navia. I followed.

The cellar smelled like damp earth and old wine — apparently Poisson had wine storage beneath everything. "Stay close," Lyney whispered.

"I am."

"You're three steps behind."

"That is close." Clorinde turned her head slightly. "Quiet." I shut up, for almost thirty seconds, as we descended.

Then another sound — not tapping, movement. Footsteps ahead. Clorinde raised one hand and everyone stopped. A figure emerged from the darkness and I nearly screamed. Lyney moved first, card already in hand; Clorinde's weapon came up. The figure raised both hands. "Don't."

Male, older, grey coat, dark hair heavily streaked with white, a scar near the jaw. Not Vautrin. I recognized him from the photograph immediately. Augustin Roche, alive, standing five meters in front of us.

Lyney went completely still. "Roche." The man's eyes moved to him — recognition, pain, something else. "You're one of hers."

Lyney's expression hardened. "Arlecchino."

Roche nodded. "Then she knows."

"Yes."

He looked almost relieved. "Good."

I stepped forward and Clorinde caught my sleeve. Roche noticed. "Advocate Martin."

"You know me."

"Everyone knows you now."

"That is becoming extremely annoying." Wriothesley gave me a look that said not the time, which was fair. I pointed toward Roche

instead. "You've been following me."

"Yes."

"You photographed me?"

"No."

"Broke into my office?"

"No."

"Left the card at my house?"

"Yes." There. "You knew about the grip."

"Yes."

"Where is Navia?" His eyes shifted toward Clorinde. "Alive." The word hit all of us at once. Clorinde stepped forward. "Where?"

"Upstairs."

"With whom?"

"Vautrin." My stomach dropped. "Armed?"

"Yes."

"How many people?"

"Three, including him."

"Why the hell are we down here?"

"Because the front entrance is watched."

"So?"

Roche stared at me. "Do you always speak like this when someone is trying to keep you alive?"

"Yes," Wriothsley said.

I turned. "Not helpful."

Roche almost smiled, and then his expression changed entirely. "He doesn't know the grip is empty."

Clorinde froze. "What?"

"The grip he took from your home is not Callas's original."

"What?"

"You kept a replacement."

"No."

"Yes." He stepped closer. "Callas switched them before the duel."

Silence. "How do you know?" Clorinde whispered.

"I helped him." Everything stopped. Navia's father. Roche. Together.

"What?"

"Callas discovered me six months before his death."

Lyney stared. "You were still undercover."

"Yes."

"With Vautrin."

"Yes."

"And Callas knew."

"Eventually."

"Why didn't you return to the House?" His jaw tightened.

"Because I couldn't."

"Why?"

He looked at Lyney, then away. "Later."

No. Absolutely not. I hated later. But Navia came first.

"Where is the real grip?"

He looked toward the dark corridor. "Callas never told me."

"Oh my god."

"He said if I was captured, I couldn't reveal what I didn't know."

Very Callas. "Then why is Vautrin holding Navia?"

"Because he thinks she knows."

"She doesn't."

"I know." Clorinde's voice went cold. "What does he want?"

"The red file."

"Which might not even exist anymore."

"It exists," he said, certain. "How do you know?"

"I saw Callas make it."

"Inside the grip?"

"No." He looked toward Clorinde. "Inside the hollow beneath it."

"What?"

"The pistol frame." Clorinde went completely still. "Not the grip."

"Correct."

"But the card said check the grip."

“To make you remember the weapon had been altered.”

I closed my eyes. “You people communicate like theater villains.”

“She has a point,” Lyney murmured.

Roche looked at him. “You really are one of hers.” Almost a laugh, then Clorinde said, “If the evidence was in the pistol frame, Vautrin has it now.”

“No.” He looked at her. “Callas removed it before the duel.”

“Then why alter the pistol at all?”

“To make someone remember.” Me — I felt it click. Callas hadn’t been hiding the file in the weapon. He’d been leaving a trail. Yellow ledger, pistol grip, red file — each clue pointing somewhere else, insurance against any single piece destroying everything.

“Who was meant to remember?” I asked. Roche looked at Clorinde. “Her.”

“Why me?”

“Because Callas knew you would survive him.” That sentence hurt all of us. Clorinde looked away and I touched her arm; she didn’t move.

“He knew Navia would search his office,” Roche went on. Navia. “He knew the Spina might search Poisson.”

Wriothesley nodded slowly. “So the ledger could eventually be found.”

“Yes.”

“But the red file needed to survive somewhere nobody connected to the Spina would search.”

“Correct.”

Neuvillette finally spoke. “Where?”

“The place Callas believed only one person would willingly return to.” Everyone waited. Roche turned toward Clorinde. “The dueling ground.”

Silence. My entire body went cold. Callas’s final duel — the place he’d died, the place Clorinde had probably avoided unless duty

forced her near it, the place Navia would only ever associate with grief. A place nobody searching his papers would think to examine.

Clorinde's face had gone pale. "What did he hide there?"

"I don't know."

"Bullshit." She rarely swore. Everyone noticed.

Roche softened slightly. "I swear."

"You helped him."

"I helped prepare contingencies. Not the final location." Her breathing was controlled, too controlled, and I stepped closer. "Hey." Her eyes moved to me. "We deal with that later." A barely-there nod. "Navia first." That centered her immediately. "Yes."

Roche looked toward the stairs. "There is another access route."

"Of course there is," I muttered.

He almost smiled. "Callas built it."

"Of course he did."

The passage ended behind Navia's private office. Roche held up a hand — voices, one male, then Navia's, angry and furious in a way that surged straight through my chest with relief. Angry meant conscious. "You are wasting your time," she was saying.

Vautrin answered. "Your father was very careful."

"Apparently not careful enough if you spent eleven years unable to find what he hid." I almost smiled. That was my girlfriend. Clorinde's eyes changed — pride, fear, both.

"You have no idea what he dragged you into," Vautrin said.

Navia laughed. "You broke into my girlfriend's office, invaded her home, threatened my father's investigation, and kidnapped me." Kidnapped. I looked toward Neuville; his jaw tightened. Good — add it to the list.

"And you think Papa dragged me into this?" Beautiful. Lyney leaned toward me and whispered, "I like her." I whispered back, "Me too." Clorinde glared at both of us. Focus. Right.

"Where is the file?" Vautrin demanded.

"I don't know."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes."

"I know Callas left it with someone."

"Then go ask him." Silence. I almost choked. Even now, Navia.

Then a slap. Sharp. Everything inside me ignited. Clorinde moved; Roche caught her arm and she turned with a look that could kill.

"Wait."

"Move."

"There are two armed men in the hall."

"I don't care."

"I do," I whispered, and hated saying it, but she heard me. We needed Navia alive. Not vengeance.

Roche pointed to a narrow ventilation opening and Lynette climbed silently toward it, small enough to disappear inside. Thirty seconds. One minute. My heartbeat pounded until two faint taps came back, clear. Lyney smiled. "She has the hallway." Clorinde moved, and this time nobody stopped her.

Everything happened in less than ten seconds. Clorinde entered first; one man raised a weapon and Lynette appeared behind him, his wrist twisting, the weapon gone. Lyney came through the side passage; the second man turned and Wriothlesley hit him like a wall. Done. Vautrin stood beside Navia, one hand gripping her shoulder, a small blade near her throat. Everything stopped.

Clorinde's weapon was aimed directly at him. "Let her go." Vautrin smiled, older than his photographs, grey along the temples, an expensive coat, a scar near his left ear — Charlotte's procurement witness had described that scar twelve years ago. "You." He looked at me. "Advocate Martin."

I stepped into the room. Wriothlesley hissed, "Shaun," and I ignored him. "You have been extremely inconvenient," Vautrin said.

"So I've been told." I looked at Navia — her lip bleeding, my anger almost shattering my judgment. Almost. "You okay?"

She nodded once. “I’ve had better dates.” I laughed, and Vautrin’s blade shifted, and Clorinde’s entire body went still. I stopped laughing.

“Careful.”

He looked at her. “The Champion Duelist.”

“You know who I am.”

“Everyone does.”

“Then you know what happens if that blade moves.” His smile faded. Good.

I looked at Navia, then him. “You’re not going to kill her.”

“You sound certain.”

“If you wanted her dead, she’d already be dead.” Roche appeared behind us, and Vautrin’s face changed — real fear, this time. “Augustin.”

“Marcel,” Roche said quietly. Navia’s eyes moved between them; Vautrin’s grip tightened. “You should have stayed buried.”

“So should René?”

Vautrin’s expression hardened. “René was weak.” My stomach turned.

“Did you kill him?” Neuville spoke from behind me, and Vautrin finally noticed him, his face changing again. Chief Justice. Not good for him. “Neuville.”

“Release Mademoiselle Navia.”

Vautrin laughed softly. “You think the law matters here?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. He stepped forward. “More than ever.”

Vautrin looked around at all of us — Clorinde, Wriothsley, Lyney, Lynette, Roche, Neuville, me — and finally seemed to understand how catastrophically his plan had gone wrong. Still, he had Navia. “That file belongs to people you don’t understand.”

“The Director,” I said. His face twitched. There. Confirmation. “Who is the Director?”

No answer.

“Vautrin.”

"Who runs the network?"

He smiled. "You think I'm the story?"

"No." That surprised him. "I think you're the middle manager." Wriothsley made a sound suspiciously like laughter.

"You are remarkably arrogant."

"I'm also correct."

"Shaun," Neuville warned. Fine. Less provoking the hostage-taker. Reasonable.

Vautrin looked toward Roche. "You told them about the duel?"

"Enough."

"You still think Callas was your friend?" Roche's face changed. Interesting. "What does that mean?" I asked.

Vautrin smiled. "Ask him why Callas never delivered the red file."

"Because he died," Roche said.

"No." The smile widened. "Because he discovered who the Director was." Silence. Navia's face changed. "What?"

"Your father didn't hide the red file to expose the Director." Roche stepped forward. "Shut up." "He hid it because exposure would have destroyed Fontaine."

Neuville's expression sharpened. "What information could have that consequence?"

Vautrin laughed. "You really don't know."

Then Navia moved — not much, just enough. Her heel came down hard on his foot; he grunted, and his grip loosened. Clorinde moved fast. Navia dropped; the blade flashed; Clorinde fired one shot. Vautrin screamed, the knife hitting the floor, his shoulder snapping backward. Wriothsley crossed the room and slammed him against the wall before he could recover, Lyney kicking the blade away, Lynette restraining his other arm. Done.

I ran to Navia, already sitting up. "Are you hurt?"

"No."

"You're bleeding."

"My lip."

“Neck?”

“No.” I touched her face. “Hands?”

“Shaun.”

“Are you hurt?” She grabbed my coat, pulled me down, and kissed me hard. I froze, then kissed her back. When she pulled away, her forehead rested against mine. “I am okay.”

My breath shook. “Okay.” Clorinde knelt beside us; Navia looked toward her, and Clorinde touched her cheek without a word before Navia pulled her in. Clorinde held her, and I wrapped myself around both of them. For one second, nothing else mattered — not Vautrin screaming, not officers moving, not Wriothesley telling somebody to secure the hall, not Neuville reading him his rights with terrifying calm. Just us.

Then Navia whispered, “You took your fucking time.”

I laughed into her shoulder. “Excuse me?”

“I’ve been listening to that man talk for forty minutes.”

“You were kidnapped!”

“And bored.” Clorinde actually laughed — relief did strange things to a person. I kissed Navia’s temple. “You’re impossible.”

“You love me.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Marcel Vautrin looked considerably less impressive in restraints. Amazing what removing a hostage and adding several angry partners did to a man’s aura. He sat against the wall under guard, a gunshot wound through his shoulder — Clorinde had aimed exactly where she intended. Naturally.

I stood several feet away, and Neuville stepped between us. “You are not questioning him.”

“I know.”

“You were about to.”

“I was standing.”

“With your questioning face.” I stared. Wriothesley laughed. “See?”

“Everyone stop identifying my faces.”

Navia sat nearby with a cloth against her lip; Clorinde refused to move more than three feet away from her, and I didn’t blame her. Lyney was speaking quietly with Roche — that conversation looked heavy, House history, twelve lost years, and I would leave it to them, for now.

Then Vautrin started laughing. Everyone turned. “What?” I asked.

“Shaun,” Neuvilleite sighed.

“What? He started it.” Vautrin looked at Navia. “You really don’t know.”

She lowered the cloth. “Know what?”

“Your father.” Her expression changed. I stepped closer, Clorinde too. “He found the red file.”

“We know,” Navia said.

“No.” He shook his head. “He found what the Director was.”

“What?”

“Not who.” The room went quiet. “What does that mean?” I asked. He looked toward Neuvilleite. “The Director was never one person.” Oh, fuck. “The Director was a position.”

Neuvilleite’s eyes narrowed. “Within what?”

“The network survived because everyone kept looking for one mastermind.” My stomach sank. “People changed. Directors changed.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know.”

“You worked for them.”

“I worked for one.”

“Who?” His smile disappeared. “The one Callas discovered.”

Navia stood. “Who?” He looked at her, then Clorinde, then me, and finally Neuvilleite. “You want to know why Callas never exposed the red file?” Nobody moved. “Because the Director he

uncovered wasn't a criminal hiding in the docks." My pulse climbed. "He was somebody Fontaine trusted."

Neuville's face went unreadable. "Name."

Vautrin laughed quietly. "I don't have to tell you."

Wriothsley stepped forward. "Oh, I think—"

Neuville raised one hand and he stopped. Vautrin continued. "You still think this ends with me."

"No," I said. Everyone looked at me. I stared at him. "You're scared." His smile faltered. There. "You've been scared since Roche walked into this room." No answer. "You broke into my office because you were scared." Silence. "You watched me for two months because you were scared." Nothing. "You searched Camille's house because you were scared." Nothing. "You kidnapped Navia because you were scared." Navia smiled faintly. "You don't know where the red file is." His eyes changed. Got you. "You never found it. You've spent eleven years looking." No answer. "And whoever the current Director is —" I stepped closer. "— they think Callas's file can expose the entire network."

Vautrin stared. I smiled. "You don't know who has it." His expression finally broke, just slightly. Enough. Neuville saw it. Roche saw it. Everyone did. I stepped back. "We're ahead."

He laughed again, but there was less confidence in it now. "You think so?"

"I know so." He looked toward Navia. "Ask her about the music box." She froze. Every person in the room turned. "What?"

He smiled. "The red one."

Navia's face went pale. "What music box?" She didn't answer. "Navia." Her voice came quietly. "My father gave me one."

My pulse jumped. "When?"

"My sixteenth birthday." Before Callas died. "What color?" She looked at me. "You already know." Red, of course. "Where is it?"

She swallowed. "I don't know." I almost screamed. She stood. "I haven't seen it in years."

“Where did you keep it?”

“My old bedroom.”

“In Poisson?”

“Yes.”

“Did it survive?”

“I thought so.”

“Where is it now?” She looked toward the ruined corridor, then at Vautrin, and horror crossed her face. “The storage room.” The same old headquarters, the same storage area where we’d found the yellow ledger. “Was it in one of the boxes?”

“I don’t know.” We’d only searched for the ledger, moved dozens of boxes, ignored dozens more. My stomach dropped. Vautrin was smiling, too smug — which meant. “You already searched for it.” His smile faded.

I turned toward Roche. He shook his head. “No.”

Then Lynette said quietly, “The man on the roof.”

Everyone turned. “He left ten minutes ago.” Fuck. Lyney’s expression hardened. “He was never guarding Vautrin.”

“No,” Lynette said. “He was waiting.” Waiting for us to move, waiting for Navia to reveal something, or waiting for Vautrin to force it out of her. The whole operation here had been a distraction.

I looked at Neuville. “Old storage room.” He was already issuing orders. Clorinde grabbed Navia’s hand. “Stay.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Navia.”

“My father’s evidence.”

“You were just held at knifepoint.”

“And I’m still standing.” Clorinde’s jaw tightened; I touched her arm. “She goes with us.” She looked at me. I knew — risk, again. But Navia would go anyway. Better together.

Wriothesley sighed. “Apparently none of you understand the concept of recovery time.”

Navia looked toward him. “You married her.”

He looked at me. "Excellent point."

"Rude."

Lyney came over, his face still holding something from the conversation with Roche. I squeezed his hand. "You okay?"

"Later." That word again. But this time I accepted it. "Later." He kissed my knuckles, then looked toward the corridor. "Let's find the box."

The storage room looked exactly as we'd left it — wet, damaged, moldy, the cabinet moved, the wall open, the yellow ledger already gone to secure evidence, boxes everywhere. Navia stood in the center. "Red."

"Very helpful," I said.

"It was red!"

"How big?" She held her hands about twenty centimeters apart. "Wooden."

"Decoration?"

"Gold."

"Design?"

"Roses." Clorinde searched one shelf, Lyney another, Lynette joining them; Wriothesley stood by the entrance while Neuville remained with Vautrin and the formal arrest. Reasonable. Disappointing.

I opened a box — old letters. Another — receipts. Another — broken toys. "Navia!" She came over. "What?" I held up a small wooden horse, and she stared, then smiled. "Oh my god."

"Yours?"

"Yes." I set it aside carefully. Not everything had to become evidence. We kept searching. Ten minutes. Twenty. Nothing.

Then Navia stopped. "Wait." She looked toward a stack of crates. "What?" "The music box played a song."

"Yes, that is typically what they do."

"No." She looked toward Clorinde. "Papa had it made."

"What song?"

"I don't remember the name." She hummed a few quiet notes. Lyney looked up. Clorinde did too. I recognized nothing.

"That isn't Fontainian," Wriothesley said.

We turned. "You know it?"

"No."

"But?"

"I've heard it. Meropide." Everything stopped. "From Lucien?" He shook his head. "Older prisoners."

"What song?"

"Work song."

"From where?" He thought. "Old miners."

Navia frowned. "Why would Papa put a miners' song in my music box?" I looked toward the wall — Callas, always pointing somewhere else. "Because it isn't about the song."

Lyney came closer. "What does the song identify?"

Wriothesley's face changed. "The old mining tunnels." Meropide, again. My stomach dropped. "Where?"

"Beneath the Fortress."

"Accessible?" Clorinde asked.

"Some." "Callas went to Meropide twice," I said.

"Yes."

"To see Lucien."

"Yes."

"But maybe not only Lucien." Callas could have hidden something in the one place nobody on the surface would think to search — a prison, underwater, old mining tunnels. And if the music box contained the clue, then the red file wasn't here at all. The music box was a map.

Lyney smiled slowly. "Callas really liked puzzles."

Navia looked exhausted. "My father was deeply irritating."

I laughed. "I like him."

"Of course you do."

Then Lynette called from the back. “Found something.” We rushed over — not the music box, a gap, one empty rectangle in the dust on a shelf. Something had sat there recently, small, wooden, approximately the right size. Navia went pale. “It was here.”

“How do you know?”

“The roses.” She pointed to tiny flakes of red paint, gold. My stomach sank. “They took it.”

Wriothesley looked toward the entrance. “The rooftop man.” Probably. “Then they know about the tunnels,” Clorinde said.

“Maybe,” Lyney said. “Or they only know the music box matters.” Right — they might not understand the song. Yet. Unless Vautrin did. Unless the Director did. We had a race now, and the destination was under my husband’s prison.

I looked at Wriothesley, who looked deeply unhappy already. “No.”

“I haven’t said anything.”

“You don’t need to.”

“Your prison.”

“No.”

“Your old mining tunnels.”

“No.”

“Your wife is Lucien’s lawyer.”

“Still no.” Navia came beside me. “Papa hid the clue.”

“No.”

Lyney smiled. “I’m excellent underground.”

Wriothesley looked at him. “Why are you helping?”

“Love.”

“He wants an adventure,” Lynette said flatly.

“Also love.” Clorinde crossed her arms. Wriothesley looked at all of us, then toward the ceiling like the Archons themselves had personally betrayed him. Finally: “Fine.”

I smiled. “But.” Of course. “You follow my rules in Meropide.”

I opened my mouth.

“Every rule.” I closed it. Clorinde smiled. Navia looked amused. Lyney looked delighted. Wriothsley pointed at me. “Especially you.”

“This feels targeted.”

“It is.” He turned toward the entrance. “We leave at dawn.”

I looked at Navia. She looked at me. Callas had started this over a decade ago. Lucien had waited beneath the sea. René had died trying to help him. Roche had spent twelve years inside the network. Vautrin was finally in custody. And somewhere beneath the Fortress of Meropide, Callas may have hidden the one thing everyone had been willing to kill for. The red file. Or whatever the red file truly was.

I looked toward Wriothsley. “Hey.” He turned. “If this is hidden under your prison—”

“Yes?”

I smiled. “Technically, you’ve been sitting on the evidence for years.” His eyes narrowed. Navia burst out laughing; Lyney joined her; Clorinde covered her mouth. Wriothsley stared at me for three long seconds. Then: “Sleep on the couch.”

I laughed. “You love me.”

“Questionable.”

“You do.” He sighed. “Yes.” Then his expression turned serious again. “Which is why tomorrow, for once in your life —”

I waited.

“— do exactly what I tell you.”

I smiled. “No promises.” Everyone groaned. And somewhere far below Fontaine, under steel, stone, water, and eleven years of buried truth, the next piece was waiting.

Chapter Twelve

Beneath Meropide

Wriothesley woke me at six, which alone should have told me how serious the day was. Usually I was the problem in our household before sunrise — opening drawers, dropping things, searching for clothes that were sitting directly in front of me, accidentally waking two increasingly homicidal spouses. This morning I opened my eyes to find him already dressed: coat on, gloves, hair done, tea in hand, standing beside the bed. I stared at him. “No.”

His eyebrow lifted. “You haven’t even heard me.”

“You’re dressed before me. Something is fundamentally wrong.”

Beside me, Clorinde shifted beneath the blanket. “Is it six?”

“Yes,” Wriothesley said, and she groaned. I looked at her. “You complain when I do this.”

“You’re louder.”

“Discrimination.” Wriothesley handed me coffee, and I sat up immediately. “Oh.”

“Thought that might improve negotiations.” I took a drink. He knew me too well. “What’s the catch?”

“Rules.”

“Here we go.”

Clorinde pulled herself upright, hair loose around her shoulders, while Wriothesley leaned against the dresser. “Once we enter the

abandoned mining levels, I am not your husband.”

I blinked. “That sounds ominous.”

“I am the administrator of the Fortress.”

“Okay.”

“You follow my instructions immediately.”

“Okay.”

“No arguing.”

I took another drink. “Define arguing.”

“Shaun.”

“Clarifying.”

“No.” Clorinde smiled sleepily. He continued. “You do not wander away because you see something interesting.”

“I don’t do that.” Both of them stared at me. “...often.”

“You do not enter any flooded section without Freminet confirming it is safe.”

“Fine.”

“No unstable passages.”

“Fine.”

“No climbing.”

“Why does everyone keep specifically banning climbing?”

“Experience.”

“I barely climb.”

“With great determination.” Clorinde reached for my coffee; I moved it out of reach. “Get your own.” She looked offended, and Wriothesley kept going. “If I say stop, you stop.”

“Yes.”

“If Clorinde says stop, you stop.”

“Yes.”

“If Freminet says the tunnel is unsafe—”

“I stop.”

“If Lyney says—”

“I’ll consider it.”

“Darling,” Lyney’s voice came from the doorway, and I jumped hard enough to swear. “What the FUCK?” He stood there smiling, fully dressed, Lynette beside him, Freminet just behind them carrying equipment.

I pointed. “How did you get into my house?”

He placed a hand against his chest. “Your wife opened the door.” I turned toward Clorinde. She had the decency to look mildly guilty. “You were awake?”

“Before you.”

“And you let him sneak into our bedroom?”

“I walked through the door.”

“I did not sneak,” Lyney said, offended.

“You were trying to surprise her,” Lynette said.

“That is different.” Freminet said quietly, “Good morning,” and I looked at him with real gratitude. “Good morning, Freminet. Thank you for being the only normal person here.” He almost smiled.

Wriothesley pointed toward Lyney. “And you listen to him too.” I looked at my boyfriend. He smiled sweetly. “I’m going back to bed.”

“No,” five people said at once. I sighed. “Fine.”

The Fortress of Meropide felt different when you knew you were about to go beneath it. The regular levels were familiar enough by now — steel walkways, mechanical sounds, workers, guards, prisoners, steam, Wriothesley moving through all of it like the Fortress itself recognized him. But below the administrative levels existed another Meropide entirely, older and forgotten, mines that predated much of the current structure, some abandoned because excavation had become unsafe, some because water pressure had shifted, some simply grown over by newer architecture. The red file, if Callas had truly hidden it down there, could have gone untouched for more than a decade. Or somebody could already be holding it. That thought made me walk faster.

Wriothesley caught the back of my coat. I stopped. “What?”

“Walk.”

“I am walking.”

“You’re attempting to overtake the escort.”

“I know where we’re going.”

“No, you don’t.”

“That is technically true.” He released me. “Behind me.” I muttered something under my breath. “What?”

“Nothing, Your Grace.” Lyney laughed. Wriothlesley looked over his shoulder. “Don’t encourage her.”

“I would never.”

“He would,” Lynette said. Freminet nodded, and my boyfriend looked thoroughly betrayed by his entire family.

Clorinde and Navia joined us near the lower administrative lift. Navia looked like she’d slept maybe three hours. I walked straight to her. “How’s your lip?”

“Fine.” I tilted her chin — small swelling, a tiny cut. She caught my wrist. “I’m fine.”

“You were kidnapped yesterday.”

“Yes.”

“And today you’re entering abandoned prison mines.” She smiled. “You invited me into your life.”

“I did not.”

“Close enough.” I kissed her forehead. Clorinde came closer. “I tried to convince her to stay home.”

“You did not try very hard,” Navia said.

“I know you.” I looked between them. “This is apparently what dating stubborn women feels like.” Both of them stared at me. Wriothlesley walked past. “Remarkable lack of self-awareness.”

“Nobody asked you,” I said, and he smiled, and then his expression changed entirely. “Before we go down, there’s someone we need to talk to.”

Lucien was waiting in one of the smaller interview rooms, no restraints, no guards inside — Wriothlesley had arranged that. He looked at all of us entering: me, Wriothlesley, Clorinde, Navia,

Lyney, Lynette, Freminet. His eyebrows rose. "What is this, a rescue mission?"

"Potentially," I said.

"Research mission," Wriothlesley corrected.

"Less exciting." Lucien looked at Navia, and his expression changed immediately. "You're Callas's daughter."

She nodded. "Navia." He stood, and for a moment neither of them knew what to do with that. Then he said, "Your father believed me."

"I know."

"He came here when nobody else would."

"I know."

"He said he'd get me out." Her eyes filled slightly. "He tried."

"That counts for something." She stepped forward and hugged him, and everyone froze, including Lucien, whose hands hovered awkwardly before slowly settling against her back. "Thank you," he whispered.

She pulled away. "For what?"

"Coming down here."

She smiled. "We're finishing what Papa started."

Lucien looked toward me. "That sounds dangerous."

I smiled. "Everyone keeps telling me that."

"Because everyone has met you." Rude. Accurate.

Wriothlesley set an old handwritten music transcription on the table. Lucien stared at it. "What is that?"

"The song from Navia's music box." He hummed several notes and went still. "Oh."

I leaned forward. "You know it."

"Every old inmate knows it."

"Why?"

"Mining song." Wriothlesley had already said that; I was getting impatient, and Lucien noticed. "There's more than one verse."

My pulse jumped. "Sing it."

“No.”

“Lucien.”

“I have dignity.”

“You’ve been in prison eleven years.”

“Exactly. It’s all I have.” Navia laughed. I crossed my arms. “Fine. Speak the lyrics.”

“That I can do.” He leaned back. “First verse is about miners descending.”

“Useful.”

“Second is about lights.”

“Very useful.”

“Third tells them which shaft returns to the main lift if something collapses.” Everyone went quiet. Freminet moved closer. “What does it say?”

Lucien thought, then tapped the table slowly. “Something like — where seven lamps become three.” Freminet immediately looked toward Wriothesley. “Seven-lamp junction.”

Wriothesley nodded. “That still exists.” Lucien continued. “Follow where the iron sings.”

I frowned. “Iron sings?”

“Ventilation pipes,” Freminet said. “Probably.” Lucien closed his eyes and kept going. “Pass the brother without a name.”

Navia whispered, “That sounds like Papa.”

“Not everything is Callas,” I said.

“It could be.”

“Fair.” Lucien finished the verse. “Turn where water climbs instead of falls.” Freminet’s expression sharpened. “Reversed pressure channel.” My stomach flipped — another water reversal. Apparently Neuville’s investigative brain had infected me by now. Lucien delivered the last line. “Then beneath the bell that never rings, the dead man’s truth remains.”

Nobody spoke. “That is suspiciously specific,” I said.

“Miners were dramatic,” Lucien shrugged.

“This entire nation is dramatic.” Lyney placed a hand against his chest. “Thank you.”

“That was not praise.”

I looked toward Wriothesley. “The bell probably means Shaft Nine.”

“Why?”

“Emergency bell broke decades ago,” Lucien said.

Wriothesley’s eyes narrowed. “Who told you that?”

“Old Baptiste.”

“Baptiste died eight years ago.”

“I know.” That was the strange thing about prisons — knowledge accumulated in places paperwork never touched. Freminet pulled out his map. “Seven-lamp junction —” He traced it. “Ventilation line.” Down. “Unnamed support pillar?” Lucien pointed. “Could be.” Then the water channel, then Shaft Nine. The route took shape in front of us, and I smiled.

Wriothesley saw it immediately. “No.”

“What?”

“That expression.”

“We found it.”

“We found a possible route.”

“Fine.”

“Still exciting.” He turned toward Lucien. “Anything else?”

Lucien thought, then looked at me. “Callas asked me about the song.”

My smile vanished. “When?”

“Second visit.”

“What did he ask?”

“Whether anybody still used the lower mines.”

“And?”

“I told him only maintenance crews.”

“Did he ask about Shaft Nine?” Lucien nodded slowly. “Yes.” There — confirmation, not absolute, but close. Wriothesley looked

at me. I looked back. Callas had known.

Lucien leaned toward us. "If you find whatever he hid—"

"Yes?"

"Don't let them bury it again." My chest tightened, and I nodded. "We won't."

The old lift stopped two levels below where I expected — not because the map said to, but because it physically refused to continue. Wriothlesley hit the control. Nothing. Again. Nothing. Lyney leaned against the wall. "Excellent."

"This is normal," Wriothlesley said.

I stared at him. "That is not a comforting sentence in an abandoned underwater mine." Freminet opened the maintenance panel. "The lower power line is disconnected."

"Recently?" I asked.

"No." Wriothlesley nodded. "From here we walk."

I looked down the dark passage. "Wonderful." Navia took my hand. "You wanted adventure."

"I wanted evidence."

"Same thing with paperwork." We moved — Wriothlesley first, Clorinde near Navia, Freminet immediately behind him with the map, Lyney beside me, Lynette behind us.

The tunnel narrowed quickly. Old support beams, rust, stone, water dripping somewhere continuously. Our lamps created small islands of light, and everything outside them felt endless. "You okay?" Lyney whispered.

"Yes."

"You're holding my hand very tightly." I looked down; I was. I loosened it. "Sorry."

He tightened his fingers back around mine. "I didn't ask you to stop." I looked over, and he smiled — soft, not stage Lyney, just boyfriend. My chest warmed. "Thanks."

"Always." Then a loud metallic groan rolled through the tunnel and I stopped immediately. "What was that?"

Freminet looked upward. “Structure settling.”

“Is that normal?”

He hesitated. “Mostly.”

“Why does everyone in this prison use terrifying qualifiers?”

Wriothesley looked back. “Keep moving.” I did, no argument, and he noticed. “I’m impressed.”

“Fuck you.”

“There she is.”

Seven lamps became three, literally — at the first junction, seven old wall lamps lined the corridor, and only three still had intact housings. Lucien’s song, right on schedule. We followed the ventilation line, iron singing not as music but as a low humming vibration through ancient pipes — the miners had apparently been poetic after all. Then the brother without a name: two enormous support columns, one bearing an old engraved marker, SHAFT EIGHT SUPPORT, the other bare. Navia stared. “The brother without a name.” Clorinde nodded, and we turned.

Then came the water — a narrow channel cut along one side, but instead of flowing downward with the tunnel’s slope, it moved upward. Freminet crouched. “Old pump system.”

“Still operating?”

“Barely.”

“Could somebody have activated it?” He touched the pipe and frowned. “What?”

“It’s warm.” Wriothesley immediately went alert. “How warm?”

“Recently active.” Silence. My pulse climbed. “We aren’t first.” Nobody said it aloud; nobody needed to. Clorinde drew her weapon, Lyney’s expression changed, and Lynette disappeared several steps ahead so silently I nearly lost sight of her. Wriothesley looked toward me. “Stay close.” This time — “Yes.” No joke, no argument, and he noticed but didn’t tease.

Shaft Nine was enormous, its ceiling disappearing into darkness. Old mining platforms crossed the open chamber at different

heights, tracks rusted into the floor, water glimmering beneath broken grating. And hanging above us, an emergency bell, cracked, no clapper. The bell that never rings. I breathed out. "Callas." Navia looked around — her father's ghost was everywhere in this case, not literally, but in every choice and contingency, reminding us he'd known he might die before finishing.

Freminet examined the floor. "Footprints."

"How many?"

"Two."

"Recent?"

"Yes." Wriothsley looked toward the far end. "Which direction?" Freminet pointed toward an old service room beneath the bell. Of course. We moved slowly now, no talking, Clorinde first beside Wriothsley, Lyney near me, Navia behind, Lynette gone again. I trusted that. Mostly.

The service-room door stood open, which was bad. Inside — nothing. Shelves, collapsed equipment, dust, an overturned chair, a rusted desk, and against the far wall, fresh scratches. Something had been moved. I crossed toward it and Wriothsley caught my shoulder. "Wait." Right, rules. Freminet inspected the frame. "No wire." Then Lynette's voice came from behind the wall itself. "Clear." I jumped. "How are you behind—" She stepped through a narrow opening. Of course. "This panel moves." Together, Wriothsley and Clorinde pulled it aside, revealing a chamber, small, dry, sealed. My heart started pounding. Inside sat one table, one metal case. Red. Actual red.

"You have got to be kidding me."

"Papa," Navia whispered. We entered. The case looked old, waterproof, the Spina emblem scratched off, no obvious lock. Lyney crouched over it. "Mechanism."

"Trap?"

"Possibly." Everyone stopped. He smiled faintly. "Finally something I'm useful for."

“You’ve been useful.”

“Keep saying things like that.”

“Open the box.”

“Romance is dead.” Lynette crouched beside him and they examined the mechanism together while Freminet watched the tunnel, Clorinde guarded the entrance, and Wriothsley stayed near me. Navia stared at the red case like it might contain her father. In a way, it did.

Lyney finally said, “This isn’t a lock.” He pressed one section — nothing — then another, then rotated a small dial. “Music mechanism.” Navia’s face changed. “The music box.”

“Yes.” The stolen music box hadn’t just been a clue to the tunnel; its melody was the combination. Fuck. “Can we recreate it?” Navia hummed. Lyney listened, tried the dial. Click. Nothing. Again, a different pattern. Nothing.

“I don’t remember the ending,” she said.

“Great.” I looked around. “The song.”

Everyone turned. “Lucien knew the full miners’ song.”

Wriothsley smiled. “The melody probably follows it.” Navia hummed again; Wriothsley added the missing phrase; Lyney turned the dial to match. Click. Pause. Click. Then a soft mechanical sound, and the case opened. Nobody breathed. Inside were documents wrapped in oilcloth, and a red folder. An actual red folder. I stared at Callas’s commitment to branding. “Your father was dramatic.”

Navia laughed through tears. “Yes.” I put on gloves. Wriothsley stopped me. “Neuvillette should process this.”

“I am Lucien’s counsel.”

“You are also emotionally compromised.”

“That phrase is getting used against me too often.” Navia touched my arm. “Read it.” Wriothsley looked toward her, and she held his gaze. “Please.” He exhaled, then nodded.

I opened the folder. The first page held Callas's handwriting. If this file has been found, then either I succeeded, or I failed badly enough that somebody finally started asking why. I laughed once. "That sounds like him," Navia whispered. I continued. Lucien Armand did not kill Benoît Vaudin. My chest tightened; Navia covered her mouth, and Wriothsesley closed his eyes briefly. There — Callas's conclusion, not enough legally by itself, but there.

René Desmarais gave false testimony under coercion. Cyril Marceau altered the formal statement at Marcel Vautrin's direction. We already knew that. Then: Vaudin was killed because he intended to leave the Triangle Network. New. I stopped. "Leave?" Lyney leaned closer. He had begun diverting money and threatened to expose routes if Vautrin refused payment. So Vaudin hadn't been innocent either — just dangerous to his own network.

René witnessed Vautrin entering the warehouse after Lucien departed. Everyone froze. "What?" Wriothsesley said. I read it again — René had seen Vautrin, not Lucien over the body. Vautrin, entering later. The missing truth. I turned the page. René did not witness the murder itself. However, he observed Vautrin leaving approximately forty minutes later. My heart pounded. The next morning, René learned Vaudin was dead. Vautrin threatened Elise and Camille unless René redirected suspicion toward Lucien. Navia looked furious. I believe Augustin Roche can establish Vautrin's connection to the Triangle Network. I do not know whether Roche remains free to speak. Lyney went still. We knew now.

Then the Director. Several pages of names, payments, shipping routes, judicial alterations, customs officials, inspectors — some dead, some retired, a few names Neuville would recognize. Then one heading: DIRECTOR. Beneath it: The title passes. The network does not depend upon one leader. Exactly what Vautrin had said. Callas continued: At present, the role appears held by Councillor Étienne Bellacourt, Deputy Minister for Maritime Commerce.

Nobody spoke. Navia frowned. "Bellacourt."

Wriothlesley knew the name. "So do I."

"Who?"

"Dead."

Of course. "When?"

"Seven years ago." Natural causes. Probably. Maybe. I hated this case. "If he was Director twelve years ago, then somebody succeeded him."

"Yes." The next page held Callas's arrows — Bellacourt, Vautrin, Marceau, several officials, Roche marked differently: INFILTRATOR? with a question mark. Callas hadn't known for sure. At the bottom: Succession determined by three keys. Commerce. Justice. Transit. I stared. "Three keys."

Wriothlesley leaned closer. "What does that mean?" I flipped the page. No Director acts alone. Appointment requires concurrence of representatives controlling cargo authorization, judicial release, and municipal transport. There — that was how the network had survived. Not one mastermind, but three institutional access points. Shipping. Courts. Waterways. Rotate the people, maintain the structure, and killing any one person changed nothing. My stomach turned. "It's institutional."

Navia looked sick. "Papa couldn't expose one person."

"No."

"He would've had to expose half the machinery making the network possible."

"Not half," Wriothlesley said, grim. "Enough."

I kept reading, and then — a separate envelope, sealed, written across the front: FOR CLORINDE. Everyone stopped. Clorinde turned. "No."

Navia stared. "Open it." She didn't move. "Do you want me to?" A swallow, then a nod. I opened it. A letter, Callas's handwriting. I read it silently first. Oh. My chest hurt. "Shaun?"

I looked at her. "You sure?"

"Yes." So I read aloud.

Clorinde, if you are reading this, then you survived me. I am sorry. Clorinde closed her eyes; Navia immediately took her hand. I continued. You will believe for a long time that my death belonged to you. It did not. I chose the duel knowing what I was asking of you, and I chose you because I trusted your judgment more than I trusted my own fear. Her breathing changed. I almost stopped. She shook her head. Continue.

There are truths I cannot give Navia without placing her in danger. There are burdens I have already placed upon you without your consent. For both, I ask forgiveness I have not earned. Navia started crying quietly. If this investigation survives me, protect her only as far as she allows. Do not make my mistake. Love is not the right to decide another person's life for them. That landed on all of us, hard — especially me, especially after every argument we'd been having about protection. Clorinde looked toward Navia, who squeezed her hand. I continued. And when she is ready, tell her that everything I hid was because I was afraid. Not because I doubted her strength. Navia covered her mouth. I couldn't read the next line immediately. Then: Tell her I knew she would become greater than anything I could have protected her from.

Navia broke. Clorinde pulled her close, and I stopped reading. Nobody rushed them; Lyney lowered his eyes, Wriothsley looked away, even Lynette's expression softened. After a minute, Navia whispered, "Finish." I continued. As for Lucien Armand: if the Court is willing to hear the truth, then give it everything. If the Court refuses, make them hear it anyway. — Callas. I laughed through tears. "That last part sounds like my legal strategy." Navia laughed too, and Clorinde actually smiled while crying.

Then — metal slammed outside. Everyone froze. One sound, then another. Freminet appeared in the doorway. "Wriothsley." His voice was wrong. Wriothsley stood instantly. "What?"

"The pressure gate closed." Silence. "What gate?"

“The one we came through.” He moved into the corridor and I followed despite knowing better. Water — a thin stream crossing the floor, then another. Freminet crouched. “This tunnel wasn’t wet before.”

“Flooding?”

“Yes.”

“How fast?” He looked toward the slope. “Potentially very.” Lyney came out, Lynette behind him. “Someone activated the old pressure system.”

“The warm pipe,” I said. Freminet nodded. “They weren’t leaving.” Whoever had reached the tunnel before us hadn’t come to find the file. They’d come to trap whoever did.

Wriothsley turned. “Everyone out.” The corridor behind us groaned, and then water exploded through a seam. Navia came from the chamber holding the red file, Clorinde beside her. Wriothsley pointed. “Leave the case.”

“No.”

“Navia.”

“Papa died for this.”

“I am not losing you for paper.” She hesitated, and I grabbed the oilcloth documents instead. “Smaller.” Wriothsley glared. “Shaun.”

“Fits in my satchel.”

“This is not the time.”

“It’s already done.” I shoved them inside; Clorinde took the letter, and Navia abandoned the metal case. Good. Progress. We ran.

Water reached my ankles within two minutes, then my calves. The lights flickered. I hated everything. Freminet led now, not Wriothsley, which told me exactly how serious it had gotten. “Not the original route,” he said.

“Why?” Wriothsley asked.

“Pressure gate sealed.”

“Alternative?”

“Old drainage shaft.”

“Safe?” A pause. “Safer.” Terrible answer. We kept moving as the water climbed, cold, my legs starting to struggle. Clorinde noticed. “Shaun.”

“I’m okay.”

“No.” She came beside me. “I can walk.”

“I know.” Another wave hit and I stumbled; Lyney caught my other arm. I looked at both of them. “This is humiliating.”

Lyney smiled. “This is survival.”

“Different thing.”

“Not currently.” They helped me anyway. No argument. Not now.

Freminet stopped at a vertical ladder. I stared upward. “No.” Everyone looked at me. “Finally,” Wriothesley said, “she agrees with the climbing rule.”

“Fuck you.” The water rose another centimeter. Freminet looked around. “There’s a maintenance lift.”

“Working?”

“No.”

“Wonderful.”

“But the pulley system might be.” Wriothesley and Lyney moved immediately — an old platform, a manual cable. Clorinde helped me onto it; Navia joined, then Lynette. Freminet stayed below. “No.”

I looked at him. “You come too.”

“I need to release the brake.”

“Then how do you get up?”

“Ladder.”

“You said—”

“I can climb faster.” Lyney looked toward him. “Freminet.”

“I’m fine.” Brother. A different tone entirely. Freminet met his eyes. “I know what I’m doing.” Lyney hated it, but he nodded. Trust.

The platform began moving, slow, painfully slow, water surging below. Freminet released the brake and climbed — fast, much faster than I expected. I watched him. “Come on.” Clorinde had one arm around my waist; Navia held the satchel against my chest,

documents inside, Callas and Lucien and René and everything else we'd fought for. Freminet reached the platform level just as another burst of water hit the shaft. He jumped; Lyney grabbed his wrist, Wriothsley caught his other arm, and together they pulled him up. I exhaled. "Okay."

Then the cable snapped. The platform dropped. We screamed — one meter, two — then caught on the emergency lock. My heart tried to leave my body. I grabbed Clorinde; Navia grabbed me; Lyney was holding Freminet against the wall. Wriothsley looked upward. "Everyone off. Now." A side ledge, narrow. We climbed onto it just as the platform cable groaned and then snapped completely, disappearing into the water below. Silence. I stared downward. "I would like to formally withdraw my complaint about the stairs." Lyney laughed breathlessly. Even Wriothsley smiled. "Noted."

We reached an active maintenance corridor forty-three minutes later — I knew because the moment we emerged into actual electric lighting, I looked at the clock, and then collapsed against the wall. Not fainting. Just done. My clothes were soaked from the knees down, my hair partially wet, my hands shaking, the satchel still against my chest. Wriothsley leaned against the opposite wall, breathing hard. Clorinde sat beside me; Navia immediately leaned against her. Lyney dropped down on my other side; Freminet sat on the floor. Lynette remained standing, because apparently fatigue was optional for her.

Nobody spoke for several seconds. Then I started laughing.

"What?" Clorinde asked.

"I followed the rules." Silence. Wriothsley stared, then laughed too, actually laughed. "You did."

"Mostly."

"Don't ruin it." I rested my head against Lyney's shoulder; he kissed my hair. Navia reached across Clorinde and touched my hand. "We got it." I looked at the satchel. Yes — Callas's red file, Lucien's

innocence, René's truth, the Triangle Network, the old Director, the succession system. All of it. We had it.

Then Freminet spoke. "There's a problem." Everyone groaned. He looked almost apologetic. "What?" Wriothlesley asked.

"The flooding wasn't automatic." Of course it wasn't. "What do you mean?"

"Someone manually opened the emergency pressure valves." My stomach tightened. "From where?" He looked toward the active Fortress levels above us. "Inside Meropide."

Silence. Wriothlesley stopped breathing for half a second. Someone inside his prison — not old corruption, not history. Now. Today. Somebody had known exactly where we were, exactly when we'd reached Shaft Nine, and exactly how to flood the abandoned tunnels without triggering the main emergency systems. His face went frighteningly calm. "Who has access?"

"Maintenance supervisors."

"How many?"

"Seven."

"Anyone else?"

"Senior engineering staff."

"Names." Freminet began listing them, and I listened — one, two, three, four — and then I recognized one. "Wait." Everyone looked at me. "What?" Wriothlesley asked.

"Say the fourth one again." Freminet frowned. "Étienne Moreau." My stomach dropped. Étienne. Bellacourt. Former Director, Councillor Étienne Bellacourt. Could be coincidence, a common name. But — "Family name?"

Freminet checked the roster. "Moreau-Bellacourt." Nobody spoke. Wriothlesley took the paper and read it, and his entire face changed. "Related?" He didn't answer immediately. Then: "Grandson."

Fuck. The former Director's grandson worked inside Meropide, with access to the very systems somebody had just used to try to

drown us. Navia whispered, “You have got to be kidding.” Clorinde stood; Lyney’s expression hardened. I got to my feet. Wriothlesley looked at me. “No.”

“I did not say anything.”

“You’re thinking.”

“Everyone needs to stop using that as evidence.” He handed the roster to Clorinde. “Seal the maintenance levels.” She nodded. “Discreetly?”

“No.” That surprised us. Wriothlesley straightened, and the Duke had returned. “No one leaves Meropide.” His voice was quiet, terrifying. “Not one worker. Not one guard. Not one maintenance engineer.”

Lyney stood. “What about Moreau-Bellacourt?” Wriothlesley looked toward the lift. “We find him.”

I looked at the red file, then at the maintenance roster. The former Director had died seven years ago. The role had passed. The network had survived. Three institutional keys — commerce, justice, transit — and somehow the grandson of the old Director now controlled maintenance infrastructure beneath Meropide. My pulse began climbing again. Maybe Étienne Moreau-Bellacourt was simply protecting family secrets. Maybe he was a network operative. Or —

I looked at Wriothlesley. “The Director is a position.”

“Yes.”

“Passed down through institutional access.”

“Yes.”

“Not necessarily hereditary.”

“No.”

“But what if Bellacourt trained his successor?” His face hardened. I kept going. “What better person than family?”

Navia whispered, “Oh no.” Lyney understood immediately. “The current Director could be inside Meropide.”

My husband looked around at the prison he controlled — his prison, his people, his systems — and someone had just used all three against him. Wriothsley slowly pulled on his gloves. “No.” His voice was colder than I’d ever heard it. “If the Director is inside Meropide —” He looked toward the upper levels. “— then they’ve made a very serious mistake.”

I smiled despite myself. There he was. The Duke. And suddenly I almost felt sorry for whoever had tried to drown us.

Almost.

Chapter Thirteen

Lockdown

The Fortress of Meropide had never been quiet. Even at night there was machinery somewhere — pipes, steam, generators, the slow hydraulic complaint of a door closing three levels above your head, boots crossing metal walkways. The place had a heartbeat, mechanical and constant, the sound of somewhere built beneath the sea and kept alive by force.

When Wriothsesley ordered a complete lockdown, the noise didn't stop. The people did.

Heavy security doors sealed one after another, a sequence of enormous metallic coughs travelling outward through the Fortress. Work crews were pulled from the production zones. Elevators stopped responding to ordinary access. Maintenance passages locked. Prisoners were directed back toward assigned areas with very little explanation and, surprisingly, very little resistance, because word travelled fast in Meropide and the word was that the Duke was angry. Nobody needed to know why.

I stood just outside the lower administrative corridor with wet trousers clinging unpleasantly to my legs and watched my husband become someone completely different from the man who had woken me with coffee that morning.

“Maintenance teams stay where they are until identified.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Engineering supervisors are separated. No private communications. Every access log from the last six hours goes directly to my office.”

The guard nodded through all of it, then hesitated on the last question, and the hesitation was the answer.

“And Moreau-Bellacourt?”

Wriothesley turned. “What?”

“He isn’t at his assigned station, Your Grace.”

“When was he last seen?”

“Approximately forty minutes ago.”

Forty minutes. Right around when Shaft Nine had started filling with water.

Wriothesley’s expression didn’t move at all, which was significantly worse than if it had. “Where?”

“Lower pressure-control room.”

Freminet looked up sharply. “That station controls the emergency valves.”

There it was. I folded my arms. “That seems mildly incriminating.”

Wriothesley glanced at me. “Mildly?”

“Legally, I’m trying to remain restrained.”

Navia laughed once, and Clorinde looked at her. “What?”

“I needed that.”

Fair, honestly. We all looked terrible. Navia’s hair was damp around her face; Clorinde had a tear in one sleeve; Lyney’s perfectly arranged appearance had finally been defeated by humidity and underground flooding, which I was secretly enjoying. Freminet looked more comfortable than any of us, which felt deeply unfair considering he had nearly been swallowed by a mine shaft. Lynette looked exactly the same as when we’d started. I had begun to suspect she might not be human.

Wriothesley turned back to the guard. "Find Moreau-Bellacourt. Quietly." The man started away, and Wriothesley added, "And alive."

I looked at him. He noticed, because he always noticed. "What?"
"Nothing."

"You were thinking something."

"I was appreciating the clarification."

His eyebrow rose. I smiled. Apparently nearly drowning had not improved my ability to behave.

We took over one of Meropide's conference rooms — not because anybody called a meeting, but because Neuville arrived twenty-three minutes after Wriothesley contacted him, took one look at all of us dripping water onto the floor, and announced that nobody was doing anything else until we changed clothes.

I stared at him. "We may have the current Director trapped inside Meropide."

"Yes."

"Somebody tried to drown us."

"Yes."

"We found Callas's red file."

"Yes."

"And you're worried about my pants?"

"I am worried about hypothermia."

"I am not hypothermic."

"The water was very cold," Freminet said quietly.

I turned on him. "Traitor." He looked apologetic, which somehow made it worse.

"You're changing," Wriothesley said, arms folded.

"This entire investigation is becoming increasingly authoritarian." Neuville, ignoring me entirely, looked toward Clorinde and asked whether she could ensure I did. She nodded. "Absolutely."

"YOU'RE MY WIFE."

"Yes."

"That means you're supposed to support me."

"I am supporting your continued body temperature."

Navia laughed again. I looked toward Lyney, who smiled, and I pointed at him before he could speak. "Don't."

"I said nothing."

"You're enjoying this."

"Immensely."

Ten minutes later I was wearing spare clothes Wriothesley kept in his office, which meant his shirt was too large and the trousers had to be rolled at the ankles, and I looked less like an advocate investigating judicial corruption and more like I had stolen my husband's wardrobe after a questionable evening. Lyney looked me up and down when I returned.

"Not one word."

"Darling, I would never."

"He was about to," Lynette said.

"I know."

Navia had changed too. Clorinde was somehow still in dark clothing that fit perfectly, because apparently she kept emergency outfits everywhere — Champion Duelist privilege. Freminet was in dry gear. Wriothesley remained irritatingly presentable. Neuvillette looked exactly as immaculate as always. I hated Fontaine men.

The red file sat in front of Neuvillette while he read, and nobody interrupted him — not even me, which was how serious it was. He read Callas's opening pages twice, then the list of names, then the section concerning the Director, then that section again. Finally he looked up toward Navia.

"Your father understood the network's structure more completely than any official investigation of the period."

Navia's expression tightened. "He didn't trust officials."

"Given what we have found, that distrust was not entirely unfounded."

That was probably difficult for him to say. He represented Fontaine's justice system, and this investigation was becoming an

autopsy of everything that system had failed to notice. Or had chosen not to.

I leaned forward. "Callas identifies three institutional keys. Commerce, justice, transit. And he says the Director needs concurrence from all three."

"Yes."

"So even if Moreau-Bellacourt is the current Director, he shouldn't be able to operate alone."

"No."

"Which means there are at least two other active people."

"Yes."

I sat back. Wonderful. We might have found one head of a three-headed bureaucratic hydra.

Navia looked at the file. "Who was Justice when Papa wrote this?"

Neuvillette turned several pages. "Callas believed Marceau served as an operational intermediary, but not the institutional representative."

My stomach dropped slightly. "So someone above him. Name?"

"No."

I groaned. "Your father really committed to withholding names."

"He was trying not to get people killed," Navia said.

"I know. I am also annoyed."

"Thank you."

Commerce, at least, was easier — the representative appeared to have been Bellacourt, the former Director. Transit remained unknown until Freminet frowned at the documents and asked, carefully, whether transit could include municipal water control.

Everyone turned. He looked uncomfortable again, and I smiled encouragingly. "Go."

He pointed. "Callas says transport routes, cargo clearance, and water-channel scheduling."

"Yes," Neuvillette said.

“Then someone with access to Fontaine’s waterways could move cargo without using normal routes.”

“And bodies,” I said.

The room went quiet. René. Freminet looked down at the map. “Yes.”

The reversed current. The forged authorization. Someone had changed the waterways the night René died, and that was transit.

I wrote three columns on a sheet of Wriothsley’s paper. COMMERCE — Bellacourt, possibly Moreau-Bellacourt. JUSTICE — unknown, Marceau as subordinate. TRANSIT — unknown. Then I stared at it until another thought surfaced.

“Boat 417?”

Lyney looked over. “What?”

“What if 417 wasn’t simply a boat?”

Freminet’s eyes narrowed. “Route number?”

“Or operational designation.” I stood and walked toward the wall, which had no string on it yet. Charlotte would be disappointed. “Callas marks triangle cargo and boat 417. René says triangle cargo. V.S.C. 417 appears on the wreck and on crates two months ago.”

Navia came closer. “Meaning 417 survived after the original boat sank.”

“Yes.”

“Because 417 is the route,” Lyney said.

“Or the network channel.”

Freminet had already opened his map. “Could be tied to pressure channel numbers.” Everyone looked at him. He scanned, then stopped. “Oh.”

That was not a good oh.

“What?” I asked.

He looked at Wriothsley instead of me. “Old municipal channel four-seventeen.”

Wriothsley crossed the room. “Where?”

Freminet pointed, and the map extended out beyond Meropide — a disused pressure line running past the eastern commercial docks, Poisson, Fleuve Cendre, and then, at the end of it, Meropide. All three black-triangle routes. My stomach dropped.

“Holy shit.”

Neuvillette stood. “Channel 417 connects all three locations?”

“Historically,” Freminet said. “Most sections were sealed.”

“Most.”

“Yes.”

“And if somebody maintained secret access,” I said, “they could move cargo underwater.”

“Invisible to surface inspection,” Lyney said, folding his arms.

Arlecchino had told us the network moved restricted materials — weapons components, stolen documents, identities — all of it through old infrastructure. A hidden artery beneath Fontaine. Navia stared at the map. “Papa knew?”

“Probably some of it.” I hated how often that answer appeared.

Then the conference-room door opened and a guard stepped in. “Your Grace. We found Moreau-Bellacourt.”

Everyone went still. “Where?”

“Level Five.”

“Doing what?”

The guard hesitated. “Trying to access the emergency evacuation lift.”

Running. That looked bad.

“Bring him.”

“He resisted, Your Grace.”

“Is he injured?”

“Minor.”

“Alive?”

“Yes.”

Wriothesley nodded once. “Interview room.”

I stood. “No.” Everyone stared at me, which I supposed was fair, so I pointed at myself. “I’m Lucien Armand’s counsel. And this man may be involved in attempting to drown me. I’m emotionally compromised.”

Wriothlesley’s expression became almost proud. “You learned.”

“Don’t make it weird.”

“I will conduct the initial questioning,” Neuville said.

“Good.” Then: “I’m watching.”

He looked at me.

“From observation.”

“Fine.”

Progress.

Étienne Moreau-Bellacourt was younger than I expected. Maybe thirty-two, dark blond, still in a maintenance uniform, with a split lip and one wrist already bruising from whatever had happened when the guards stopped him. He sat across from Neuville alone. Wriothlesley stayed in the room but remained against the wall, which was its own kind of interrogation technique.

The rest of us watched through the one-way glass. I had questions — so many questions, pressing up against my teeth — and beside me Clorinde said, without looking over, “Don’t.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“You’re tapping.”

I looked down. My fingers were drumming against my leg. I stopped.

Neuville began. “State your full name.”

“Étienne Luc Moreau-Bellacourt.” He sounded irritated, which was interesting, because irritated men stop performing.

“Position.”

“Senior hydraulic maintenance supervisor.”

“Duration?”

“Five years.”

“Were you assigned to emergency pressure systems today?”

“No.”

“Did you access the lower pressure-control room?”

Silence.

“Étienne.” Wriothesley said the name exactly once. The man looked toward him, and that was enough.

“Yes.”

Neuville continued without any change in tone. “Why?”

“Alarm.”

“What alarm?”

“Pressure irregularity. Lower mine levels.”

Freminet shook his head immediately. “No automatic alarm,” I whispered, and he nodded. Meaning lie. Neuville knew it too.

“No alarm appears in the system logs.”

Moreau-Bellacourt’s face changed. “Then the monitor was wrong.”

“Which monitor?”

No answer.

“Étienne.”

He looked down.

“Did you manually open emergency valves controlling Shaft Nine?”

“No.”

“Your access credentials were used.”

“My credentials were stolen.”

“By whom?”

“I don’t know.”

“When did you discover this?”

“Noon.”

“And you failed to report it.”

“I was handling it.”

Wriothesley’s expression became very still. “You were handling stolen security credentials inside my Fortress.”

Moreau-Bellacourt swallowed. “I didn’t want disciplinary action.”

Bad answer. Very bad answer.

“Why did you attempt to access an evacuation lift during lockdown?” Neuville asked.

“I panicked.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew how it looked.”

At least that part was accurate.

Then Neuville placed a photograph on the table — Étienne Bellacourt, former Deputy Minister for Maritime Commerce, former Director — and said, “Your grandfather.”

Moreau-Bellacourt’s face emptied. There.

“Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Were you aware of his connection to illicit maritime operations?”

“No.” Too fast. Neuville noticed. “Were you aware of the Triangle Network?”

“No.” Again, fast.

I leaned toward the glass. Lyney murmured, “He knows.”

“Probably.”

“Definitely,” Lynette said.

We both looked at her. “You can tell?”

“He stopped blinking.”

That was terrifying. And useful.

Neuville set down a copy of the black triangle symbol, and Moreau-Bellacourt’s breathing changed. “Recognise it?”

“No.”

Wriothsley looked at him. He avoided Wriothsley’s eyes. Then Neuville asked the same question differently, the way I’d watched him do a hundred times from the defense table.

“Have you ever seen this symbol before today?”

A pause. There. “Yes.”

“When?”

He rubbed his palms against his trousers. "My grandfather's office. At home."

"What context?"

"Paperwork. I was a child."

"Approximately how old?"

"Twelve."

"What did you see?"

"Shipping maps." A hesitation. "Some crates."

My pulse jumped. Neuville didn't move. "What kind?"

"I don't remember."

"Was the triangle on them?"

"Yes."

There it was. Neuville leaned back. "Did your grandfather discuss his work with you?"

"No."

"Did he train you in municipal hydraulic systems?"

Moreau-Bellacourt looked confused. "No."

"Then why did you enter that field?"

"My father."

New. Everyone behind the glass went very still.

"Your father's occupation?"

Silence. Neuville repeated the question. "What did your father do?"

"Municipal waterworks," Moreau-Bellacourt whispered.

Transit. My stomach dropped. Grandfather controlled Commerce. Father controlled Transit. And the grandson now had access to Meropide's pressure systems. That wasn't coincidence anymore; that was a family business.

"Name."

"Luc Moreau."

"Alive?"

He looked down. "Yes."

I wrote it immediately. LUC MOREAU — TRANSIT?

“Current position?”

“Retired.”

“Former?”

“Regional hydraulic director.”

Freminet inhaled. Everyone turned. “That office controlled Channel 417.”

Oh, fuck.

“Family business,” Navia whispered. Not exactly. But close enough.

Through the glass, Moreau-Bellacourt looked terrified. Not guilty — terrified. There was a difference, and it mattered.

“When did you last speak with your father?” Neuville asked.

“Two days ago.”

“About?”

“Nothing important.”

“You are currently detained in connection with an attempted drowning inside the Fortress. I suggest you reconsider what qualifies as important.”

Moreau-Bellacourt closed his eyes. “He told me to resign.”

“Why?”

“He said things were changing.”

“What things?”

“He wouldn’t say.”

“When?”

“After an article in The Steambird.”

My entire body went cold. Charlotte’s dock feature. Or mine. “Which article?” Neuville asked.

“About the eastern docks.”

Yesterday. The bait. My bait. Fuck.

“What did he tell you?”

“That people were asking questions.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“He told you to leave Meropide.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He said I was exposed.”

“Exposed as what?”

Moreau-Bellacourt’s face collapsed slightly. “I don’t know.”

“You expect me to believe—”

“I DON’T KNOW.” He shouted it. Everyone behind the glass jumped. He sat breathing hard, and then, quieter: “My father never tells me anything.”

That felt real. Which was still not proof.

“But he knows my access,” he continued. “He knows what systems I manage.”

“Did he ask you to manipulate them?”

Silence.

“Étienne.” Once. Twice.

“Yes.”

My stomach dropped.

“When?”

“Several times.”

“For what purpose?”

“He said emergency tests.”

“Which systems?”

“Pressure valves. Maintenance gates. Old channels.”

“Channel 417?”

The man went pale. “Yes.”

“Did you know what moved through it?”

“No.”

“Did you ask?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He told me not to.”

“Did you continue?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus,” I whispered. Not a mastermind. A tool. Family-controlled access, for fifteen occasions across five years, according to the numbers Neuville pulled out of him next. And then:

“What about today?”

“No.”

“You expect us to believe your credentials opened valves in the exact mine where we found evidence linked to your grandfather’s criminal network, but today was the one time it wasn’t you?”

“Yes.”

It sounded terrible. It was also, I was increasingly afraid, possibly true.

Neuville studied him. “Who else knows your access code?”

“My father.”

The room behind the glass went frozen. Luc Moreau. Former hydraulic director. Transit. Possible current network authority.

“Why?” Neuville asked.

“He helped set up the maintenance software.”

“He could still know the architecture,” Freminet whispered.

Wriothlesley looked murderous, and he hadn’t even moved.

“My father told me never to change the emergency override,” Moreau-Bellacourt said.

“Why?”

“He said old systems wouldn’t recognise new credentials.”

“That is false,” Freminet said immediately.

I turned. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“Then Luc wanted permanent access.”

“Yes.”

Neuville asked where his father was now, and got the answer we were all expecting — I don’t know, three weeks since he’d seen him, a residence in the Northwestern Court. Then, “Can he access Meropide remotely?”

Moreau-Bellacourt paused. "No."

Freminet looked uncertain. "Maybe."

I turned. "What?"

"The old hydraulic relays have surface control links."

Wriothesley's head came round. "Could someone activate Shaft Nine externally?"

"Not directly. But if they routed through Channel 417 maintenance control—" His face changed. "Yes."

Meaning Moreau-Bellacourt might genuinely be telling the truth. His credentials, used. Not by him.

Neuvillette sat back, and then Moreau-Bellacourt said the thing that changed everything.

"My father isn't the Director."

Nobody moved. Neuvillette's gaze sharpened in a way I had personally been on the receiving end of exactly once and never wanted to repeat. "How do you know that title?"

Moreau-Bellacourt realised his mistake approximately half a second too late.

"How do you know the title 'Director'?"

His eyes filled with panic. "I heard them."

"Who?"

No answer. Wriothesley pushed away from the wall. "Étienne."

He swallowed. "My father."

"And?"

He looked at the table. "A woman."

Every muscle in my body tensed.

"What woman?"

"I don't know her name."

Of course not. "Description," Neuvillette said.

"Older. Fifties. Dark hair, grey streak. Always gloves."

"Accent?"

"Fontainian."

"Position?"

"I don't know."

"Where did you hear them?"

"My father's study. Years ago. Three."

"What did they discuss?"

Moreau-Bellacourt whispered it. "Succession."

The room changed. Neuville became very still. "Succession of what?"

He looked up. "The Director."

"How long ago?"

"Seven years."

Bellacourt had died seven years ago. They had been selecting his replacement.

"Was your father considered?"

"Yes."

"But he wasn't chosen."

"No."

"Who was?"

"I don't know."

"Did the woman become Director?"

"I think—" He stopped.

"What?"

"I think she already was Justice."

My stomach dropped. Justice. One of the three keys. A woman, older, gloves, positioned high enough to participate in the succession of a Director. Someone inside Fontaine's judicial system seven years ago. Neuville's face had gone completely unreadable, and I knew exactly what that meant: it narrowed the list. Maybe too much.

Behind me, Navia whispered, "Who?"

Neuville didn't answer. Not yet. He asked, "Did you ever hear a name?"

"No."

"Title?"

Moreau-Bellacourt thought about it. Then: “Madame Registrar.”

Neuvillette stopped. Completely. I saw it through the glass, and Wriothlesley saw it too.

Registrar. Records. Judicial access. Marceau beneath her. Someone capable of making evidence disappear, and of understanding every procedural weakness in Fontaine’s courts.

Then, quietly enough that I only knew because I was watching his mouth, Neuvillette said a name.

“Solène Varin.”

Wriothlesley’s expression changed.

“Who the hell is Solène Varin?” I said to the glass. Navia looked at me. Clorinde didn’t know. Neither did Lyney. But Neuvillette did, and Wriothlesley did, and that worried me more than anything else in the room.

Neuvillette asked Moreau-Bellacourt to describe the woman’s voice, and he did — calm, precise, low, rarely raised. Then her clothing: dark judicial formalwear, gloves, a silver clasp. Neuvillette closed his eyes once, opened them.

“Was the clasp shaped like scales?”

Moreau-Bellacourt stared at him. “Yes.”

Silence.

Eventually Neuvillette stood. “Interview suspended.”

“What happens to me?” Moreau-Bellacourt said, panicking.

“You remain in protective detention.”

“I’m not a criminal.”

“You knowingly permitted unauthorised access to restricted hydraulic systems at your father’s request. That matter will be addressed.” Neuvillette paused. “But if what you have told us is accurate, you may also be in significant danger.”

The man went pale. Good. He finally understood.

The observation room door opened and Neuvillette came through it, and nobody spoke, which meant I got to go first. Naturally.

"Who is Solène Varin?"

"Former Chief Judicial Registrar."

Former. "Retired?"

"Five years ago."

"Still alive?"

"Yes. In Fontaine."

"Could she have been the Justice representative?"

"Yes."

"Could she have been Director?"

Neuville was silent, and my stomach sank. "Neuville."

"Yes."

Navia covered her mouth. Wriothesley came in behind him, and I looked between the two of them. "You knew her?"

"Professionally," Neuville said.

"How well?"

"She served the Court for twenty-eight years."

Almost three decades. "Did you trust her?"

A pause. "Yes."

That hurt him. I could hear it. This wasn't another corrupt clerk somewhere in the machinery; this was somebody who had stood near the foundations of his own institution and been, as far as he had ever known, exactly what she appeared to be.

"What access did she have?"

"Everything."

I went through it anyway, because I needed to hear each one out loud. Trial records. Evidence storage. Witness protections. Internal correspondence. Judicial release orders. Yes to all of it. Enough to cover Marceau's alterations. Enough to suppress Callas's petitions. Enough to know René had requested protection, and exactly where he was being moved.

"Yes," Neuville said, and his expression had hardened past anything judicial.

And enough, perhaps, to arrange his death.

The room felt smaller. Lyney crossed his arms. “Where is she now?”

“Officially retired to a private estate outside the northern district.”

“Officially,” I repeated. “I dislike that word.”

“So do I.”

That surprised me. I looked at him properly, and he seemed tired — not physically, but in the same way Wriothlesley had looked when he talked about Lucien. Institutional guilt, in a different shape.

“You didn’t know,” I said.

“No.”

“This is not your fault.”

His expression shifted slightly, and I realised, a half-second late, that I had just used his own argument on him. He understood too. Apparently I had learned to steal from everyone.

Then Wriothlesley said, “If Varin is Director, she knows we’re inside the network now. She may know Vautrin’s in custody. Marceau. Moreau-Bellacourt.”

“Yes.”

“And if Luc Moreau is one of the institutional keys—”

“He may already have warned her.”

My pulse jumped, and I looked at the map again. Three keys. Old Director Bellacourt had held Commerce. His son Moreau held Transit. Varin could have been Justice. A complete leadership triangle — and then Bellacourt had died, and somebody had taken Director, potentially Varin, and Commerce had needed replacing, and Justice had needed a new representative if Varin moved upward, and the network had simply reproduced itself. Callas hadn’t been chasing a man. He’d seen a machine. That was why he could never simply expose one person.

I wrote it out. CURRENT STRUCTURE? Director — possibly Solène Varin. Transit — Luc Moreau? Justice — unknown successor. Commerce — unknown.

Then I stopped, because something had just landed. “Where was Moreau-Bellacourt trying to go?”

Wriothesley looked at me. “Emergency evacuation lift.”

“Where does it exit?”

“Surface access near—” He stopped.

Freminet already had the map. “Northwestern Court.”

The same district where Luc Moreau lived. Everyone froze, and I felt the pieces click together. Moreau-Bellacourt might not have been escaping randomly at all. He might have been going home. Or somebody had told him where to go.

“Check his communications,” I said.

Neuvillette was already ahead of me.

The communicator came in five minutes later. Most of it was ordinary — maintenance schedules, personal messages, a dinner arrangement. Then one message received during lockdown, from an unknown sender.

EVAC LIFT. COME HOME.

“His father,” I said.

“Possibly,” Neuvillette said, and I was beginning to hate perhaps and possibly in equal measure.

Then a second message, sent immediately after we’d entered the old mines.

THEY FOUND THE BELL.

Nobody spoke. They knew. Not just that we were underground — exactly where. Shaft Nine. The bell that never rings. Somebody had reported our progress in real time.

From inside the group? No. Absolutely not. I looked around anyway, because my brain insisted: Wriothesley, Clorinde, Navia, Lyney, Lynette, Freminet. No. Neuvillette hadn’t even been there. Guards, then. Maintenance. Somebody watching old systems.

Then Freminet said, “The lights.”

We all turned.

"The old mining lights. When we passed the seven-lamp junction, one flickered."

"So?"

He swallowed. "They're disconnected."

My skin crawled. "Someone powered them."

"Yes."

"Remotely?"

"Maybe."

Meaning whoever controlled Channel 417's old infrastructure might have tracked our route through power draw alone. Possibly more than that. Had there been cameras twelve years ago? Meka sensors? Modern additions somebody had quietly installed since?

Wriothesley looked furious in the specific, quiet way that made people in this Fortress reconsider their entire lives. "My prison has been turned into their surveillance network."

"Yes," Freminet said quietly.

Wriothesley pulled his gloves tighter. Somebody was about to have a very bad afternoon.

Then Neuville's communicator rang. He answered, listened, and his face changed again.

"What?" I asked. He held up one hand. I waited. Barely.

He ended the call. "Officers reached Luc Moreau's residence."

"And?"

"Empty."

Of course. "How long?"

"Unknown."

"Varin?"

He looked at me. "Her estate is also empty."

Both of them gone. Network leadership running — or repositioning.

And then, before I understood why, I said, "Charlotte."

Everyone looked at me.

"What about her?" Navia asked.

The Steambird. She'd published the bait article. Her name had been on it. They knew she had photo access, and if Varin had worked out that my office drive was gone but the images had survived anyway —

I reached for my communicator and called. No answer. Called again. Nothing.

My blood went cold. "Not again."

Lyney was already moving. "Lynette." She nodded and left. Neuville contacted the Maison Gardiennage. I called a third time, and finally:

"Hello?"

I exhaled so hard I nearly shouted. "CHARLOTTE."

"Ow."

"Where are you?"

"At work?"

"You hesitated."

"I am technically adjacent to work."

I closed my eyes. "Charlotte."

"I was following a lead."

Everyone around me groaned. I pointed at nothing in particular. "YOU ARE WORSE THAN ME."

"Impossible," Wriothsley muttered. I ignored him. "What lead?"

"A former registrar."

Everything stopped. "Name."

"Solène Varin."

"WHERE ARE YOU?"

"Near the northern district."

Neuville moved immediately. "Tell her to leave."

"Charlotte, leave."

"Why?"

"NOW."

Silence. She'd heard my tone. "All right."

"Go somewhere public."

"I am public."

"Crowded."

"I—"

There was a noise on her end. A door, maybe. Footsteps. Charlotte stopped speaking.

"Charlotte?"

Nothing.

"CHARLOTTE."

Then, a whisper. "Shaun."

My blood froze. "What?"

"There's someone behind me."

The room went silent around me. "Don't turn around."

"Too late."

"What do you see?"

"A woman. Older. Dark hair."

Neuville closed his eyes.

"Gloves?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Silver clasp?"

Charlotte paused. "Yes."

Solène Varin. Not at her estate. Standing behind Charlotte.

Then my communicator picked up another voice — calm, low, precise. Not Charlotte.

"Advocate Martin."

Every hair on my body rose. She had taken the communicator.

"Put Charlotte back on."

A small pause. "You sound exactly as I expected."

"Put her back."

"Your colleague is unharmed."

"Then prove it."

A beat, and then Charlotte: "I'm fine."

Relief, and then Varin again. "You've been very disruptive."

I laughed once. "Apparently that's going around."

Wriothesley looked ready to explode. Neuville motioned for silence and wrote something quickly, and I caught the shape of it. Tracking. Good. Keep her talking.

"You falsified Lucien Armand's conviction."

"I did no such thing."

"Your clerk did."

"Former clerk."

"Under your authority."

Silence. Interesting.

"René Desmarais." Nothing. "Marcel Vautrin." Nothing. "Augustin Roche." A pause — there. "Callas."

Varin finally spoke. "You resemble him."

Navia heard it, and her face changed.

"How?" I asked.

"Persistent."

"Annoying?"

"Very."

I smiled despite myself. "Thank you."

"It was not praise."

"I'll take it."

Neuville was writing again. KEEP HER TALKING. I paced.

"Are you the Director?"

Silence. Then laughter, soft and controlled. "No."

That surprised everyone. "You expect me to believe that?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I was once."

My stomach dropped. Former Director. "So Callas found you."

"Yes."

Navia inhaled sharply.

"He was extraordinarily difficult to frighten," Varin said.

"You threatened his daughter."

"I did not." I froze. "Vautrin did."

"That distinction means very little to me."

"It mattered to Callas."

"Why?"

"Because he understood there are differences between monsters."

That sentence bothered me more than anything else she'd said.

"What does that mean?"

"Vautrin wanted control. Bellacourt wanted money. Moreau wanted security."

"And you?"

"I wanted stability."

I almost laughed. "You imprisoned an innocent man for stability?"

"No."

"Your network did."

"Yes."

Her honesty was somehow worse than denial would have been.

"The Triangle Network existed before me, Advocate Martin."

"So you joined it."

"I inherited it."

"That does not absolve you."

"I did not say it did."

Which was interesting. Varin didn't seem to be defending herself at all, and that worried me considerably more than if she had been.

"Who is Director now?"

Silence. Then: "You have already met them."

Every person in the room froze. My stomach dropped. Met them. Who? Vautrin — no, she'd said now. Moreau? Marceau? Somebody else entirely?

"When?"

No answer.

"Who?"

"You are asking the wrong question."

"I hate when people say that."

“I know.”

“How would you know?”

“You have been watched longer than two months.”

My entire body went cold. The surveillance photograph had been two months old. She’d said longer.

“How long?”

“Years.”

Wriothesley went terrifyingly still. Lyney’s expression changed. Clorinde stepped closer to me. Navia had gone pale.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because Shaun Martin is memorable.”

That landed strangely. Too personal. “What does that mean?”

“You built connections without understanding their value.”

My eyes moved around the room — Wriothesley, Clorinde, Navia, Lyney, Neuvillette. All of them.

“Was I a target before this case?”

“No.”

“Then why watch me?”

“Because eventually, people like you notice things.”

My photography. My journalism. My community. My law practice. Stories, all of them, and I hated how much sense that made.

“You knew I’d find something.”

“No. We knew you might.”

We.

“Who is we?”

She ignored it entirely. “Callas made the same mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“He believed relationships were only vulnerabilities.”

Navia went still.

“They are also networks,” Varin said.

I looked around the room again. Our polycule. My coworkers. My clients. The House of the Hearth. The Spina. The Court. Meropide. She understood it — possibly better than we did.

"He protected Navia by isolating information."

"Yes."

"And that failed."

"Eventually."

"So what are you telling me?"

Varin's voice softened, and what she said was not remotely what I expected.

"Stop hiding things from each other."

Neuvillette wrote: ASK LOCATION. Right.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I am tired."

"Of what?"

"The Director."

Everyone froze. The current one. Not her. And she sounded, for the first time, almost afraid.

"Who?"

"I will not say over this line."

"Then come in."

"No."

"Why?"

"They'll kill Charlotte."

My blood ran cold. I looked at Neuvillette, whose face hardened. Somewhere in the background, Charlotte whispered something.

"They know I approached her," Varin said.

"So you're not holding Charlotte."

"No."

Oh. Fuck. Charlotte wasn't Varin's hostage. They were both being watched.

"Who is?"

No answer.

"Varin."

"I have twenty minutes."

"Until what?"

“Until the person following us realises where we are going.”

My pulse jumped. “You’re taking Charlotte somewhere?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“She has something I need.”

“What?”

“The photograph.”

Of course. “Roche, Vautrin, Marceau?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because one detail in that photograph proves who the current Director is.”

Everyone went still. “What detail?”

“I won’t tell you over this line.”

“Where are you going?”

Varin hesitated. Then: “Where Fontaine keeps the names it wishes to forget.”

I closed my eyes. I hated clues. “Could people in this case please start using addresses?”

“I said the same thing,” Charlotte whispered faintly, and despite absolutely everything, I almost laughed.

“You have fifteen minutes now,” Varin said, and ended the call.

I stared at my communicator. Neuville was already moving. “Trace?”

An officer shook his head. “Partial. Northern district. Signal redirected.”

Lyne looked at me. “Where Fontaine keeps names it wishes to forget.”

“Cemetery?” Wriothesley suggested.

Navia shook her head. “Too literal.”

“Archives,” Clorinde said.

I looked at Neuville, who was thinking, and then his eyes changed. “No.”

“What?”

“The Hall of Deferred Judgments.”

Nobody knew what that was except him. “What is it?”

“An old judicial archive.”

My pulse jumped. “Names of people whose cases were never resolved.”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Beneath the original courthouse.”

Of course it was underground. I was beginning to resent Fontaine architecture on principle. “Still used?”

“No.”

“Public?”

“No.”

“Then why would Varin—”

“She was Registrar.” Of course. She would know every forgotten archive in the city, every hidden record, every name. And if the current Director followed her there, that location was a trap, or a confession, or both.

Neuville grabbed his coat. “Move.”

Wriothesley turned to me. “No.”

I stared at him.

“We are not doing this again. You nearly drowned forty minutes ago.”

“More like ninety.”

“That is not better.”

“Charlotte is my coworker.”

“And Varin specifically asked for you.”

“She didn’t.”

“She called you.”

“Because Charlotte called me.” I stepped closer to him. “Shaun.”

“I’m going.”

His jaw tightened. Clorinde moved to stand beside me. “So am I.”

Navia joined her. “Me too.”

Wriothesley looked toward the ceiling, and Lyney smiled. “I believe you’re outvoted.”

“Polyamory is not a democracy,” Wriothesley said.

I pointed at him. “HEY. That’s my line.”

Even Neuville almost smiled. Then he became serious again.

“We go together.”

I looked at him. “Together?”

“Yes.”

Varin’s warning. Stop hiding things from each other. She was probably manipulating us — she was almost certainly manipulating us — but on this one thing, she might be right.

“No separate investigations,” Neuville said.

“No improvisation,” Wriothesley added.

Everyone looked at me.

“Why?”

Nobody answered. Rude. “Fine.”

“We retrieve Charlotte,” Neuville continued.

“And Varin?” I asked.

His expression became complicated. “She answers for what she did.”

Fair. “But?”

“But if she is telling the truth—”

“She may be our only direct witness to the current Director.”

“Yes.”

I looked at the red file sitting on the table. Callas had spent years building fragments because nobody could safely hold the entire truth. René had kept one piece. Roche another. Marceau another. Navia had inherited one without knowing it. Clorinde had carried another through eleven years of grief. And now Solène Varin — former corrupt Registrar, former Director, possible accomplice to murder, maybe whistleblower — was offering the last one.

I hated this case. I loved this case. Mostly hated.

I grabbed my coat. Wriothsley sighed. “You are staying beside me.”

“Clorinde said the same thing.”

“Good.”

“So I’m walking between you.”

“Yes.”

I looked toward Lyney. “Boyfriend privileges revoked.”

He smiled. “I’ll survive.”

Navia took my hand. “Ready?”

No. Absolutely not. “Yes.”

We left Meropide. Behind us, Lucien Armand was still waiting for freedom. Ahead of us, Charlotte was walking beside a woman who had helped steal eleven years from him. And somewhere in Fontaine, the current Director was watching both.

For the first time, though, we weren’t following a dead man’s clues. We were following somebody who had actually been inside the Triangle Network — somebody alive, and frightened. And if Solène Varin was telling the truth, we were finally about to learn who had been pulling the strings all along.



Chapter Fourteen

The Hall of Deferred Judgments



I had developed a new rule for Fontaine. If somebody described a location using a sentence that belonged in a ghost story, I did not want to go there. Where Fontaine keeps the names it wishes to forget absolutely qualified.

Unfortunately, nobody cared about my new rule.

The original courthouse stood in one of the oldest sections of the Court of Fontaine, mostly hidden behind the newer administrative buildings that had replaced it decades ago. Its upper floors had been converted into storage, offices, and several rooms Neuville described as “administratively redundant,” which I assumed was Chief Justice for nobody remembers why this place exists.

The Hall of Deferred Judgments was underneath it. Naturally. Because apparently every important secret in Fontaine lived underground.

I sat in the carriage between Wriothesley and Clorinde, exactly as ordered, which I resented on principle. Navia sat opposite us beside Lyney; Neuville had the front-facing seat with documents open across his knees. Nobody spoke for several minutes.

Then I looked at him. "How abandoned is abandoned?"

He didn't look up. "The Hall has not been actively used in twenty-three years."

"That did not answer my question."

"It is structurally sound."

"Also not my question."

Wriothesley looked out the window. "She wants to know whether we're about to encounter ghosts."

"I did not say ghosts."

"You were thinking ghosts."

"Stop doing that."

Lyney smiled. "I would enjoy a ghost."

Navia looked at him. "Why?"

"Excellent audience potential."

"A dead audience?"

"They cannot leave during the performance."

Lynette wasn't with us; she had gone ahead, of course. Freminet had remained at Meropide assisting Wriothesley's engineers with Channel 417, and Arlecchino was handling the House of the Hearth's internal investigation into Roche. Which meant the people currently surrounding me were, arguably, the less alarming half of our operation. My life had become ridiculous.

Clorinde touched my knee. "You're bouncing."

I looked down. I was. I stopped. "I'm fine."

"Didn't ask."

There was no winning with her, so I sighed and looked at my communicator instead. Charlotte hadn't contacted me since Varin ended the call. Fifteen minutes, she'd said. We had already used twelve.

"Are we close?"

"Yes," Neuvillette said.

"How close?"

"Three minutes."

“Good.”

Wriothesley looked at me. “You cannot personally make the carriage faster.”

“I could encourage the driver.”

“No.”

“I wasn’t going to jump out.”

“No one mentioned jumping.”

I closed my mouth. Lyney started laughing. “Don’t.”

He held up both hands. “I admire your consistency.”

Navia smiled, and then her expression softened. “Charlotte is probably okay.”

“I know.”

I didn’t. Neither did she. But I squeezed her hand when she offered it.

The Hall of Deferred Judgments had no sign, which bothered me more than it should have. At minimum, haunted places ought to be labelled. Instead Neuville led us through an old courthouse corridor, down a narrow spiral staircase, past one locked iron door, then another, and finally into a stone passage lined with cabinets.

Hundreds of cabinets. Maybe thousands. Each fitted with a small brass plate. Names. Dates. Case numbers.

I stopped walking.

“Oh.”

Neuville glanced back. “What?”

“This is—” I didn’t know how to finish it. Sad. Heavy. Wrong.

Every drawer represented something unresolved. Missing defendants. Disputed identities. Appeals never completed because somebody died. Property claims nobody returned for. Judgments suspended because evidence vanished. Names the legal system could neither clear nor condemn. Deferred — not forgotten, exactly. Just unfinished.

I understood immediately why Varin had chosen it.

Then Charlotte’s voice echoed somewhere ahead. “SHAUN?”

I ran.

“Shaun.” Clorinde. Right. No running blindly through creepy judicial catacombs. I slowed to what I considered an extremely responsible fast walk, and Wriothlesley grabbed the back of my shirt anyway.

“I am literally walking.”

“Barely.”

We rounded the corridor, and there was Charlotte, standing beside an enormous wooden table. Alive. Uninjured. Furious.

I crossed the room and hugged her. She froze. “Oh.”

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were going to.”

She hugged me back. “I’m okay.”

I released her. Then hit her arm.

“Ow!”

“You followed a former judicial registrar connected to a criminal network into an abandoned underground archive.”

“You entered an abandoned mine this morning.”

“That is completely different.”

“How?”

“I had my husband.”

Wriothlesley raised an eyebrow. Charlotte looked at him. “Does he come with legal liability insurance?”

“I should,” he said.

Then I turned, and across the room stood Solène Varin.

She was exactly as Moreau-Bellacourt had described her. Late fifties, dark hair streaked silver, gloves, a black formal coat, and at her throat a silver clasp shaped like scales. She didn’t look like a criminal mastermind. She looked like somebody who could correct your filing procedure so severely that you reconsidered your entire education.

Her eyes moved across us — Neuville first, then Wriothesley, Clorinde, Navia, Lyney, and finally me.

“You brought everyone.”

“You told me to stop hiding things from people.”

Her mouth moved slightly. “Touché.”

I hated that I liked that.

Neuville stepped forward. “Solène.”

Something passed between them. Twenty-eight years working inside the same institution. Trust. And now this.

“Neuville.”

“You understand that you are not free to leave.”

“I assumed.”

“You have admitted participation in the Triangle Network.”

“Yes.”

Charlotte stared at her. “You left that part out.”

“You didn’t ask.”

Charlotte looked at me. “I don’t like her.”

“I haven’t decided.”

“She’s a confessed former criminal conspirator,” Wriothesley muttered.

“Yes, but she’s interesting.”

Clorinde sighed. Navia whispered, “She does this,” and Varin said, “I gathered.”

Neuville did not indulge any of us. “Where is the person following you?”

Varin’s expression tightened. “Gone.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Roche intercepted him.”

Lyney went very still. “Roche is here?”

“No longer.”

“How do you know him?”

She looked at him. “Better than he would like.”

Lyney didn’t smile. “That’s not an answer.”

“No.”

Interesting.

I stepped closer. “The photograph. You brought it?”

Charlotte opened her bag, and Neuville said immediately, “Do not remove it.”

She froze. “I wasn’t—”

“You were.”

Charlotte sighed. Everyone apparently had a face now.

“We have secured copies,” Neuville continued, and I took one out of my folder — the dock photograph, Vautrin and Roche and Marceau, the black triangle crate behind them. I put it on the table.

Varin looked at it, then at me. “You took this accidentally.”

“Yes.”

“You have a remarkable talent for inconvenience.”

“Thank you.”

Again, not praise. Didn’t care.

“What detail?” I asked.

She looked toward Neuville instead. “If I identify the Director, I expect protection.”

“You will receive protection as a cooperating witness.”

“And consideration.”

His face hardened. “You are not negotiating immunity.”

“I didn’t request immunity.” A pause. “I deserve prosecution.”

That shut all of us up. Even Charlotte.

Varin took off one glove. Her hand trembled, barely. “I protected the Triangle Network.”

Navia stared at her. “You threatened my father.”

“No.”

“You helped the people who did.”

Varin met her eyes. “Yes.”

No excuse. No minimisation. Navia’s face tightened.

“I suppressed records,” Varin continued. “I redirected investigations. I permitted Marceau to remain in his position after I

learned he had altered evidence.”

My anger rose. “Lucien.”

“Yes.”

“Did you know he was innocent?”

“Not when he was convicted.”

“When did you learn?”

“Approximately eight months later.”

Eight months. Lucien had spent another ten years and four months in Meropide after she knew.

I took a step toward her, and Wriothesley’s hand closed around my wrist. Good call.

“You knew.”

“Yes.”

“And you left him there.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because correcting his conviction would have exposed Marceau.”

“GOOD.”

“And Marceau would have exposed Vautrin.”

“GOOD.”

“And Vautrin would have exposed Bellacourt.”

“GOOD.”

“And Bellacourt would have exposed me.”

There it was. I stared at her. “So you chose yourself.”

“Yes.”

Somehow the honesty made me angrier. “You let an innocent man rot in Meropide because you were afraid of going to prison.”

“Yes.”

I laughed once, and it came out ugly. “Then I hope you’re comfortable there.”

“I’ll find her a room,” Wriothesley said from behind me.

Varin actually looked at him. “I expected you might.”

Good.

“Continue,” Neuville said quietly.

She had become Director seven years before her retirement, she told us, after Bellacourt — trained not by him but by his predecessor, which made my brain hurt.

“How old is this network?”

Varin looked around the Hall, at all those cabinets. “Older than any of us. Nearly seventy years.”

Silence.

“Papa found seventy years of corruption?” Navia whispered.

“Pieces of it.”

“What did it start as?”

“Smuggling, during a period of strict commercial rationing.” That almost sounded mundane, until she kept going. “Then officials discovered that controlling illicit routes gave them leverage over legitimate commerce.”

“Money.”

“Yes.”

“Power. Blackmail.”

“Yes.”

“And eventually murder.”

Her eyes lowered. “Yes.”

I hated her. Not simply — that would have been easier. I hated that she seemed to understand exactly what she had done.

“Who is Director now?”

She looked at the photograph. “Look.”

“I’ve looked.”

“Not at the men.”

I frowned. Charlotte moved beside me, and Varin pointed at the warehouse window behind Vautrin. A reflection, distorted, barely visible.

I leaned closer. “That’s nothing.”

“Enlarge it.”

Charlotte already had her portable magnifier out, because of course she did. We placed the high-resolution print underneath, and in the reflection there was a fourth figure — standing behind me when I originally took the photograph, apparently just outside the direct frame. Male. Broad shoulders. Formal coat. Face distorted by the glass.

“I can’t identify that.”

“You already have.”

“What?”

Varin pointed lower. His hand. Not a ring. A cufflink — circular, with three small lines through it.

My stomach shifted. I had seen it. Court. An office. Somewhere.

Lyney came closer. “Symbol?”

Varin nodded. “Martel Engineering.”

I froze. No.

Charlotte looked toward me. “Oh.”

“Élodie,” Navia whispered.

My first client. The industrial accident. Missing maintenance records. Management that had known the machinery was unsafe. And the operations director who had sat in the witness stand and told me the files had been archived.

Adrien Delorme.

The room tilted slightly. “No.”

“You recognise it,” Varin said.

“Adrien Delorme.”

Neuvillette went completely still. Wriothesley’s hand tightened around mine.

I stared at the reflection again. The man I had cross-examined. The man who’d signed the maintenance warnings. The man whose company had somehow lost critical digital documentation immediately after a serious industrial accident. I had stood across a courtroom from him. He’d looked annoyed. Defensive. Maybe a little nervous.

Director?

“Holy shit,” Charlotte whispered, and for once nobody told her not to narrate.

I looked at Varin. “Adrien Delorme is the current Director.”

“Yes.”

“You said I had already met him.”

“Yes.”

“And Élodie’s case—”

She nodded slowly. “Was not unrelated.”

Everything came back at once. The malfunctioning municipal-maintenance machinery. The warnings ignored. The records missing. Élodie copying files because she was certain management would destroy them. The industrial facility. The pressure system.

Freminet’s map assembled itself in my head. Channel 417. Hydraulic infrastructure.

“What was that facility maintaining?”

“You never asked the right department,” Varin said.

My anger flared. “Don’t start with cryptic bullshit.”

Wriothsley almost smiled. Varin didn’t. “Martel Engineering held municipal contracts servicing obsolete hydraulic systems.”

My skin went cold. “Channel 417.”

“Yes.”

Oh my god. Élodie hadn’t stumbled into simple workplace negligence. She had stumbled into the network’s infrastructure.

“That is why the records disappeared.”

“Yes.”

“The machine failure?”

“Probably ordinary negligence. Delorme was not sabotaging his own facility.”

Fair. “But if investigators reviewed the maintenance database, they might have found Channel 417 service activity.”

“Yes.”

“And Élodie copied the records.”

“Yes.”

My chest tightened. “She has them.”

“Some.”

Neuvillette stepped forward. “What does Delorme believe she retained?”

“I don’t know.”

I looked at him. “He tried to prosecute her aggressively.”

Neuvillette understood immediately. “The charges would have discredited her.”

“Yes,” Varin said. “And potentially restricted her access to company records permanently.”

I thought about Élodie at nineteen, sitting in the chair nearest my office door with a bruised wrist, terrified, trying to preserve evidence because nobody believed her. I had thought I was saving her from being crushed by a negligent company. I had accidentally pulled a thread out of a seventy-year criminal network — and Delorme had been sitting in the gallery watching me do it.

No wonder I’d been watched. Not just because I was memorable. Not just because I knew powerful people. I had challenged the Director publicly. And won.

“Where is Élodie?” Charlotte asked.

I had no idea. I reached for my communicator, and Neuvillette caught my hand.

“Do not call.”

I stared. “Why?”

“If her communications are monitored, a sudden call from you may identify her as important.”

“She IS important.”

“To us. Delorme may not know how much we understand.”

“He may still believe you saw the Martel case as an isolated safety matter,” Varin said.

I hated this. “So what do we do?”

“Locate her through protected means,” Neuville said, already thinking.

Wriothesley looked toward Charlotte. “The brother?”

Fourteen years old. She’d told him enough to hide the storage device.

“Oh, shit.”

Varin’s eyes sharpened. “What brother?”

Everyone turned toward her. She hadn’t known. Good. I shut up immediately, and Charlotte — smart enough not to continue — looked at me and said nothing at all.

Varin noticed. “Interesting.”

“No.” I stepped closer to her. “You don’t get that information.”

She studied me for a second, then nodded. “Good.”

That surprised me.

“You’re learning,” she added.

“I’ve been learning.”

“Slowly.”

“She really does resemble you,” Wriothesley murmured.

I turned. “What?”

He smiled faintly. “Nothing.”

I would deal with that betrayal later.

Neuville returned to the photograph. “Why did Delorme meet Vautrin, Roche, and Marceau two months ago?”

Varin’s expression darkened. “Succession.”

My stomach dropped again. “Whose?”

“The network is failing.”

“How?”

“Callas weakened it.”

Navia looked up. “He did?”

“Yes.”

“He never exposed it.”

“He didn’t need to.” Varin walked toward one of the old cabinets and rested a gloved hand near it. “After René died, Callas quietly

dismantled several revenue streams. He warned Spina crews away from certain routes. He made contracts inconvenient. He exposed minor smuggling operations without ever connecting them publicly."

Navia's eyes filled. "He kept fighting."

"Yes."

Even after the threats. Even while protecting her.

"He damaged Commerce enough that Bellacourt struggled to maintain control."

"And after Papa died?"

"The network recovered."

Navia looked away, and Clorinde's hand found hers.

"But Fontaine changed," Varin continued. "Technology improved. Records became harder to erase. Surveillance improved. Independent journalists multiplied."

Charlotte smiled slightly. "You're welcome."

Varin ignored her. "Then the House of the Hearth began disrupting their routes."

Lyney's expression sharpened. "Roche."

"Yes. From inside."

"And recently?"

"You." She looked at me.

I blinked. "Me?"

"Élodie Martel. You exposed unsafe operations and forced an independent investigation into Martel Engineering. That investigation began uncovering irregular maintenance contracts."

I stared at Neuville, who looked genuinely surprised. "You didn't know?"

"The workplace inquiry is independent."

Right. Proper boundaries.

"Then you reopened Lucien Armand," Varin said.

"Wriothesley started that."

"She did the work," Wriothesley said.

I glanced at him. He meant it.

"Then Callas's ledger resurfaced," Varin went on. "René's notebook. Vautrin was arrested. Marceau entered custody. Moreau-Bellacourt disclosed Transit." She looked at the photograph. "Delorme's network is collapsing."

"So he's choosing a successor?"

"No." Something in her voice changed.

"Then what?"

"He is preparing to disappear."

Silence. Lyney stepped closer. "With what?"

"Everything. Money. Identities. Records. Routes."

Neuville's eyes narrowed. "People?"

Varin hesitated, and my stomach turned. "Varin."

"Yes."

People. "What people?"

"Anyone whose knowledge can rebuild the network elsewhere."

Roche. Moreau. Other operators. "And anyone who could expose him?"

She looked at me. "They don't travel."

Meaning killed.

Charlotte stopped smiling. I looked at her, then at Navia, then at Clorinde. My family. My client. Élodie. Lucien.

"Why haven't you gone to Neuville before now?"

Varin took a long breath. "Because I didn't know who succeeded me."

I frowned. "You handed over Director and didn't know?"

"I chose my successor."

"Who?"

"Not Delorme."

There it was. "What happened?"

"My successor died three years ago."

"How?"

"Accident."

Nobody in this case believed that word anymore. "Who?"

“Magistrate René Vallois.”

Neuvillette’s expression changed. He’d known him too. “Carriage accident.”

“Yes.”

“And Delorme took over afterward?”

“Without formal succession.”

“How?”

“He held Commerce. He acquired Justice and Transit through coercion.”

“Who is Justice now?”

Varin looked toward Neuvillette when she said it. “Deputy Archivist Laurent Serrat.”

Neuvillette went cold. Another person he knew.

“And Transit?”

“Luc Moreau.”

We had him. Mostly.

“Where is Serrat?” Neuvillette asked.

“At work this morning.” She shook her head. “Not anymore.”

“You know that?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

She reached inside her coat, and everyone tensed. Slowly — very slowly — she removed a folded sheet and placed it on the table.

Three names.

LUCIEN ARMAND. ÉLODIE MARTEL. CHARLOTTE.

I stopped breathing. Beside each one, a time. Lucien: 20:00. Élodie: 19:30. Charlotte: 18:45.

I looked toward the clock. 18:16.

Thirty minutes.

“What is this?”

Varin’s voice went quiet. “Cleanup schedule.”

Charlotte went pale, and Lyney moved to her side immediately.

“Where did you get this?”

“Roche.”

“When?”

“Today.”

“Why isn’t MY name on it?”

Varin looked at me. “That should worry you more.”

It did. “What does that mean?”

“Delorme does not intend to kill you.”

Silence. Wriothsesley’s expression became terrifying. “What does he intend?”

She looked directly at me. “To take you.”

No.

Lyney stepped closer. “Why?”

“Leverage.”

“Against whom?”

Varin simply looked around the room. Everyone. Every relationship I had. Wriothsesley. Clorinde. Navia. Lyney. Neuville. The House of the Hearth. The Spina. The Court. Meropide. The Steambird.

“Oh,” I said.

Wriothsesley’s voice became dangerously soft. “He thinks holding Shaun controls all of us.”

“Yes.”

Lyney laughed. There was absolutely no humour in it. “That’s a remarkably bad idea.”

Clorinde didn’t say anything at all, which frightened me more. Navia moved to stand beside her.

Neuville picked up the cleanup schedule. “Charlotte remains here.”

“What?” Charlotte said.

“Yes.”

“But—”

“No.”

She looked at me, and I shook my head. “For once, Charlotte, no argument.”

She stared, then nodded. Good.

“Lucien,” I said, and Wriothsley already had his communicator out. Meropide was locked down. Food suspended until verified. Medical under direct supervision. And Lucien wasn’t staying in general population. Relief, small and cold.

“Élodie.”

“We locate her now,” Neuville said.

“And her brother.”

“Yes.”

“There is another issue,” Varin said.

I snapped. “OF COURSE THERE IS.”

Everyone went silent. I rubbed my face. “Sorry.” Not sorry. “What?”

She pointed at the times. “They’re coordinated.”

“So?”

“Three targets in separate locations.”

Charlotte. Élodie. Lucien. “Meaning three teams.”

“Yes.”

“Or one central trigger,” Lyney said.

Varin nodded. “The network is moving tonight.”

My pulse climbed. “Where?”

“Channel 417.”

Of course. “They’re evacuating through the old water route.”

Freminet had found it hours ago and hadn’t known what he was looking at. Eastern docks. Poisson. Fleuve Cendre. Meropide. One hidden artery.

Wriothsley looked toward Neuville. “If they access Meropide through the channel—”

“They could reach Lucien.”

“Not if I close it.”

“Can you?”

“Yes.”

I looked at him. “Without drowning anybody else?”

He stared at me. “I’m going to pretend that was concern rather than criticism.”

“It was both.”

He kissed my forehead, abruptly, and I blinked. “What was that?”

“I’m leaving.”

My chest tightened. “Meropide.”

“Yes.” A beat. “Be careful.”

“You too.”

Then his expression hardened. “No heroics.”

“I know.”

“Shaun.”

“I KNOW.”

He looked toward Clorinde. “She stays with you.”

I turned. “She is not an object you can assign.”

“I am staying with you,” Clorinde said.

I looked back at him. “Fine.”

Navia stepped forward. “And me.”

Wriothesley opened his mouth, and Navia pointed at him. “Don’t.”

He shut it. Smart man.

Lyney looked toward Neuville. “Élodie. I can locate her quietly.”

“With Lynette.”

“Yes.”

“I’m going,” he said to me, before I’d said anything.

I stared at him.

“Don’t start.”

“You just came back.”

“And I intend to stay back.” His hand touched my cheek. “But she is nineteen, Shaun.”

That stopped me. A scared nineteen-year-old mechanic who had trusted me. A little brother.

"You bring her back."

"I will."

"Promise?"

His expression softened. "Promise."

I kissed him — fast, no performance. "Come back."

"You too."

Arlecchino's words came back to me, and Varin's after them. Relationships are networks. Callas had divided information because he believed separation created safety. Maybe safety was exactly the opposite.

Wriothsley to Meropide. Lyney and Lynette to Élodie. Neuville coordinating the Court. Clorinde and Navia beside me. Charlotte protected here. Varin in custody. Not isolated. Connected.

Then Neuville turned toward me. "You are going to the Palais."

I frowned. "Why?"

"Protection."

"No."

His eyes narrowed. "Shaun."

"Delorme wants me."

"Yes."

"So we know what he expects."

"No," Clorinde said immediately.

"Absolutely not," said Navia.

"No," said Neuville.

"Oh, I know that face," said Charlotte.

I pointed at all of them. "Everyone shut up."

Varin watched me, which was interesting. "What are you proposing?" she asked.

"Delorme thinks I'm leverage. He thinks if he takes me, Wriothsley gives him Meropide access. Neuville gives him legal passage. Navia gives him Spina routes. Lyney gives him House cooperation."

Lyney, halfway to the door, turned around. "Absolutely not."

"Obviously not. He thinks my relationships make me weak."

"No," Varin said.

"What?"

"He thinks they make everyone else weak."

That was worse. And more accurate.

I looked around at my people. Every single one of them would do something catastrophically stupid for me. I knew, because I would do something catastrophically stupid for them.

"Then we use it."

Neuvillette's face became immediately exhausted. "No."

"Oh my god, hear me out."

"No."

"Delorme is disappearing tonight. If he realises we're evacuating all three cleanup targets, he runs early. But if one target remains accessible—"

Clorinde stared at me. "You."

"Yes."

"No."

"Visibly protected, obviously."

"No."

"Tracked."

"No."

"Surrounded."

"No."

Navia grabbed my hand. "Shaun."

I turned, and her face wasn't angry. It was scared. That stopped me more effectively than every order in the room combined.

"You're asking us to intentionally let somebody attempt to kidnap you."

"When you say it like that—"

"That is literally what you're saying."

I closed my mouth.

She squeezed my hand. "You told me I get to decide which risks I take."

"Yes."

"And so do you."

"Yes."

"But your decision affects us too."

There. The hard truth, and my own argument again, returned to me with interest. I looked toward Clorinde. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to; her eyes were enough.

I exhaled. "Okay."

Everyone looked surprised.

"I don't like that reaction." I kept going before anybody could enjoy it. "No deliberate kidnapping."

"Thank you," Wriothsley said from the door.

"But—"

Everyone groaned.

"BUT if Delorme contacts me, we don't shut it down automatically."

Neuville considered that, which was progress. "We assess."

"Yes."

"No unilateral response."

"Yes."

"No disappearing. No following mysterious instructions alone."

"Yes. Yes."

"She sounds physically ill," Charlotte whispered.

"I am."

Lyney came back for one more kiss, then murmured against my forehead, "I'm proud of you."

"For compromising?"

"For not volunteering to be kidnapped."

"That bar is insultingly low."

"Yet here we are."

I shoved him lightly. He smiled and left with Lynette, and Wriothesley followed a moment later, and then Neuville began directing officers and everything moved very quickly — orders, routes, protected transport, warrants, names.

Varin stood silently beside the table. I looked at her. “What?”

“You aren’t what Delorme expects.”

I folded my arms. “What does he expect?”

“Someone who needs to be the hero.”

That irritated me, possibly because it was slightly true. “And?”

She looked toward the door where my husband and my boyfriend had disappeared. “Heroes work alone.”

I stared at her, then looked at Clorinde and Navia. Neither of them had let go of me.

“No,” I said, and smiled faintly. “They really don’t.”

Then my communicator buzzed, and everyone stopped.

Unknown sender, of course. I opened it.

One photograph. Élodie Martel, standing outside a tram station. Alive. Timestamp 18:19 — taken three minutes ago.

My stomach dropped. Lyney wasn’t there yet.

Below the image: YOU LIKE SAVING PEOPLE.

Then another message: LET’S SEE HOW MANY.

Navia’s hand tightened around mine. Clorinde came closer. Neuville read over my shoulder.

A third message appeared. An address. Eastern docks. Warehouse 12.

I knew that warehouse. It was my photograph — the one where Vautrin, Roche, Marceau, and Delorme’s reflection had all been standing.

Then: 19:00.

Forty minutes.

And the last one: COME WITH THE RED FILE OR THE GIRL DIES FIRST.

Silence. I stared at the screen.

Élodie. Nineteen. My first client. The girl who had trusted me because I told her evidence could be protected lawfully, because I told her she didn't have to destroy herself to make the truth survive. And Delorme was using her because of me.

My hands started shaking. Clorinde took the communicator out of them — not to control me, but because I was about to drop it.

Navia stepped in front of me. "Look at me."

I did.

"This is what he wants."

"I know."

"He wants you panicking."

"I know."

"He wants you alone."

"I know."

"He wants you to believe you have to choose."

My chest hurt. Lucien. Élodie. Charlotte. Who do you save?

That was the game. It was the same game the Triangle Network had been playing for seventy years. Threaten the family. Split the people. Make everybody believe protecting one person required sacrificing another. Callas had fallen into it. So had René. So had Marceau. So had Varin. Maybe that was how the network had actually survived — not corruption. Isolation.

I looked toward Neuville. "Where's Lyney?"

He checked. "Eight minutes from Élodie's last confirmed location."

"Tell him she's being watched."

"I will."

"Do not tell him to rush."

Neuville paused. That surprised him. "Why?"

"Because that's what Delorme expects."

Clorinde's eyes sharpened. I was thinking now, rather than reacting.

“Photo taken three minutes ago,” I said. “If Delorme’s people already had Élodie, they’d have sent a hostage photograph.”

Navia understood at once. “She isn’t captured yet.”

“Exactly. They’re following her.”

Neuville sent the message.

“Warehouse Twelve?” Clorinde asked.

I looked at the address again. “He wants the red file.”

Navia smiled slightly. “He doesn’t know we no longer need the original.”

Certified copies. Photographs. Neuville had documented everything. Callas’s evidence could survive now without the paper.

I looked at Varin. “Does Delorme know that?”

“No.”

Good. I turned to Neuville. “We give him the file.”

Clorinde stared. “Shaun.”

“Not the evidence.”

Understanding crossed her face. “A decoy?”

“Yes.”

“I like it,” Navia said.

Of course she did.

Neuville considered it. “He will inspect it.”

“Eventually.”

“We need enough time.”

“For Lyney to secure Élodie. For Wriothsley to lock Channel 417. For you to get warrants on Delorme.”

He looked at Varin — her confession, the photograph, Callas’s file, Moreau-Bellacourt, Marceau, Vautrin. Enough?

“Already in progress.”

Good. Forty minutes. And the task wasn’t to choose who lived. It was to coordinate. Network against network. Delorme had seventy years of secrecy; we had something better, which was that every single one of us knew exactly what everyone else was doing.

I smiled. Clorinde recognised it. “This one is different.”

“What?”

“Your expression.”

“Good or bad?”

“Still concerning.”

Fair.

I looked at Navia. “Can the Spina get me a red folder?”

She smiled. “Oh, absolutely.”

Charlotte: “Blank historical shipping records.”

“Done.”

Neuvillette: “Tracking device.”

“Yes.”

Clorinde: “I go with you.” I hesitated, and she stared at me. “Not negotiable.”

“Fine.”

Navia: “Me too.”

“No.”

Her face darkened, and I stepped closer. “Not because I decide your risk.”

“Then why?”

“Because Delorme expects you with the Spina.” She paused. “I need you somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“Poisson.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“Channel 417 connects through it.”

Understanding. “If Delorme runs through the route—”

“He may emerge in Spina territory.”

Navia smiled. Now she liked the plan. “Fine.”

I kissed her. “Stay safe.”

“You first.”

“Can’t promise.”

She stared at me.

“Okay. Fine. Promise.”

“Better.”

Then I looked around the Hall of Deferred Judgments one more time. Names Fontaine had forgotten. Cases left unfinished. People abandoned because the truth had become inconvenient. Lucien's name could have ended up in one of these drawers. It nearly had.

Not anymore.

Delorme thought he was forcing me to choose which person mattered most. He still didn't understand that I wasn't choosing. None of us were.

I took the empty red folder Charlotte handed me.

Thirty-six minutes.

“Let's go save everybody.”

Chapter Fifteen

Warehouse Twelve

Thirty-six minutes sounds like a reasonable amount of time until you need to fabricate a seventy-year-old criminal archive, protect a nineteen-year-old mechanic, secure an underwater prison, shut down an illegal transit network, coordinate three separate organisations, and then walk willingly into a warehouse where somebody was planning to abduct you.

Then thirty-six minutes becomes offensive.

Charlotte was sitting on the floor of the old courthouse archive, rapidly aging blank shipping records with dust.

I stared at her. "What are you doing?"

"Making them look old."

"You are rubbing judicial archive dirt onto paper."

"Yes."

"That feels illegal."

"It is not judicial evidence," Neuville said from the table.

"Yet."

He gave me a look. "Do not say things like that."

Charlotte blew dust off one page. "This is the most fun I've had all week."

"You were nearly murdered today."

"Exactly."

There was something deeply wrong with journalists. I understood it completely.

Clorinde stood beside the table checking the decoy folder — red cover, old documents, several meaningless shipping manifests, three lists of names Charlotte had pulled from publicly available commercial records. Enough authentic-looking material that anybody flipping quickly through it might believe Callas had compiled it, and not enough to damage anyone innocent if it escaped. Neuville slipped a tracking device into the spine, tiny, almost invisible.

I stared at him. “You have those?”

He didn’t look up. “Yes.”

“Since when?”

“Shaun.”

“Just curious.”

Clorinde closed the folder. “Done.”

I took it. She immediately took it back.

“Hey.”

“You are not carrying it until we leave.”

“Why?”

“Because you keep opening things.”

“I do not.”

Charlotte looked up. “You opened the real red file three times after being told not to.”

“That was different.”

Clorinde put the folder under her arm. “No.”

Then my communicator buzzed and everybody stopped. Lyney. I answered immediately.

“Tell me something good.”

His voice was quieter than usual. “Élodie is moving.”

“Safe?”

“Currently.”

Currently. I hated that word. “Where?”

“Heading toward Fleuve Cendre.”

“Alone?”

“No.”

My stomach tightened. “Who?”

“Two men have been following her from the tram station.”

Clorinde came closer, and I put the communicator on speaker.

“Do they know you’re there?” Neuville asked.

“No.”

“Lynette?”

“Behind them.”

Of course.

“How close are you?” I asked.

“Two streets.”

“Do not rush.”

Silence. Then: “Who are you and what have you done with my girlfriend?”

“Fuck off.”

There he was. His tone softened. “I know.”

“Get her somewhere safe.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Her brother too.”

A pause. Too long.

“Lyney.”

“We haven’t located him.”

My stomach dropped. “What?”

“Élodie left home alone.”

“Where is he?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“Did you ask—”

“No contact, remember?”

Right. They were shadowing her. Fuck.

“Find him.”

“I will.”

“Promise.”

“Shaun.”

“Promise.”

A small pause. “Promise.”

The line ended, and I stood there staring at the communicator until Clorinde touched my arm. “He’ll find him.”

“I know.”

I didn’t. But this was apparently what trust felt like. Horrible. I hated it.

Twenty-eight minutes.

Navia left first. Spina di Rosula operatives were already moving quietly through Poisson, watching the old Channel 417 access points without closing them — deliberately, because if Delorme realised we’d sealed every exit he might abandon the route entirely. We wanted him moving. We just wanted to know where.

She stood in front of me before she left. “You have the flare?”

I blinked. “What?”

“The one Neuvillelette gave you yesterday.”

“How do you know about that?”

“Clorinde.”

I turned. My wife looked completely unapologetic. “Yes.”

I pulled the flare out of my bag and Navia inspected it. “Good.”

“I am not twelve.”

“No. Twelve-year-olds often listen better.”

“Rude.”

Then she took my face between her hands, and the humour disappeared. “If something changes, leave.”

“I know.”

“No investigation. No proving anything.”

“I know.”

“No deciding you can buy everybody else time.”

That one caught. She knew me far too well, and I looked away slightly, and she turned my face back. “Shaun.”

“Fine.”

“Say it.”

“I won’t sacrifice myself because I think everybody else matters more.”

Her expression softened. “Good.”

“That was uncomfortably specific.”

“Yes.”

She kissed me once, then again, the second one slower. “For luck.”

“I thought Fontaine didn’t believe in luck.”

“I’m flexible.”

Then she stepped toward Clorinde, and their kiss was different — quiet, familiar. Navia rested her forehead against hers. “Bring her back.”

“I will.”

I folded my arms. “I am standing right here.”

Neither of them acknowledged me. Terrible girlfriends.

Twenty-four minutes.

Wriothesley’s message came next. 417 sealed at Meropide junction. Lucien secure. Don’t do anything stupid.

I typed: Define stupid.

Three dots appeared almost immediately, then disappeared, then appeared again. Finally: I married you. I know better than to waste time defining it.

I laughed out loud, and Clorinde looked over. “Wriothesley?”

“Yes.”

“How angry?”

“Affectionately.”

“That is not a measurement.”

“Seven.”

“Out of?”

“Wriothesley.”

Fair.

I typed: Love you too. Stay alive.

That's my line, he wrote back. Then: I love you.

My chest tightened. Not fear, exactly. Weight. Everybody was somewhere tonight because of this case. Because of me.

No. Not because of me. Because of Delorme.

That distinction mattered, and I repeated it to myself deliberately, because people like Delorme survived by convincing everybody else that they were responsible for the violence done to them.

Not today.

Nineteen minutes.

Neuvillette was receiving warrant confirmations when Varin approached me. I still disliked her; that hadn't improved. She stopped several feet away.

"You should remove your necklace."

I frowned. "What?"

She pointed at the small gold chain. "Delorme notices details. He may search you."

Clorinde's entire expression changed. "He won't."

Varin looked toward her. "If his intention is abduction, assume physical search."

"No." The word came out of Clorinde so coldly that even Charlotte stopped moving.

Varin didn't react. "I am telling you what he does."

I touched the chain. It had no tracker in it, nothing important at all. But the idea of Delorme putting his hands on me made my skin crawl, so I took it off and held it out. Clorinde opened her palm, and I placed it there, and she closed her fingers around it.

"You get that back."

I smiled faintly. "I was hoping."

"No communicator visible," Varin continued.

"I know."

"No weapon."

"I don't carry one."

"Good."

"Are you finished?"

"No."

Of course not.

"If Delorme believes you are frightened, he will become overconfident."

"I can act frightened."

She studied me. "You are frightened."

Rude. Correct. "Yes."

"Then use the truth. Don't perform."

That surprised me. He had Élodie followed. He'd threatened Lucien. He knew every relationship in my life. Yes, I was scared — I just had to let him think fear meant obedience.

Varin nodded once. There was something deeply unsettling about receiving criminal strategy from a former Director, and I hated how useful it was.

Then she said, "And do not insult him."

I stared at her. Charlotte immediately started laughing. Clorinde covered her mouth. Neuville closed his eyes.

"What?"

"You provoke people when you are frightened," Varin said.

"No, I don't."

Everyone in the room said, "Yes."

I looked around at all of them. "This has become a hostile work environment."

Varin's mouth moved slightly. "Delorme's ego is unusually fragile."

I thought about the courtroom. His stiff answers. His irritation when I proved the production loads had never been reduced. Oh.

"I pissed him off."

"Yes."

"Professionally."

"Yes."

"He already hated me before the cold case."

"Very likely."

I smiled, and Varin said immediately, "Do not look pleased."

"I'm not."

"You are."

Fine.

Twelve minutes.

Lyney called again, and this time I answered before the first full ring. "Lyney?"

"We have Élodie."

My knees almost went. "Safe?"

"Yes."

I closed my eyes. "Thank god."

Clorinde squeezed my shoulder. "What happened?"

"Lynette intercepted one follower. I intercepted the other."

"How?"

A pause. "Gently."

Lynette's voice came faintly through the line. "No."

I smiled despite everything. "Are they alive?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Then Élodie's voice, suddenly, much too close to the communicator. "Shaun?"

I froze. "Élodie?"

"What the hell is happening?"

There she was. Angry, confused, alive. Beautiful.

"Long story."

"Two people were following me!"

"I know."

"Your boyfriend dropped out of a roof."

I stared at the communicator. Lyney said, "It was a balcony."

"IT WAS THREE STORIES," Élodie shouted.

I closed my eyes. "Lyney."

“Darling.”

“We’ll discuss that later.”

“Looking forward to it.”

I made myself focus. “Élodie, listen to me. Do you have the copied maintenance records from Martel Engineering?”

A pause. “Yes.”

Neuvillette looked toward me. Good.

“Where?”

“I gave them to my brother.”

Fuck. “Where is he?”

Another pause. “I thought he was at school.”

My stomach dropped. “It’s evening.”

“He had an after-school mechanics club.”

“Did he go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Élodie.”

Her voice changed. “What?”

“Lyney is going to take you somewhere safe.”

“No.”

“Élodie.”

“My brother—”

“We are finding him.”

“I’m going with you.”

“No.”

“You’re my lawyer, not my mother.”

That was an excellent legal distinction. Still no. “You are currently a target in an organised criminal conspiracy.”

Silence. Then: “What?”

“Longer story.”

“SHAUN.”

“We’ll explain somewhere safe.”

“I’m finding Antoine.”

Antoine. The brother’s name. Good.

“Lyney?”

“Yes?”

“Find Antoine.”

“I already sent Lynette.”

Of course he had.

“I’m coming,” Élodie said.

“No,” Lyney replied, perfectly calm.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Shaun’s boyfriend.”

Silence. Then: “She has a HUSBAND.”

I closed my eyes. Not now.

Lyney sounded delighted. “Yes.”

“And a wife,” Charlotte called from across the room.

I stared at her. Élodie went completely silent. Then: “WHAT?”

“We do not have time for my relationship chart!” Navia would have loved every second of this.

Lyney laughed. “I’ll keep her safe.”

“You’d better.”

“Always.” Then his voice lowered, and something in it made me listen properly. “Shaun.”

“Yes?”

“Same.”

I understood. Stay safe. Come back. “I will.”

Five minutes.

Neuville stopped in front of me. The operation was set: three external teams around Warehouse Twelve, none close enough to be obvious; Clorinde entering with me but staying out of sight until contact was established; Neuville coordinating outside; Varin secured here with Charlotte; Maison Gardiennage units held beyond the dock district. No obvious siege. No large force that might make Delorme abandon the meeting. The fake red file sat in my satchel with the tracker live.

I looked at Neuville. “You look worried.”

“I am.”

That honesty still surprised me sometimes. “About the operation?”

“Yes.”

“About me?”

A pause. “Yes.”

I smiled slightly. “Wriothsley’s rubbing off on you.”

“He would undoubtedly make an inappropriate comment regarding that phrasing.”

I stared at him. He remained completely straight-faced.

“Oh my god.”

Clorinde looked between us. “What?”

“Nothing.” Neuville had already walked away.

“He’s learning humour,” I whispered.

Clorinde looked genuinely concerned. “Wriothsley must be stopped.”

I laughed, and it helped. Exactly enough.

Warehouse Twelve looked smaller in person, maybe because the first time I photographed it, it had only been background. Industrial brick, tall windows, rusting loading doors, a narrow water channel running behind it, one side facing the old dock cranes. Normal. Boring. The kind of place you could walk past a hundred times without ever wondering whether three generations of corruption had been holding meetings inside.

I checked the time. 18:58.

Clorinde stood in the shadow of the adjacent building. I couldn’t see her unless I deliberately looked, which was the point. I touched my satchel. Red folder. Nothing else.

18:59.

I walked toward the warehouse. The door was already open, of course, and I stepped inside into dark — not complete dark, because several industrial lamps were still burning, enough to illuminate a path toward the middle of the floor. I hated obvious staging.

“Delorme?”

My voice echoed. No answer.

I moved farther in. One step. Two. Three.

The door closed behind me and my whole body tensed. Do not turn around quickly. Fear means obedience. Let him think that.

I turned slowly. Nobody.

Then a voice from the upper platform. “You came.”

Adrien Delorme stepped into the light. The same man from court — same controlled posture, same expensive coat. Except there was no witness stand now, no judge, no respectable industrial-director mask. Just him.

I looked up. “You threatened my client.”

“Which one?”

I hated him instantly. “Élodie.”

“Ah.” He came down the metal stairs, slowly. “You have so many now.”

“Lucien Armand isn’t yours to touch either.”

His expression shifted. “You reopened that.”

“Neuville did.”

“Because of you.” He stopped several meters away. “You really don’t understand when to leave things alone.”

“That seems to be a recurring criticism.”

His eyes went to my satchel. “The file.”

“You first.”

He laughed. “This isn’t court, Advocate Martin.”

“Still prefer evidence before performance.”

His smile faltered slightly. Varin had been right. Fragile ego. Do not poke.

I swallowed the next sentence. Growth.

“Élodie is alive,” he said.

“I know.”

That caught him — tiny, but there. Good.

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

He studied me, and I watched him work out what it meant. So the photo had been surveillance, not capture. Our assumption, confirmed.

“Then why come?”

“Because you also threatened Lucien.”

“He’s underwater inside the most secure prison in Fontaine.”

“Exactly.”

Delorme smiled. “Security is mostly confidence reinforced by walls.”

My stomach tightened. “Channel 417.”

His eyes changed. There. He hadn’t expected me to know the number.

“Interesting.”

“Callas kept excellent notes.”

His smile disappeared, and I realised half a second too late that I’d just confirmed the real file existed. Except he’d already believed that. Fine. Keep going.

“You brought it?”

I opened the satchel and removed the red folder, and held it. He didn’t approach immediately. Smart.

“Open it.”

“No.”

“Shaun.”

First name. I hated that. “I don’t remember giving you permission.”

His eyes hardened. Damn it. Provoking. Varin would be furious.

“Open it.”

I did, slowly. Old-looking pages. Shipping records. Names. Callas’s handwriting replicated only from the small public samples Charlotte had legally copied. Nothing substantive.

Delorme moved closer. Three meters. Two. He reached, and I closed it.

His eyes lifted.
“Lucien,” I said.
“What about him?”
“You call off the cleanup order.”
Silence. Then: “Solène told you.”
I didn’t react.
He smiled. “Of course she did.”
“You knew she flipped?”
“She was always weak.”
“She ran your network.”
“She preserved it.”
“Same thing.”
“No.” He came closer. “Running something requires vision.”
There it was. Director ego.
“You think you improved it.”
“I modernised it.”
I wanted to vomit. “How?”
“Why would I tell you?”
“Because you’ve already decided I’m leaving with you.”
He stopped. Good. His eyes changed — I had named it out loud,
and he liked that.
“You’re very perceptive.”
“Occupational hazard.”
“You’ve built something remarkable without realising it.”
I knew exactly what he meant. My relationships. My network.
“People aren’t assets.”
“Everyone is an asset.”
“No.”
“That is why you lose.”
I almost laughed. “You’re standing in an abandoned warehouse
bargaining for fake papers because a nineteen-year-old apprentice
ruined your records.”
His face changed. Too far. Also satisfying.

His hand moved — not to a weapon, to a communicator. He pressed once, a side door opened, and two men came through it. Armed.

I stayed absolutely still. Clorinde. Not yet.

Delorme took another step. “Give me the file.”

I held it out. He took it, and the tracker left my hand. Good. Objective one.

He flipped the pages. Fast. His brow furrowed.

Too fast.

“These are wrong.”

I widened my eyes, not too much. Use the real fear. “What?”

“This shipment never passed Poisson.”

I looked at the page like I didn’t understand it. “I didn’t write it.”

He stared, then turned to another page. “This name wasn’t alive in that year.”

Charlotte. I was going to murder her historical accuracy later.

He looked up at me. “You brought me garbage.”

I said nothing. Do not deny too quickly.

His face changed completely, the mask gone. “You thought you could bait me.” He stepped closer. “Where is the real file?”

“I don’t know.”

His hand caught my arm, hard. Every part of me wanted to jerk away, and I didn’t. Clorinde. Wait.

“You opened it.”

“I saw copies.”

“Where?”

“No.”

His fingers tightened and pain shot up my arm. I breathed through it.

“Where?”

“No.”

One of the armed men moved toward the front entrance, checking. Maybe he’d sensed something. Fuck.

Delorme leaned closer. “Your husband cannot protect you here.”

I looked him directly in the eyes. “That’s where you keep making your mistake.”

He frowned.

“I didn’t come here because Wriothesley protects me.”

Movement behind him. Barely visible. Purple.

I smiled. “I came because my wife does.”

Delorme turned. Too late.

Clorinde hit his wrist and his grip vanished. I dropped. One gun came up, a shot cracked — not toward me — and Clorinde moved before I understood what she was doing. The gunman’s arm jerked and the weapon hit the floor. The second man turned, and Lyney dropped from the upper platform.

I stared. “WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

He landed between two crates. “Hello, darling.”

“YOU WERE WITH ÉLODIE.”

“She’s safe.”

The second gunman aimed; a playing card flashed; he shouted and dropped the weapon, and Lynette appeared behind him. Of course.

“You found Antoine?” I yelled.

“Not yet,” Lyney said.

“THEN WHY ARE YOU HERE?”

“Lynette found his trail leading here.”

Everything inside me stopped.

“What?”

Delorme moved, and Clorinde slammed him against the railing. “Stay.”

He actually laughed. “Too late.”

Then an alarm sounded — low, industrial, mechanical — and the floor beneath us vibrated.

Lyney’s face changed. “What is that?”

Delorme smiled. “Transit.”

Oh no. The water channel behind the warehouse.

Neuvillette's voice came through the concealed receiver in Clorinde's collar. "Shaun. Exit immediately."

I looked toward the side doors just as the heavy metal shutters slammed down. One. Two. Three. The warehouse sealed.

"Delorme!"

He laughed. "You thought I came here to leave? This warehouse is a transfer point."

Lyney was already moving toward the cargo platforms. He pulled a tarp aside, and beneath it was an open shaft, water moving fast, and attached to the old loading mechanism, a transport capsule.

Large enough for people.

Channel 417. Delorme hadn't planned to abduct me by carriage at all. He'd planned to take me underwater, invisible, straight through Fontaine.

Clorinde shoved him against the railing. "Open the doors."

He smiled. "No."

Her grip tightened. "Open them."

"You should ask your girlfriend."

I froze. "What?"

His eyes came to me. "She has the key."

"I have nothing."

"The device. Martel's copy."

Élodie's storage device. "No."

"She gave it to her brother."

My blood went cold. He knew. "How?"

"He told us."

Everything stopped. Lyney went pale. "Antoine."

Delorme laughed. "He wanted to help his sister."

My heart started pounding so hard it hurt. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing."

"Where is he?"

No answer.

“WHERE IS HE?”

He looked toward the water shaft.

I ran to it. Clorinde shouted my name. Inside the transport capsule, somebody moved — small, bound wrists, dark hair.

A boy. Fourteen years old. Alive. His eyes found mine through the small window, and he was terrified.

“LYNEY.”

He was already there. The capsule began descending.

“No!” I grabbed the outer handle, and Clorinde caught me around the waist before I went with it. “Shaun!”

“HE’S IN THERE.”

“I know.”

The capsule dropped another meter. Lyney grabbed the release lever. Locked. Lynette was already at the control panel. “Manual override.”

“Where?”

“Below.”

Freminet. We needed Freminet.

Neuville’s voice came through again. “Status.”

“Hostage in Channel 417 transport,” Clorinde shouted. “Minor.”

Silence. Then: “Identity?”

“Antoine Martel.”

My throat closed.

Delorme smiled. “Now you understand.”

I turned on him. “You son of a bitch.” There went Varin’s advice. Worth it.

“You can’t shut the route,” he said. “Not without killing him.”

Wriothesley. The Meropide junction. He’d sealed it. If the capsule reached that seal—

I grabbed my communicator. “WRIOTHESLEY.”

He answered instantly. “Shaun?”

“OPEN 417.”

Silence. "What?"
"OPEN IT NOW."
"Why?"
"Antoine Martel is inside a transport capsule."
His voice changed completely. "Where?"
"Warehouse Twelve, entering the channel."
"Direction?"
I looked at Lynette. She checked. "Southwest."
"Toward Poisson," Lyney said.
Not Meropide. Relief, some of it.
"Wriothesley, keep your junction closed."
"Are you safe?"
"Yes."
"No," Clorinde said.
I glared at her.
"What happened?" Wriothesley demanded.
"Later!"
He hated that. Good.
I turned toward Delorme. "You're done."
He smiled. "Not if you want the boy alive."
"Do not negotiate," Neuville said through the receiver.
Delorme laughed. "Your Chief Justice is remarkably confident for somebody who doesn't understand the system."
I stepped closer. "What do you want?"
"Me."
"No," said Clorinde.
"No," said Lyney.
"No," said Neuville through the comm.
Delorme ignored all of them. "You enter the second capsule."
I looked. Another transport pod sat behind the first.
"You and the real file."
"I don't have the real file."
"Then tell them to bring it."

"The real file is evidence."
"The boy is breathing."
My hands shook. Fuck.
Then Navia's voice came through the communicator. "Shaun."
Poisson. She was there.
I grabbed it. "Navia."
"I have the Channel 417 outlet."
My chest loosened slightly. "Can you intercept Antoine?"
"Freminet is with me."
I froze. "What?"
"He came after Wriothesley locked Meropide."
Of course he did. Beautiful boy.
Then Freminet's voice: "I can enter the channel from here."
"No." The word came from Lyney beside me, immediate. Brother.
"No."
"I can reach the capsule," Freminet said calmly.
"You don't know the pressure."
"I do."
"Freminet."
"I know this system better than anyone there."
Lyney's face twisted, because he knew it was true. He looked at me. I looked at him.
Trust was horrible. Remember?
Yes.
I spoke into the communicator. "Freminet."
"Yes?"
"Can you do it?"
A pause. "Yes."
Not bravado. Freminet. If he said yes, I believed him.
"Do it."
Lyney closed his eyes, and pain crossed his face. But he didn't stop me.
Delorme's smile faded slightly. "What are you doing?"

I looked at him. “Not choosing.”

His eyes narrowed.

“You want me. You want the file. You want Antoine as leverage.” I stepped toward him. “You built your whole network around making people believe one life has to be traded for another.”

Clorinde came to my side. Lyney took the other. Lynette moved in behind Delorme.

I smiled. “We stopped playing that game.”

His expression hardened. And then the warehouse lights cut out.

Darkness. Somebody moved. A gunshot. Clorinde shoved me down. Glass exploded somewhere above us, Lyney shouted, another shot, and then the emergency lights flickered on, red and low.

Delorme was gone.

“What?”

Lynette ran toward the shaft. “He jumped.”

Into Channel 417. Fuck.

The second capsule was already moving. Empty? No — a figure had disappeared inside it. Delorme. And he had taken the fake file.

The tracker. Good.

“LET HIM GO,” Neuville ordered.

Clorinde stopped. Lyney did too. The second capsule descended, carrying Delorme out through the channel, and we knew exactly where he was going.

For once.

I looked at the tracker receiver. Moving. Southwest. Toward Poisson. Toward Navia. Toward Freminet. Toward an entire Spina operation he did not know existed.

I started laughing.

Lyney looked at me like I had finally lost it. “Darling?”

“He took the fake.”

“Yes.”

“The tracker is still inside.”

His expression changed, and then he smiled. “Oh.”

Clorinde understood. "So we know his route."

"Yes."

"Do not follow," Neuville said.

"Wasn't going to."

Everyone paused. Clorinde stared. Lyney stared. Neuville actually said, "Thank you."

I rolled my eyes.

Then Navia's voice erupted through the communicator. "WE HAVE ANTOINE."

Everything stopped. My knees nearly gave out. "What?"

"Freminet got him."

In the background I could hear coughing, a boy crying, Freminet breathing hard.

Lyney grabbed my communicator. "FREMINET"

"I'm okay."

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Are you SURE?"

"Yes."

Lyney closed his eyes. The relief on his face hurt to look at.

I took the communicator back. "Antoine?"

A shaky voice. "Shaun?"

Oh, god. "Hey."

"I'm sorry."

My heart broke. "No."

"I thought I could get the drive back."

"No, baby. Listen to me." Clorinde looked at me; I hadn't even realised what I'd called him. "You have nothing to apologise for."

"They said my sister would go to prison if—"

"They lied."

"I gave them the device."

"It's okay."

"But—"

“It’s okay.”

He started crying. Élodie’s brother. Fourteen years old. Trying to protect her, exactly like everybody else in this entire case. People manipulated through love.

“No more protecting everybody by yourself, okay?”

Silence. Then: “Okay.”

I swallowed. “Good.”

“Shaun?”

“Yes?”

“Élodie’s going to kill me.”

I laughed so hard that the relief turned into tears. “Yes.”

He sniffed. “Can you stop her?”

“No.”

In the background, Navia laughed. So did Freminet. Good. Alive, all of them.

Then Lyney’s communicator buzzed. Élodie. He answered, and her scream came through immediately. “YOU FOUND HIM?”

“Yes.”

She started crying so loudly that he had to pull the communicator away from his ear, and I covered my mouth.

There. One person saved. Not chosen. Saved.

I closed my eyes and let myself feel it for about half a second.

Then Lynette said, “Tracker stopped.”

My eyes opened. “What?”

She looked at the receiver. Delorme’s signal, stationary, somewhere in Channel 417 halfway between Warehouse Twelve and Poisson.

“Did the capsule stop?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Coordinates?” Neuville said through the comms. Lynette gave them, and there was a silence on the other end.

Then Freminet, still on the line: “That isn’t a transfer station.”

My stomach tightened. “What is it?”

A pause. “Nothing.”

“Freminet.”

“There’s no official structure there.”

Official. I had come to hate that word.

I looked toward the dark water shaft. “If Delorme stopped there —”

“There is something unofficial,” Lyney finished.

A hidden station. Maybe network headquarters. Maybe an archive. Maybe an exit.

“No one enters the channel until engineering secures it,” Neuville ordered.

Reasonable. This time I didn’t argue, because we had Delorme tracked, Antoine safe, Élodie safe, Lucien protected, Charlotte secure — and for the first time in this entire case, Delorme didn’t know we’d found his destination.

Then the tracker began moving again.

Not toward Poisson. Not toward Fleuve Cendre. A new direction entirely.

On the other end of the line, Freminet was looking at the map on Navia’s side.

“What?” I asked.

He didn’t answer immediately.

“Freminet.”

His voice became uneasy. “There shouldn’t be a channel there.”

“Where?”

“Up.”

I frowned. “What does that mean?”

“The capsule is ascending.”

“Toward the surface?” Neuville asked.

“No.” Freminet sounded genuinely confused. “It’s rising inside the central hydraulic tower.”

My stomach dropped. The central hydraulic tower. I knew it. Everybody in Fontaine knew it — an old municipal structure

connected to—

I looked at Clorinde, and she understood.

“The Palais.”

“Under it,” Freminet corrected.

Silence. Neuvillelette went completely still on the other end of the line.

“What is beneath the Palais?” I asked.

Nobody answered.

“Neuvillelette.”

A pause. Then: “The original judicial evidence vault.”

My blood ran cold. Old Court records. Sealed cases. Evidence. Everything Varin might once have controlled. Everything Callas couldn’t safely file. Everything the Triangle Network could have manipulated across seventy years.

Delorme wasn’t escaping Fontaine at all. He was going to the place where the network had buried its history.

And maybe to destroy all of it.

Neuvillelette’s voice changed. Not boyfriend. Not friend. Not the exhausted man who tolerated my chaos over dinner.

Chief Justice.

“Seal the Palais.”

I looked at Clorinde. Then Lyney. Warehouse Twelve around us — broken glass, empty capsules, red emergency light — and Delorme’s tracker climbing steadily toward the foundations of Fontaine’s justice system.

I smiled slowly.

Lyney saw it. “Oh no.”

“What?”

“That expression.”

Clorinde sighed. “Here we go.”

I picked up my coat. “Delorme wanted the red file.”

“Yes,” Lyney said.

I looked at the tracking signal.

“He just took us to the rest of the library.”

Chapter Sixteen

The Vault Beneath the Court

There are very few circumstances in which watching the Chief Justice of Fontaine become genuinely angry is comforting. This was apparently one of them.

By the time we reached the Palais Mermonia, every public entrance had already been closed. Not dramatically — no bells, no announcement, no guards shouting for evacuation. That would have warned Delorme. Instead officials quietly redirected visitors, staff were told there had been a hydraulic maintenance problem, and judicial hearings ended early enough that several confused clerks left carrying briefcases and complaining about scheduling. Nobody looking at the building would have guessed that somewhere beneath their feet, Adrien Delorme was currently travelling through an illegal seventy-year-old smuggling route directly toward Fontaine’s original judicial evidence vault.

I stood inside a restricted corridor with Clorinde on my left and Lyney on my right. Lynette had vanished again; I had stopped asking where. Neuville approached carrying an old ring of keys. Actual keys — iron, heavy, ancient-looking, nothing like the modern access mechanisms the rest of the Palais used.

I stared at them. “You have dungeon keys.”

“They are archive keys.”

"They look like dungeon keys."

"They predate the current Palais."

"Exactly."

Clorinde touched my back. "Focus."

"I am focused."

"She is coping," Lyney whispered, and I looked at him, and he smiled. Asshole.

Neuvillette stopped in front of a narrow stone staircase. "The original evidence vault was constructed below the former courthouse before the Palais expanded over it."

"How many people know it exists?"

"Currently, very few."

"And historically?"

"Chief judicial officers. Registrars. Evidence custodians."

"Solène Varin."

"Yes."

"Laurent Serrat."

His face hardened. "Yes." The current Deputy Archivist — the man Varin had identified as the Justice representative of the Triangle Network.

I looked down the staircase. "And Delorme knows."

"Most likely. Serrat told him."

I exhaled. "Great."

Neuvillette put the first key into the gate, and it turned, and then he stopped.

"What?"

He pointed. The lock had been scratched. Freshly. Somebody had opened it recently.

Lyney crouched to look. "Not forced."

"No," Neuvillette said.

"Proper key?"

"Likely."

Serrat. I looked at Neuville. He didn't say anything, and he didn't need to — somebody he had trusted with Fontaine's judicial records had just opened a secret vault for the head of a criminal network.

We descended.

The air grew colder as we went, and old paper had its own smell — dust, leather, ink, dry cloth, time — that got stronger the deeper we walked. Then something else joined it. Smoke.

Clorinde stopped first. "Do you smell that?"

"Yes."

Lyney's expression changed, and Neuville moved faster.

"Fire."

My stomach dropped. "No."

We reached the bottom landing. A steel door stood open, and beyond it, orange light. Smoke drifted through the corridor.

"They're burning it."

I moved before I'd decided to, and Clorinde grabbed my coat. "Together." Right. Together. We went in.

The original judicial evidence vault was enormous — much larger than I'd expected, rows of shelving disappearing into darkness, wooden cabinets, metal evidence boxes, ledgers, sealed trunks, old meka storage, entire generations of Fontaine's legal history. And at the far end, flames. Not uncontrolled, not yet. Somebody had dragged records into a shallow archival disposal furnace built into the stone wall and was feeding it, one box after another.

Laurent Serrat stood beside it. I recognised him from the Palais — I'd passed him before, several times, a quiet man in his early fifties with spectacles and a grey suit, the sort of person nobody notices because his entire career has been built around organising other people's records. He was throwing documents into the fire.

I felt sick.

“Laurent,” Neuville said, and his voice carried across the whole vault.

Serrat froze, then turned slowly. His face went white. “Chief Justice.” The title sounded pathetic in his mouth.

Neuville walked forward, no rush, no raised voice, which was somehow worse. “Step away from the furnace.”

Serrat’s eyes flicked toward a corridor behind him. Clorinde saw it. “Don’t.” He stopped.

“Delorme isn’t here,” Lyney whispered. No — the tracker. I pulled the receiver out of my bag. Signal still moving, still going deeper.

“There.” I pointed toward the back of the vault. “He kept going.”

Neuville looked at Clorinde. “Take Shaun and Lyney.”

Serrat laughed, suddenly, not because anything was funny. Panic. “It’s too late.”

Everyone stopped. “For what?” Neuville asked.

“You think those records matter?” He gestured at the burning pile. “They’re copies.”

My stomach dropped again. “Copies of what?”

He smiled weakly. “The network never kept its history where judges could find it.”

I stepped toward him. “Then why burn them?”

His smile disappeared. Good question.

Neuville answered for him. “Because these are the records proving judicial interference.” Serrat looked away. There it was — individual cases, falsified warrants, disappearing evidence, witness transfers, maybe decades of innocent people.

“Get the fire out,” I said.

“I am aware,” Neuville said.

“Sorry.” Palais personnel were already coming in behind us with suppression equipment. Good. I looked at the tracker. Delorme kept moving.

“Go,” Neuville said, and I didn’t need telling twice. For once.

The vault had levels, because apparently even a secret underground archive required a basement. We followed the tracker through narrow aisles until the signal dipped sharply, and Lyney found the stairs first.

“How?” I asked.

“I look for entrances people don’t want found.”

“Normal profession.”

“Thank you.”

“That was sarcasm.”

“I accept praise in all forms.”

Clorinde went first, and I stayed behind her, like I’d promised. Mostly.

The lower vault looked different — newer, which worried me. Electric lighting. Recent locks. Modern shelving mixed in with old stone.

“This isn’t abandoned,” I whispered.

“No,” Clorinde said.

Lyney touched one cabinet. “No dust.” My stomach sank. The Triangle Network hadn’t simply inherited an old hiding place; they were still maintaining it, beneath the Palais, right now.

Footsteps ahead. We stopped. Then a metal door slammed somewhere, and the tracker moved fast.

“He knows we’re following.”

“He may have found the tracker,” Lyney said.

“No.” The signal kept moving. “If he found it, he’d dump the folder.”

Clorinde nodded slowly. “So he’s carrying it deliberately.”

My stomach tightened. “Leading us.”

“Possibly.”

I groaned. “I hate when criminals develop strategy.”

“Very inconsiderate,” Lyney agreed.

We kept going, and the corridor opened into a chamber, and everything changed. Records covered the walls — not judicial

evidence, network records. Photographs. Maps. Financial accounts. Shipping manifests. Identity documents. Lists. Dozens of black triangles stamped across folders. A hidden archive. The rest of the library.

I stopped walking. "Oh my god."

Lyney stopped beside me. "That is—"

"Seventy years. Maybe more."

Clorinde looked around. "Don't touch anything."

I stared at her. "I wasn't going to."

She gave me a look.

"Fine."

I pulled out my Kamera instead. Clorinde immediately said, "Shaun."

"Photography is non-contact documentation." A pause. She had no argument. "Thank you."

I started taking wide photographs — shelves, labels, room position, not individual document contents, just preserving what existed in case somebody tried to destroy it. My photography finally doing exactly what it had always done best. Witnessing.

Lyney watched me. "You're smiling."

"This is my job."

"Which one?"

I paused. Lawyer. Photographer. Journalist. All of them suddenly intersecting. "Yes."

He laughed softly, and then his expression changed. "Movement."

Clorinde raised her weapon. A shadow passed behind the far shelving. "Delorme!" No answer. I checked the tracker — ten meters, maybe less.

Then a voice. "You really cannot leave anything alone."

Delorme stepped from behind the shelf, the red folder in one hand and a gun in the other. Great. I was tired of guns.

Clorinde moved immediately in front of me. Delorme smiled. "There she is."

“Put it down,” Clorinde said.

“Which?” He lifted the gun slightly. Her expression became lethal, and he lowered it, slightly. “Still humourless.”

I almost said something. Varin’s voice appeared in my head — do not insult him — and I bit my tongue. Lyney saw and looked, briefly, impressed. Growth.

Delorme held up the folder. “You wasted my time.”

“You kidnapped a fourteen-year-old.”

“He volunteered.”

“He is FOURTEEN.”

“He chose.”

“That is not how coercion works.”

Delorme rolled his eyes, that casual dismissal landing like a slap, and something in me went colder.

“You know what your problem is?”

“Shaun,” Clorinde whispered.

“I know.”

“Please,” Delorme said.

“You keep mistaking desperation for consent.” His expression shifted. Good. “René signed a false statement because you threatened his family.”

“I didn’t.”

“Your network did. Callas stopped because Navia was threatened.”

“He made a choice.”

“Marceau altered evidence because his son was threatened.”

“A choice.”

“Moreau-Bellacourt gave his father system access.”

“A choice.”

“Antoine handed over Élodie’s device because you told a child his sister would go to prison.”

“A choice.”

I stared at him. “No.” The room went very quiet. “You manufacture impossible choices and then blame people for picking one.” Delorme stopped smiling. “That isn’t power. It’s cowardice with paperwork.”

Lyney closed his eyes, and I heard the tiniest sound that might have been laughter. Worth it.

Delorme lifted the gun. Clorinde’s weapon came up at the same instant. “Enough.” There it was — ego cracked. I probably should have listened to Varin. Still worth it.

“Drop your weapon,” Clorinde said.

He gestured toward the shelves instead. “Do you know what is in this room?”

“Yes,” I said.

“No.” His eyes stayed on mine. “People. Not paper. Lives.”

I almost laughed. “That sounds rich coming from you.”

“These records contain identities people built after leaving the network.”

Lyney’s face changed. “House children?”

“Some.”

Oh, fuck.

“Protected witnesses,” Delorme continued. My stomach dropped. “Former smugglers.” Clorinde’s expression tightened. “Officials who cooperated. Families.”

I suddenly understood exactly why he had come here. Not just destruction. Leverage. The archive held enough private information to destroy people who had already escaped the network.

“If you seize this room,” he said, “you expose them.”

“No.”

“You think the Court can keep a secret?”

I nearly glanced back toward where Neuville had stayed. “That seems ironic from you.”

“Your Chief Justice has already employed a Director for twenty-eight years.” That landed. He knew it. I hated him for enjoying it.

“Solène hid herself under his nose.”

“Yes.”

“And Laurent.”

“Yes.”

“And how many others?”

I didn’t answer, because we didn’t know.

He smiled. “You cannot trust the institution you’re giving these records to.”

“Maybe not blindly. But I trust specific people. Relationships.”

“Those make you vulnerable.”

“You really don’t listen.” I glanced toward Lyney, then Clorinde. “My relationships are the only reason you’re losing.”

His jaw tightened. Good.

Then a sound came from behind him — soft, metal — and he turned. Too late. Lynette stepped out from behind the shelving.

“How long have you been there?” I whispered. She ignored me, of course, and held up Delorme’s dropped magazine. He looked at his gun, then at her — she’d removed the ammunition somehow. I stared. Lyney smiled proudly. “That’s my sister.”

Delorme pulled the trigger anyway. Click.

Clorinde crossed the distance fast, twisted his wrist, and the gun hit the floor. He swung; she blocked; Lyney moved in. Delorme shoved a shelf, and Clorinde shouted, “MOVE,” as the entire metal unit tipped. I jumped backward, and Lyney grabbed my coat and pulled me clear as boxes crashed and paper erupted everywhere.

Delorme ran. “Fuck!” Clorinde chased. I started after her, and Lyney grabbed my waist. “No.” “I KNOW.” That was new — I actually stopped myself. Mostly. Lynette disappeared after Clorinde, and Lyney looked genuinely surprised.

“You actually stopped.”

“Do not ruin the moment.”

We followed at a responsible speed. Mostly.

We found Delorme at the end of the lower vault. It looked like a dead end, except it wasn't — a circular hydraulic door sat in the wall. Channel 417, again. He was entering an access code.

Clorinde stood ten meters behind him. "Step away." He kept typing. "Delorme." Nothing. Lynette held the other flank.

He entered the final number, and the door began opening, water thundering behind it. He smiled. "That's the difference between you and me."

"No one asked," I said.

He looked at me. Apparently I hadn't grown that much. "I know when to leave." Then he stepped backward toward the opening and pulled something from his coat — not a weapon, a small switch, red.

Oh no.

"DOWN!" Lyney shouted. Delorme pressed it. Nothing happened. We all froze. He stared at the device and pressed it again. Nothing.

A voice came from the corridor behind us. "I disabled it."

Freminet. Everyone turned. He stood beside Wriothlesley — wet hair, exhausted, holding a hydraulic control module.

Lyney stared. "Freminet?"

Freminet gave a tiny wave. "Hi."

"What are you doing HERE?"

"Saving your asses, apparently," Wriothlesley said.

I nearly laughed from sheer relief. Delorme's face changed; his escape route had stopped opening halfway, water pouring beyond the barrier but not enough for the capsule mechanism.

Wriothlesley walked forward slowly. The Duke. His eyes settled on Delorme. "You used my prison." Another step. "You corrupted my staff." Another. "You flooded my mines." Another. "You threatened one of my prisoners." Delorme's eyes flicked toward me. Mistake. Wriothlesley noticed. "And you put your hands on my wife."

Oh. "Wriothlesley," I whispered.

"Not now."

His voice was terrifyingly calm. Lyney leaned toward me. "I would listen." "Yes."

Wriothlesley stopped several meters away. "Step away from the gate."

Delorme laughed, nervous now. "You think you frighten me?"

"No." Wriothlesley smiled. "I know I do."

I had never loved him more. Possibly inappropriate timing.

Delorme looked toward the open water, then Clorinde, then Wriothlesley, then Lyney, Lynette, Freminet, me. Nowhere. His face changed with the realisation. He wasn't escaping. Not this time.

"You don't understand what happens if the network collapses."

"Then explain it under oath," Neuville said, from behind us. Everyone turned; he'd walked into the lower vault with several officers, and behind them, Solène Varin, restrained, and Charlotte.

Why was Charlotte here? I stared at her. "WHY ARE YOU HERE?"

She lifted her notebook. "I was escorted."

"That doesn't answer me."

"She was already at the Palais," Neuville said.

"That also does not answer me."

Charlotte smiled. "I have press credentials." I was going to fight her later.

Delorme stared at Varin, his face twisting. "You."

"Yes."

"You destroyed everything."

"No." Her voice was calm. "You did."

He laughed. "You think confession cleans your hands?"

"No."

That silenced him. "I expect prison," Varin said.

Wriothlesley looked at her. "I can arrange that."

She inclined her head. "I assumed."

Delorme looked around, then at me. "You think you won?"

I hated that sentence. Villains never said it before good news. “No.” I answered honestly. “I think we found you.” His expression shifted. “And I think Lucien is still in prison.” Another. “René is still dead.” Another. “Callas is still dead.” Navia wasn’t here — thank god. “Élodie is still traumatised.” I thought of Antoine. “And a fourteen-year-old boy almost drowned tonight because adults decided he was useful.” Delorme said nothing. “So no. This isn’t winning.” The room went quiet. “This is stopping you.”

For once, he had nothing to say.

Neuvillette stepped forward. “Adrien Delorme, you are under arrest for conspiracy, obstruction of justice, witness intimidation, kidnapping, unlawful detention, corruption of public officials, destruction of judicial evidence, attempted destruction of protected records, and multiple offences relating to the Triangle Network.”

Delorme smiled weakly. “You forgot murder.”

Neuvillette’s expression hardened. “We are still investigating those.”

“Then perhaps you’ll find surprises.”

I hated him. Neuvillette didn’t react. “You have the right to remain silent.”

Delorme laughed. “I’ve been silent for twenty years.”

“Then you should find it familiar.”

I looked at Neuvillette. He looked at me. That was absolutely a joke. Not now. Later.

Officers restrained Delorme, and he didn’t fight, not anymore. As they moved him past me, he stopped, and Clorinde stepped closer immediately, and so did Lyney, and Wriothesley — good god — and Delorme looked around all of them, then at me.

“Ask yourself something, Advocate Martin.”

“No.” That clearly surprised him. I smiled. “I have learned that when criminals tell me to ask myself something, my day gets worse.”

Charlotte laughed. Delorme’s face hardened, and the officers moved him, and just like that, the Director was gone.

Not the network. Not the consequences. But him. Caught.

I exhaled, long, and my body suddenly remembered everything that had happened that day — the flooding, the kidnapping threat, the warehouse, Antoine, gunfire, an underground vault. I leaned against Lyney, and he caught me.

“Tired?”

“No.” Everyone stared. “...Yes.”

He wrapped an arm around me. Wriothesley came over, his eyes moving across my face. “Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Actually?”

“My arm.”

Clorinde looked immediately, and I sighed and let her roll up the sleeve of Wriothesley’s borrowed shirt. Finger marks were already beginning to bruise. Wriothesley stared. Oh no.

“Don’t.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“That face says otherwise.”

“I apparently have several faces.”

“Now you’re learning.” He kissed my forehead, then touched his forehead briefly to mine. “You did well.”

I blinked. “Even with the insulting?”

“No.”

“Fair.”

The fire upstairs had been contained, and most of the records survived. Serrat was in custody. Delorme in custody. Varin cooperating. Vautrin already detained. Marceau protected. Moreau-Bellacourt cooperating. Luc Moreau still missing — and that mattered, because the Triangle Network’s Transit key was still out there, possibly with other operators. The network wasn’t gone. But it was bleeding names now.

Neuville stood at the central table while teams began cataloguing the hidden archive — small teams, every person vetted.

Varin had been right about one thing: these records could hurt innocent people if mishandled, so access became severely restricted. No press copies. Charlotte complained, then looked at the names of protected witnesses and stopped complaining. That impressed me.

I was photographing shelf arrangements under official instruction when I found it. A small box on a back shelf, judicial evidence numbering, old, the label faded.

ARMAND, LUCIEN – SUPPLEMENTAL

My heart stopped. “Neuville.” He looked over. “Come here.”

Something in my voice brought everyone — Wriothesley first, then Clorinde, then Lyney. I did not touch the box. Growth. Neuville put on gloves and checked the seal. Broken, then resealed later. Interesting.

He opened it. Inside were three things: a medical examiner’s supplemental report, a photograph, and a small evidence envelope.

I read the report over his shoulder and stopped breathing. Wound morphology inconsistent with recovered industrial hook.

I grabbed Neuville’s sleeve. “Read that.”

“I am.”

“Out loud.”

“Shaun.”

“PLEASE.”

He looked at me, then read. “Secondary examination indicates the primary fatal wound was produced by a narrow rectangular penetrating object approximately—” He stopped. Wriothesley went still. “What?” Neuville continued. “—approximately fourteen millimeters in width, inconsistent with the curved industrial hook submitted as suspected weapon.”

The weapon used to convict Lucien could not have caused the fatal wound.

My eyes filled immediately. “Oh my god!”

Wriothesley took the page and read it himself, once, twice. “Why wasn’t this at trial?” Nobody needed to answer. Network. Registrar. Evidence suppression. Marceau. Varin. Somebody had buried it here.

I looked inside the envelope. Neuville carefully opened it — a metal fragment, tiny, rectangular, recovered from Vaudin’s wound, stamped with three partial characters. V.S—

Vaudin Shipping? V.S.C.

I looked toward the photograph. Autopsy evidence — the fragment matched machinery fittings used on shipping-lock mechanisms. Not Lucien’s hook. Not even close.

Wriothesley sat down. Actually sat. His eyes stayed on the report. “Eleven years.”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“He never should have been convicted.”

Neuville didn’t correct us this time. He looked at the evidence, then at the hidden archive around us. “The original conviction is no longer legally sustainable.”

My heart stopped. “What?”

He looked directly at me. “You heard me.”

“Say it again.”

Wriothesley looked up. Clorinde smiled faintly. Lyney squeezed my hand.

“Lucien Armand’s conviction is no longer legally sustainable.”

I laughed. Then cried, immediately. Embarrassing. Didn’t care.

“Oh my god.”

Wriothesley stood, and I hugged him before he could react, and he caught me hard. “He’s getting out,” I whispered into his coat. He didn’t answer; his chest moved. I pulled back, and his eyes were wet, which almost made me cry harder.

“He’s getting out.”

“Yes.”

"I still need to file the emergency motion and enter the judicial order," Neuville said carefully.

I turned. "How long?"

"Tonight."

I stared. "TONIGHT?"

"Yes."

"Like tonight tonight?"

He looked almost offended. "There is only one tonight."

Lyney laughed. I looked at Wriothsley. "Call Meropide."

He already had his communicator out, then paused, and looked at me. "No."

"What?"

"You tell him. You're his lawyer."

Oh. Right. I wiped my face. "Okay."

My hands shook as I took the communicator — not fear this time, something else. Wriothsley made the connection, and Lucien appeared on the other end several moments later.

"What happened?" He looked worried immediately, probably because everyone kept contacting him during crises.

I couldn't speak.

"Shaun?"

I laughed, which didn't help. His face became more concerned. "What the fuck happened?"

I finally managed it. "We found suppressed forensic evidence."

He stopped. "What?"

"The murder weapon. It wasn't your hook."

Silence.

"The medical examiner knew. The wound was incompatible."

Nothing.

"Neuville is filing an emergency order."

Lucien stared. I started crying again. Fuck professionalism.

"Lucien. You're coming home."

He froze. Wriothsley turned away. Clorinde put a hand against my back. Lyney's fingers tightened around mine.

On the communicator, Lucien blinked once, twice, then laughed — one strange sound. “No.”

I smiled through tears. “Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Shaun.”

“Yes.”

“Don't—” His voice broke, and I understood immediately. Don't give me hope. Eleven years had taught him that hope was dangerous. I steadied myself.

“This isn't me promising something I can't prove. Neuville has reviewed the evidence.”

I looked toward him, and he nodded. “Your conviction cannot stand.”

Lucien covered his face. Nothing, for several seconds. Then his shoulders shook. No sound. Just crying. I let him. Nobody in the vault spoke.

Finally: “When?”

“Tonight.”

He lowered his hands. “What do I do?”

That question hurt, because Wriothsley had warned me. You assume he'll know how to leave. He didn't.

I smiled softly. “First? Pack.”

He laughed through tears. “I don't have much.”

“Then that part's easy.”

“And after?” There it was. After prison. The world. Home. Eleven stolen years.

“We figure it out.”

“Who?”

I looked around — my husband, my wife, my boyfriend, Neuville, Charlotte in the background pretending she wasn't

crying, Navia and Freminet probably already hearing through messages, Élodie safe, Antoine safe, a whole ridiculous web of people who had somehow inherited Callas's unfinished promise.

"All of us."

Lucien looked confused. I laughed. "Trust me."

"That hasn't worked out great historically."

"Fair." Then he smiled — small, terrified, real. "All right."

The call ended. I stood there holding the communicator. Wriothesley wiped one eye.

"Are you crying?"

"No."

"You are."

"Don't."

I hugged him again, and he sighed and wrapped both arms around me. "Eleven years," he whispered.

"I know."

Behind us, Neuvillette quietly closed the evidence box, and then his expression changed.

"What?" I asked.

He was looking at another label, one shelf below Lucien's. Dozens of boxes. Not one. Dozens. Each marked SUPPLEMENTAL — WITHHELD.

My happiness stopped. I pulled away from Wriothesley. "What are those?"

Neuvillette didn't answer immediately. He read the names — old cases, convictions, dismissed appeals. People. Some likely dead. Some perhaps still imprisoned.

My stomach sank. Lucien wasn't the only one. Of course he wasn't. A seventy-year network did not destroy one life. Callas had found one case. We had followed one thread. And beneath the Palais, we had just uncovered an entire shelf of truths the justice system had never heard.

I stared at the boxes, then at Neuvillette. His face had gone pale.

“How many?” Charlotte whispered.

No one answered. I stepped toward the shelf, not touching, just reading. Name. Name. Name. Years. Decades. Stories interrupted because somebody powerful had decided the truth was inconvenient.

I thought about why I had become a lawyer in the first place. Not to win. Not to stand in court and sound clever. To stop stories from becoming tragedies.

Behind me, Wriothlesley said quietly, “Shaun.”

I looked at him. He already knew. That expression again — the one everybody apparently recognised on me now. But this time, nobody told me no.

I looked back at the shelf. Lucien Armand was going home tonight.

And tomorrow, we were opening every box.

Chapter Seventeen

Eleven Years

At 11:43 that night, Lucien Armand entered the Court of Fontaine for the second time in his life as a defendant. The first time, he had been twenty-eight. He had worn a borrowed jacket. He had believed that if he told the truth clearly enough, somebody would understand. He left in chains.

Tonight he was thirty-nine. His hair was grey at the temples, and there were lines around his eyes that didn't exist in the photograph attached to his original case file. When the doors to the chamber opened, he stopped walking — not because anyone blocked him, but because nobody did. No restraints around his wrists. No guard holding his arm. No chain at his waist. Nothing.

Wriothesley stood beside him. Lucien stared down at his own hands, then at the courtroom, then at me.

I stood from counsel's table, and for one horrible second I thought he might turn around and go back. The Fortress was terrible in ways I would never romanticise, but it had also been predictable for eleven years. This room wasn't. Freedom wasn't. Hope definitely wasn't.

"Lucien." His eyes found mine. I smiled — small, nothing theatrical. "Come sit with me."

He swallowed, then walked. One step. Another. I watched every single one. Wriothsley stayed several paces behind him, not escorting, just there. When Lucien reached me, he looked at the chair.

“Here?”

“Yes.”

“Defense table?”

“Yes.”

He laughed quietly. “Feels different without someone telling me where to stand.”

I pulled the chair back. “Get used to it.”

He sat, then immediately looked over his shoulder. Wriothsley had taken a seat in the gallery beside Clorinde. Navia sat on Clorinde’s other side, holding her hand. Lyney was beside Navia; Lynette and Freminet several seats down. Charlotte was there too, notebook closed in her lap for once. Élodie sat near the end of the row with Antoine practically attached to her side. The boy had clearly been crying, and Élodie looked like she’d spent the last hour alternating between hugging him and planning his murder. Normal sibling response.

Lucien looked at all of them, then back at me. “Who are these people?”

I considered. “My problem.”

He smiled, and I leaned closer. “They helped.”

His expression softened. “All of them?”

“Yes.”

“That seems excessive.”

“You haven’t met my social circle.”

“I was in prison.”

“Fair.”

The courtroom doors closed, and Lucien flinched — tiny, but I saw it. I put my hand on the table beside his, not touching him, just there.

“Those doors open again.” He looked at me, and I held his gaze. “They open again tonight.”

His breathing slowed. Then the chamber rose, Neuville entered, and everything became official.

It was not a normal hearing. Nothing about the day had been normal. The prosecution had received less than two hours to review the suppressed medical examiner’s report, René Desmarais’s notebook, Callas’s investigative materials, and the judicial archive documenting interference in Lucien’s case. Normally that would have been impossible. But some evidence doesn’t need weeks to become devastating.

The original murder weapon was incompatible with the fatal injury. The prosecution’s central eyewitness had admitted privately that his testimony was false. A judicial clerk had confessed to altering the witness statement and identified the person who paid him. The same network had suppressed exculpatory forensic evidence. And the man everyone once believed had simply been a convicted murderer had spent eleven years paying for all of it.

No prosecutor wanted to defend that conviction anymore. Not even institutionally. Especially not institutionally.

Neuville looked across the chamber. “Advocate Martin.”

I stood, my legs strangely heavy. “Yes, Your Honour.”

“You filed an emergency motion requesting that the conviction against Monsieur Lucien Armand be vacated in its entirety.”

“Yes.”

“Not merely suspended pending retrial.”

“No.”

Lucien looked toward me. I kept my eyes forward.

“Your filing asserts that the newly recovered evidence does not simply undermine confidence in the original verdict, but establishes that the prosecution relied upon materially false testimony and suppressed exculpatory forensic evidence.”

“Yes.”

“And you further argue that absent the corrupted evidence, the remaining case could not lawfully support conviction.”

“Yes.”

Neuvillette looked toward the prosecutor. “Monsieur Caron.”

Caron stood. I had expected resistance — not because he was personally corrupt, but because institutions resist humiliation, and people resist admitting that something they inherited was broken. He looked at Lucien, then at me, then at Neuvillette.

“The prosecution has reviewed the materials presently available.” Lucien’s hands tightened underneath the table; I saw it. “We cannot defend the integrity of the original conviction.”

Lucien stopped breathing. “Stay with me,” I whispered. His eyes stayed forward.

Caron swallowed. “The suppressed supplemental pathology report alone materially contradicts the theory presented at trial concerning the murder weapon.” Yes. “The newly discovered writings of René Desmarais independently contradict his sworn trial testimony.” Yes. “And evidence concerning former clerk Cyril Marceau establishes substantial reason to believe that Desmarais’s statement was improperly altered before trial.” Lucien whispered, “Holy shit.” I almost laughed. Not yet.

“The prosecution therefore does not oppose vacatur.”

I closed my eyes for half a second. There. Not oppose. Still not enough.

I stood straighter. Neuvillette looked at me. “You wish to be heard further?” Of course I did. Wriothsley actually sighed in the gallery; I heard him. I looked at Lucien, and he looked terrified — not excited, terrified, because he’d heard legal words before, and legal words had once destroyed him.

I turned toward Neuvillette. “Yes.”

The room went quiet. “This case cannot end with the Court merely saying that it no longer trusts the conviction.” Neuvillette listened. “For eleven years, Monsieur Armand has carried the public

identity of a murderer.” Lucien lowered his eyes. “He lost his employment.” His twenties. His thirties. “His relationships.” His home. “His freedom.” I paused. “And, perhaps worst of all, his credibility.” Lucien looked up. “Every time he said ‘I didn’t do this,’ the existence of the conviction was used as proof that he was lying.”

Nobody moved.

“So if this Court now understands that testimony was falsified, evidence was concealed, and the supposed murder weapon could not have caused the fatal injury—” I looked directly at Neuville. “—then Monsieur Armand should not leave this room carrying the implication that perhaps the system merely made a procedural mistake.” My voice steadied. “It did not make a technical mistake. It condemned the wrong man.”

Silence. Absolute. I could hear somebody breathing in the gallery. Maybe Navia. Maybe me.

“The people responsible for Benoît Vaudin’s death remain subject to investigation.” I glanced toward the prosecution. “But Lucien Armand is not one of them.” Then I looked at Lucien. “And he has waited eleven years to hear someone in this courtroom say that clearly.”

I sat. Lucien stared at me, his eyes wet. “You really don’t know when to stop,” he whispered.

I smiled. “No.”

Neuville looked down at the file. Several long seconds passed. Then: “Monsieur Armand.”

Lucien froze.

“Please stand,” Neuville said, his voice softening.

Lucien looked at me. I stood with him; his knees almost caught the table, and I steadied the chair. He straightened, and Neuville looked at him — not over him, at him.

“The evidence now before this Court establishes that your original prosecution was corrupted by false testimony, improper alteration of evidence, and suppression of material forensic

findings.” Lucien’s jaw began trembling. “The remaining admissible evidence does not sustain the conviction entered against you.” His breathing broke, and I grabbed his hand — this time he took mine immediately.

“The judgment against Lucien Armand is hereby vacated.” He squeezed my hand so hard it hurt. I didn’t care. “The conviction is nullified.” His eyes closed. “All custodial authority arising from that conviction terminates immediately.”

A sound came from Wriothsley, tiny and broken. I looked back; he had his head down, Clorinde’s hand resting against his shoulder, Navia openly crying.

Then Neuville said the words that mattered. “Monsieur Armand, you are free to leave.”

Lucien did not move. Nobody did. Neuville waited. Lucien opened his eyes. “You mean—” His voice cracked.

“Yes.” Neuville looked directly at him. “You are free.”

Lucien laughed, then covered his mouth, then laughed again. And then he cried — not quietly, not neatly. Eleven years didn’t leave a person’s body politely. He bent forward against the table and sobbed. I wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

The courtroom stayed silent. Nobody told him to compose himself. Nobody rushed the next case. Nobody asked him to stand straight or speak properly or be grateful. He cried, and the Court waited, exactly as long as he needed.

Twenty-one minutes later, Lucien stood outside the courtroom doors. They were open. He stared through them, toward the Palais corridor, and beyond that, Fontaine.

He looked at me. “That’s it?”

I laughed through the remaining tears. “Legally?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“No paperwork?”

“Oh, there’s paperwork.”

He groaned. "Later," I said. "Thank god."

Wriothsesley approached, then stopped about two metres away. Neither man spoke. This wasn't mine, and I knew it, so I stepped back.

Lucien looked at him. "The Duke."

"Lucien."

"They actually did it."

"Yes."

"You knew?"

"Not until tonight."

Lucien swallowed. Wriothsesley's expression broke slightly. "I'm sorry."

Lucien frowned. "For what?"

"That it took this long."

Lucien stared at him, then shook his head. "You got me her." He pointed at me. I looked around. "Excuse me?"

"You kept reviewing my file," Lucien said. Wriothsesley said nothing. "You believed something was wrong when I stopped believing anybody would."

The two men stood there — prisoner, jailer, except neither term fit anymore. Lucien stepped forward and hugged him. Wriothsesley froze. I covered my mouth; Navia started crying harder. Charlotte whispered, "Oh, this is horrible."

I looked at her. "What?"

"I can't publish any of this yet."

I slapped her arm.

"Ow."

Wriothsesley eventually wrapped his arms around Lucien, tight. "Don't come back," he muttered.

Lucien laughed into his shoulder. "I'll try not to murder anyone."

"Legally advisable," I said.

They pulled apart. Wriothsesley wiped his face. I stared. He pointed at me. "Don't."

"I didn't say anything."

"Your face did."

I smiled. He kissed my forehead. "Annoying."

"Marriage."

Lucien frowned. "You're married to the Duke?" There it was. I sighed. Wriothlesley smiled. "Yes." Lucien looked between us. "Okay."

Clorinde approached, and Wriothlesley added, "And her."

Lucien looked at Clorinde, then at me. "Champion Duelist?"

"Yes."

Navia walked over. "And her," Clorinde said. Lucien looked at Navia, and then Lyney appeared behind me and slid an arm around my waist. Lucien stared.

"No."

I closed my eyes. Lyney smiled. "Hello."

Lucien looked at me. "You're dating the magician too?"

"Yes."

Then Neuvillette stepped from the courtroom. Wriothlesley glanced toward him, and Lucien followed the glance, then looked back, his eyes narrowing.

"Wait."

No. No no no. Wriothlesley smiled. I covered my face. Lucien pointed at Neuvillette. "And the Chief Justice?"

"Not me. Thank god."

"Me," Wriothlesley said.

Lucien stood completely still. Then Navia started laughing, hard. Lucien looked around at all of us.

"Prison was simpler."

I started laughing too. "Honestly?"

"Yes."

"Fair."

Furina came running down the corridor. "IS HE FREE?" Neuvillette closed his eyes. Lucien stared as she reached us

carrying, of course, a cake. “I brought something!” I looked at the icing. CONGRATULATIONS ON NOT BEING A MURDERER.

“Furina.”

“What?”

Lucien read it. Silence. Then he started laughing so hard he had to lean against the wall.

Okay. Fine. Maybe perfect.

We had gathered afterward in one of Navia’s quieter reception rooms, because apparently nobody was ready to go home, and because Furina had brought enough food for approximately thirty people.

Élodie grabbed Antoine and punched him in the shoulder, hard. “Ow!”

“What were you THINKING?”

“I was helping you!”

“YOU GOT KIDNAPPED.”

“I know!”

“You went after CRIMINALS.”

“I know!”

“You are FOURTEEN.”

“I KNOW.”

I stood several feet away with Lyney, watching. Élodie grabbed Antoine and hugged him, immediately, and he buried his face against her shoulder. “I thought they were going to send you to prison.” Her expression shattered. “Oh, Antoine.”

“They said if I gave them the device, they’d prove you stole everything.”

“You little idiot.” She kissed his hair.

“I know.”

“You don’t protect me like that.”

He looked up. “You’d do it for me.”

Élodie opened her mouth, then stopped, because yes. She would. I understood. Apparently everyone did now.

She sighed. "That doesn't make it smart."

Antoine looked toward me. "That's what Shaun said."

Élodie followed his gaze, then marched directly toward me. I braced, and she hugged me, hard.

"Oh."

"Thank you."

I wrapped my arms around her. "You don't owe me that."

"Yes, I do."

"No."

She pulled back. "You saved him."

"Freminet saved him."

She turned immediately. Freminet had been sitting quietly beside Lynette, and he looked horrified at the attention as Élodie crossed the room.

"Are you Freminet?"

He stood. "Yes."

She hugged him. His arms stayed at his sides for a full three seconds, then hugged her back, awkwardly.

Lyney looked toward me. I smiled. "Your brother's adorable."

"He is." Freminet heard, and his face turned red.

"He hates when we do this," Lynette said.

"I know," Lyney said, smiling.

Family. Messy. Protective. Terrifyingly competent.

I leaned against Lyney, and he wrapped an arm around me. "You came back."

"So did you."

"Promise kept."

I looked up. "Antoine scared the shit out of you."

His smile faded slightly. "Yes."

"Freminet too."

"Yes."

"You okay?"

A pause. "Not yet."

Fair. "Later?"

He looked at me. "Later."

I kissed his cheek. No pressure. No fixing. Just later.

Navia found me alone on the balcony sometime after one in the morning. Fontaine was quieter from above, lights reflecting off the waterways, the city with no idea what had happened beneath it — a criminal network uncovered, a Director arrested, a kidnapping prevented, judicial records recovered, one wrongfully convicted man released, and dozens more boxes still waiting. Tomorrow would be chaos. Tonight, quiet.

Navia stood beside me. I looked over. "You okay?" She nodded, then shook her head. "Both."

"Fair."

For a minute we watched the water, and then she said, "Papa did it."

I looked at her.

"He didn't finish."

"No." She smiled sadly. "But he did enough." The yellow ledger. The red file. René. Roche. Clorinde's letter. Every clue. "He left a trail."

"Yes." Navia looked down at her hands. "For years I thought Papa's secrets meant he didn't trust me."

My chest tightened. "He was scared."

"I know that now." She laughed quietly. "The annoying man wrote an entire criminal investigation but couldn't just tell his daughter he thought she was strong."

"Parents are weird."

She smiled, and then tears came. I didn't say anything; she leaned against me, and I put my arm around her.

"I miss him."

"I know."

"I hate that I found more of him after he died."

I kissed her hair. "I know."

“But—” She looked toward the balcony doors. Inside, Clorinde was talking quietly with Wriothsley. Lucien sat with Furina. Charlotte was interviewing absolutely nobody, because I had threatened her life professionally. Élodie and Antoine were asleep against each other on a sofa. Lyney was helping Freminet dry diving equipment, because apparently nobody in this city understood bedtime.

Navia smiled. “But I think he’d like this.”

“What?”

“All these people finishing something he started.”

I considered. “He’d probably hate how many confidential boundaries I’ve yelled about.”

She laughed. “Definitely.”

“And he’d probably tell me to stop asking the same question six ways.”

“Definitely.”

“And I would ignore him.”

“Absolutely.”

She rested her head against my shoulder. “He would have liked you.”

That one got me. I swallowed. “Yeah?”

“Unfortunately.”

I laughed. She kissed my cheek, then went back inside. I stayed another minute. Just one.

Then Clorinde came out. Of course. Apparently I was no longer allowed solitary emotional contemplation.

She stood beside me. I looked over. “You okay?”

“No.”

Fair. Callas’s letter. The duel. Years of guilt. I reached for her hand, and she took it.

“He forgave you.”

Clorinde stared at the city. “I don’t think it was his forgiveness I needed.”

No. I understood. “Navia?”

“Partly.”

“And?”

She looked at me. “Hers was never really the problem either.”

Herself. I squeezed her hand and didn’t say it. She knew. That one would take time. Not every wound got solved because you found a letter — mystery novels lied about that. Evidence could resolve facts. It couldn’t command healing.

Clorinde rested her forehead against mine. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Not turning his letter into evidence.”

I smiled. “That belonged to you.”

“And Navia.”

“Yes.”

She kissed me, slow and quiet, then pulled back. “You are exhausted.”

“I am not.”

“Shaun.”

“Yes.”

“Bed.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

She smiled. Growth.

I almost made it to bed. Almost.

Then Charlotte found me in the hallway. “Shaun.”

I stopped. “No.”

“You don’t know what I’m asking.”

“No.”

“It’s important.”

“Tomorrow.”

“It’s about the withheld cases.”

I stopped. Damn her. She knew exactly which words worked.

“What?”

Charlotte held out a copied inventory sheet. "The hidden archive boxes. I was helping Neuville's team make a preliminary index."

"You were told not to investigate independently."

"I wasn't."

I stared. She corrected, "Much."

"Charlotte."

"Listen."

I took the sheet. Names, case numbers, dates — some old enough that everyone involved might be dead, some disturbingly recent. Then one entry had been circled. CASE 06-417 — PERSON UNKNOWN. No defendant, no victim, just: SEALED BY DIRECTOR ORDER.

I frowned. "Why is this important?"

Charlotte handed me another page — the contents inventory. One item: photographic plate, unidentified female subject. Another: recovered personal correspondence, Mondstadt origin.

I looked up. Mondstadt. My vacation home. Lyney's expression from the hallway changed when he heard it, and he came closer. "What?"

I showed him. Charlotte continued. "The case is twenty years old."

"Before Callas's Lucien investigation."

"Yes."

"Triangle Network?"

"The 417 code suggests it." Maybe. Not proof. I had learned.

"What does Mondstadt have to do with it?"

"I don't know," Charlotte said, smiling.

I stared. "Then why are you smiling?"

"Because I found the photographic plate."

Of course she did.

"Charlotte."

"I did not open the evidence." Good. "It was already digitised during an old preservation project." Better.

She handed me a printed copy — an old image, black and white, damaged around the edges. A woman standing near a shipyard, face partially turned. I didn't recognise her. Neither did Lyney. But in the background there was a symbol — not a black triangle, something different. A crest.

I frowned. "Is that Mondstadt?"

Lyney leaned closer. "No."

"Then?"

A voice behind us answered. "It's Fatui."

We turned. Arlecchino stood at the end of the corridor. I stared. "How long have you been there?"

"Long enough."

She walked toward us and took the photograph, and for the first time that entire night I watched her lose control of her expression. Barely. But she did. Lyney noticed too.

"Father?"

Arlecchino stared at the woman in the photograph. "You know her," I said. Silence. Then: "Yes."

My exhausted brain immediately woke back up. "Who?"

She looked at me, and I knew from her face that I wasn't going to like the answer. "She was House of the Hearth."

Lyney went still. "Was?"

"She disappeared twenty years ago."

"Name?"

"Celestine Roche."

Roche. My stomach dropped. "Augustin?"

"His sister."

Silence. There it was. The next thread. Lyney stared at the image. "Roche had a sister?"

"Yes."

"Why did nobody tell us?"

"Because she was presumed dead."

I rubbed my face. "Nobody in this story stays dead."

Charlotte smiled. I pointed. “No.” She stopped.

Arlecchino looked at the case number. “Where was this found?”

“Hidden judicial archive.”

“And sealed by Director order?”

“Yes.”

Her expression turned cold. “Then your Triangle Network began interfering with the House of the Hearth long before Augustin infiltrated them.” My stomach tightened. Meaning Roche hadn’t chosen that assignment randomly. Maybe his sister had been the reason.

A twenty-year-old case. Mondstadt correspondence. Fatui connection. Triangle Network. And a woman officially dead but apparently important enough that a Director had personally sealed her identity.

I looked toward the bedroom, then the photograph, then Clorinde standing several meters away with both arms crossed.

“No.”

I sighed. “I haven’t said anything.”

“You’re not opening another case tonight.”

“But—”

“No.”

Lyney took the paper from me. “I agree.”

I stared. “YOU?”

“Yes.”

“Your family is literally involved.”

“Which means I want to investigate it properly.”

Dammit. Reasonable boyfriend. Hated that.

Arlecchino folded the photograph once, then stopped before damaging it. Good. Evidence. She handed it back. “Tomorrow.”

I looked at her. “Tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“So you want to investigate.”

Her expression went unreadable again. “I want to know why a dead woman from my House appears in a judicial archive controlled by the same organisation that held her brother for twelve years.”

Fair. Very fair.

Charlotte whispered, “So book two.”

I turned. “What?”

She smiled innocently. “Nothing.”

I stared at the photograph one more time, then put it down. Actually put it down. Clorinde looked impressed.

“I can learn.”

“Slowly.”

“Everyone keeps saying that.”

She wrapped an arm around my waist. Bed. Fine. Tomorrow. Because tonight wasn’t for the next case. Tonight was for Lucien.

At 2:17 in the morning, Lucien Armand walked outside without permission. That was the first thing he did with his freedom. Nobody stopped him. He stood at the edge of the Court of Fontaine and looked up — not at buildings, not at people. At the sky.

He hadn’t seen an open night sky in eleven years.

Wriothesley stood several steps behind him. I stood beside Wriothesley. Neither of us said anything. Lucien breathed one long breath, then another. Finally he whispered, “I forgot.”

My throat tightened. “What?”

He looked upward. “How big it is.”

Nobody answered. There wasn’t an answer.

After a while, Lucien looked toward me. “What happens tomorrow?”

I thought about the withheld boxes, Delorme’s prosecution, René’s murder investigation, Varin, Vautrin, Marceau, Moreau, Élodie, the Triangle Network, Callas, Celestine Roche — all the stories waiting.

But that wasn’t what Lucien was asking. He meant himself. Tomorrow. Morning. Breakfast. Where do I go? Who am I now?

I smiled. "Tomorrow you wake up wherever you choose."

His face changed. Choice. Such a tiny word. Such an enormous thing.

"And then?"

"You figure out what you want for breakfast."

He laughed. "That's your professional advice?"

"Yes."

"Expensive."

"I'll bill you later."

"I'm unemployed."

"Pro bono."

He smiled, then looked at Wriothesley. "Can I come back?"

Wriothesley froze. "To Meropide?"

"Visit."

Oh. Wriothesley smiled. "Yes."

"Not stay."

"No."

"Good."

Lucien looked at the sky again, and then said, "I think I want eggs."

I laughed. Wriothesley laughed. And that — after eleven years of murder allegations, corruption, hidden ledgers, drowned witnesses, kidnapped children, underground networks, and a justice system forced to confront its own failures — was how Lucien Armand began his freedom.

With the sky. And a decision about breakfast.

Behind us, the Court of Fontaine remained lit through the night. Officials catalogued boxes. Investigators secured evidence. Old lies began collapsing under the weight of records people once thought were buried forever.

Tomorrow we would open every box. Tomorrow we would start counting how many people the Triangle Network had hurt. Tomorrow somebody would ask who Celestine Roche really was.

But not tonight. Tonight, one story had finally stopped being a tragedy. And for once, that was enough.



Epilogue



The Name I Left Behind

Three weeks after Lucien Armand walked out of Meropide, we opened the last box. Not the last box in the hidden archive — that would have been impossible, there were hundreds. The last box assigned to the first review. Those were different things.

Neuvillette had formed what the Palais officially called the Special Judicial Restoration Commission, which sounded very respectable and definitely did not communicate the fact that half of Fontaine's legal establishment had spent the previous three weeks discovering just how catastrophically fucked certain historical cases were. I called it the Box Problem. Neuvillette hated that. Charlotte loved it. The Steambird had privately begun calling the entire scandal The Triangle Files, although nothing substantive had been published yet beyond confirmation that an extensive corruption investigation was underway.

That had been a fight. Charlotte wanted names. Neuvillette wanted silence. I wanted anything that wouldn't jeopardise an innocent person's retrial. So naturally everyone hated the compromise. Democracy.

The hidden archive beneath the Palais had been sealed under direct judicial authority. Access required two separate authorisations, every entry was logged, and no individual was

permitted to review materials alone. Solène Varin was in custody. Cyril Marceau was cooperating. Marcel Vautrin had been charged. Laurent Serrat had apparently discovered that setting judicial records on fire was frowned upon. Luc Moreau had been found two days after Delorme's arrest attempting to leave Fontaine using forged commercial papers. Étienne Moreau-Bellacourt remained under investigation but was cooperating extensively enough that Wriothsley had stopped referring to him as "the idiot with my pressure valves." Adrien Delorme was awaiting trial.

And Lucien had discovered that eggs tasted better when nobody counted how long he had to eat them. That was apparently important. He told me three times.

He was staying temporarily in Poisson. Navia had arranged a small apartment through the Spina, although she made me swear not to tell him she had quietly paid the first several months herself. Wriothsley visited, more than he admitted. Lucien visited Meropide once too, voluntarily; he lasted forty-two minutes before coming back to the surface. Nobody mocked him. Not even me.

Freedom, I was learning, was not the opposite of prison. Sometimes freedom was simply learning that you were allowed to leave.

Élodie Martel had become one of the central witnesses in the investigation against Delorme. Her maintenance records documented years of unauthorised work on Channel 417. Antoine had been formally forbidden by his sister from conducting further undercover operations, which he interpreted as a personal attack. Freminet apparently remained his hero, which concerned everybody except Freminet, who seemed mostly confused by it. The real Martel storage device was gone, but enough copies survived, because evidence, like people, was surprisingly difficult to erase once enough hands decided to protect it.

That was what the Triangle Network had never understood. For seventy years it survived by isolating people — threatening one

person with another, making witnesses believe silence kept their families safe, making officials believe confession would destroy everyone around them, making victims believe nobody else would believe them. Callas had begun breaking that system. We finished what he started by doing the opposite. We talked. To each other. Constantly. Sometimes too constantly, according to Neuville.

The final box sat on the table in front of me. CASE 06-417. The same one Charlotte had noticed the night Lucien was released. Twenty years old. PERSON UNKNOWN. SEALED BY DIRECTOR ORDER.

I stared at it. Charlotte sat across from me, Lyney beside her. Arlecchino stood farther down the table. Neuville was at the head. Navia and Clorinde were to my right. Wriothesley arrived twelve minutes late, carrying tea, because apparently being the Duke of Meropide did not protect a man from domestic expectations.

I looked at him. "You're late."

"I run a prison."

"You had one meeting."

"With prisoners."

"Still late."

He put a cup beside me. Coffee. I looked at it, then him. "You are forgiven."

"I assumed." He kissed the top of my head and sat.

Neuville watched. "I would like to begin."

"Yes, Dad."

His eyes closed. Wriothesley immediately drank his tea to hide his expression. Navia laughed. Clorinde looked away. Lyney openly smiled. Arlecchino stared at all of us like Fontaine itself had become personally disappointing.

Neuville opened the box. Inside was the photographic plate — Celestine Roche, Augustin Roche's older sister, House of the Hearth operative, presumed dead twenty years ago. Except the Triangle

Network had maintained a sealed judicial case involving her after her supposed death, which generally suggested that somebody had lied. Again.

I was beginning to think Fontaine's national motto should be nothing is ever as dead as the paperwork claims.

Neuville removed the remaining contents — letters, transit permits, shipping manifests, one damaged journal, a folded map, and three sealed envelopes. Arlecchino's attention settled immediately on the correspondence.

"Those are hers."

Lyney looked at her. "You recognise the handwriting?"

"Yes."

Something in her voice made him stop asking questions. House history. Complicated. I understood complicated families, so I left it alone. For approximately thirty seconds.

Then: "What was Celestine doing for the House?"

Arlecchino looked at me. "Thirty seconds."

"What?"

"You lasted approximately thirty seconds."

Lyney laughed. I stared. "You were counting?"

"No."

Lynette wasn't even here, and I could somehow feel her judging me remotely.

Arlecchino picked up one letter. "Celestine specialised in foreign networks."

"Smuggling?"

"Intelligence."

"Where?"

"Fontaine. Liyue." Then, "Mondstadt."

Something inside me shifted. I knew the word shouldn't have affected me. Mondstadt wasn't forbidden. I owned a home there. I visited occasionally — vacation, festivals, short stays. I drank at Angel's Share, walked the city walls, bought flowers, listened to

bards. Then returned to Fontaine. Mondstadt was easy when I treated it like somewhere I visited.

The problem was that Mondstadt had never really been somewhere I visited. It was where I came from.

Wriothesley noticed my expression, of course, and his hand touched my knee beneath the table. Nothing said. Just there.

Neuvillette unfolded the map. Old trade routes. Fontaine. Northern roads. Then across the border. Mondstadt. Several locations had been marked — Stone Gate, the main city, Springvale, a road west of Dawn Winery, and farther north, old routes I didn't recognise.

Charlotte leaned closer. "Triangle routes?"

"No," Arlecchino said.

"How do you know?"

"The markings are House cipher."

Lyney looked. "Old House cipher."

"Yes."

"What do they say?"

She studied them, and her expression shifted. "Safe contact." Another. "Compromised contact." Another, and she stopped. "What?" I asked.

"This one says missing operative."

"Celestine?"

"No."

"Who?"

"The name has been removed."

Of course. Charlotte whispered, "I hate old spies."

"Finally something we agree on."

Arlecchino opened the first envelope. Inside was correspondence between Celestine and someone in Mondstadt identified only as C.

I groaned. "No." Everyone looked at me. "Absolutely no more initials."

Navia laughed. I continued. “We spent half of this investigation asking whether C meant Callas, Camille, Cyril, a location, a fucking wall—”

Wriothlesley put my coffee in my hand. “Drink.” I did. Helped slightly.

Neuvillette read. The correspondence began twenty-two years ago. Celestine had been investigating forged commercial identities entering Fontaine through Mondstadt — not contraband, people, or rather names. Passports. Commercial registrations. Travel permits. Records belonging to individuals who either did not exist or had disappeared. The Triangle Network had used Mondstadt as a source of identities. Some willingly sold. Some stolen. Some belonging to dead people.

Charlotte’s humour vanished. “So that’s how network members disappeared.”

Neuvillette nodded. “New identities.”

“Entire lives.”

“Yes.”

Lyney looked toward Arlecchino. “Celestine found it.”

“She found part.”

I flipped through the papers. “Then Augustin went after the Triangle Network twelve years ago because—”

“He believed they killed his sister,” Arlecchino finished.

There it was. Not assignment. Personal. Roche had spent twelve years inside an organisation he believed murdered Celestine — not because Arlecchino had sent him to investigate random shipping corruption, but because he had inherited his sister’s unfinished mystery. Just like Navia inherited Callas’s. Just like I—

I stopped. No. Not me. Not yet.

Neuvillette turned another page. “This appears to be her final known communication.” Arlecchino took it, read silently, then handed it to Lyney. His expression became confused.

“What?” I asked.

He slid it across. Celestine's final letter, no recipient name, only: If Fontaine closes behind me, I will return to the city of freedom. The first route began there. So did the name trade. Someone in Mondstadt remembers what the Triangle was before Bellacourt.

I read it twice. "The first route."

Navia looked over my shoulder. "So the Triangle Network didn't begin entirely in Fontaine."

"Possibly," Neuville said.

I pointed at him. "I said possibly in my head before you did."

"Congratulations."

Growth.

Charlotte began turning through another group of files. "If the identity trade started in Mondstadt—"

"Then Fontaine may have inherited only one branch," Lyney said.

My stomach tightened. Meaning Delorme's network might have been enormous by Fontaine standards, and still not the original.

Wriothesley leaned back. "So Book One's criminal conspiracy has a prequel."

I stared. "What?"

He smiled. "Nothing." Charlotte looked suspiciously delighted. I ignored both of them.

Neuville opened the damaged journal. Most pages were unreadable — water, age, ink bleeding through paper. But the final legible section contained a location. Mondstadt City — West Gate Registry, Basement Archive 3.

I knew that building. Or had known it. Years ago. Before renovations. Before Fontaine. Before Shaun.

My stomach tightened. Navia noticed. "You know it."

Everyone looked at me. I wished she hadn't said that. "Yes."

"How?"

I stared at the address, because I used to walk past it almost every day. Because the old registry stood two streets away from the neighbourhood where I grew up. Because when I was younger,

before I started introducing myself as Shaun Martin to almost everyone who mattered in my adult life, the documents inside that building had carried another name.

I leaned back. "That's where Mondstadt kept old civil records."

Neuvillette nodded. "Correct."

"Birth registrations. Residence records. School certifications. Old citizenship paperwork."

Charlotte frowned. "You know a lot about it."

I looked at her, then away. Wriothesley's hand was still against my knee. He knew some of this. Clorinde knew more. Navia knew pieces. Lyney, less — not because I'd deliberately hidden it from him, it just rarely mattered. Fontaine knew Shaun Martin. Advocate Martin. Photographer. Journalist. Wriothesley's wife. Clorinde's wife. Navia's girlfriend. Lyney's girlfriend. Annoying professional complication in Neuvillette's life. Mondstadt had known someone else.

"Chantal." The name came from Clorinde, quietly.

The room went still. Lyney looked toward me. Not shocked. Curious.

"Chantal?"

I exhaled. "My old name." Not exactly old. Birth name. A name that still belonged to me in some way. Just not the way Shaun did.

Charlotte, surprisingly, didn't ask a thousand questions. Thank god.

Navia's expression softened. "Mondstadt knew you as Chantal Martin."

"Yes."

"Before Fontaine."

"Yes."

Lyney sat back slightly. "How long has it been since you really went back?"

I almost said I went all the time, then stopped, because that wasn't true. Not the way he meant.

"I still use the house."

"Your vacation house," Navia said.

"Yes."

Wriothesley looked toward me. "But?"

I hated that everyone I loved had learned to interrogate me. "But I don't—" I searched for the words. "I don't really go home."

Silence. That was it. I visited Mondstadt. I did not return to it. There was a difference. I stayed at my place, saw familiar streets, sometimes familiar faces from far enough away that I didn't have to explain anything. I didn't knock on old doors. Didn't ask who was still there. Didn't walk into the places where someone might look at me and say — Chantal? — like no time had passed. Like everything between then and now had not remade me.

Lyney looked toward the file. "So this case requires records from your old neighbourhood."

"Yes."

"That seems—"

"Cruel?"

"I was going to say inconvenient."

I laughed. "Same thing."

Arlecchino continued reviewing Celestine's journal, then stopped. "There is another reference."

"To what?"

"The contact." C. She turned the page around. The writing was faded. C. says the Martin family records were used twice. Registry discrepancy unresolved.

Everything inside me went silent. Nobody spoke. I stared at the sentence. Martin. No — common name. Could be anybody. Absolutely. Mondstadt had other Martins. Probably.

I looked at Neuville. He was already thinking exactly what I was.

"Do not assume."

"I'm not."

“You are.”

“I am actively not assuming.”

“Good.”

Charlotte whispered, “Martin family.” I pointed. “Not helping.” She shut her mouth.

Wriothesley leaned closer. “Do you know of any registry discrepancy involving your family?”

“No.” That answer came immediately, and then I reconsidered. Old records. Old identities. My childhood. Things adults handled that I never questioned. Paperwork I hadn’t seen in years.

No. I didn’t know. That wasn’t the same as no.

“Fuck.”

Lyney’s eyes softened. “Hey.” I looked at him. “This doesn’t mean anything yet.”

“I know.”

“Could be another family.”

“I know.”

“Could be administrative.”

“I KNOW.” He smiled slightly. “Good.” I wanted to throw something. Instead I drank coffee.

Neuvillette returned to the journal. “Whatever this reference means, the Mondstadt archive appears relevant.”

Charlotte immediately said, “Road trip.”

“No,” six people answered.

She crossed her arms. “I am an investigative journalist.”

“You are also staying in Fontaine until the Triangle investigation is stabilised,” Neuvillette said.

“You cannot order me.”

“I can restrict access to sealed judicial evidence.”

Charlotte went quiet. “Cruel.”

“Effective.”

I smiled. Neuvillette was learning.

Then Arlecchino said, “Lyney will go.”

I turned. Lyney did too. "Father?"

"Celestine belonged to the House."

"Yes."

"Augustin's history remains unresolved."

"Yes."

"And if old House operations are involved, you will recognise what Shaun will not."

He nodded slowly. I stared at Arlecchino. "You're assigning my boyfriend to me?"

"No."

"Sounds like it."

"I am assigning an operative to an investigation."

Lyney smiled. "I can be both."

Arlecchino gave him a look. He stopped smiling. Mostly.

Wriothesley looked toward me. "I'm coming."

I blinked. "No."

His eyebrows rose. "Excuse me?"

"You run Meropide."

"So?"

"So you cannot abandon an underwater prison every time your wife discovers international corruption."

"That is an extremely specific marital limitation."

"And yet necessary."

Navia laughed. Wriothesley looked at Neuvillette. "Can I abandon the underwater prison?"

"No."

"Traitor."

"You are my boyfriend. That does not exempt you from administrative responsibility."

I covered my mouth. Lyney leaned toward me. "This family is bizarre."

"You climbed through my office window."

"Romantically."

“Stop saying that.”

Clorinde looked at me. “I could come.” Navia immediately looked toward her, and so did I. Clorinde understood — Poisson, Callas, the reopened cases. Fontaine needed her too. She exhaled. “Not immediately.”

I touched her hand. “Come later.”

“Yes.”

Navia smiled. “And me.”

“Obviously.”

“Good.”

I looked around, and it felt different from the person I had been at the beginning of this case. Months ago, maybe I would have heard Mondstadt and immediately built an escape around myself. Go alone. Handle it. Return when done. Don’t make anyone worry. Don’t make anyone see the older parts.

Now Lyney was already apparently coming. The others would come when they could. And somehow that didn’t feel like weakness.

By the following week, the hidden archive had produced twenty-three priority case reviews. Five living prisoners. Three people who had completed sentences years ago. Several deceased. Families were being contacted carefully — no mass announcement, no spectacle, no pretending the Court could erase what happened simply because it finally acknowledged it.

Lucien attended the first Restoration Commission hearing, not as a defendant. As a consultant. That had been Wriothesley’s idea. Lucien asked why. Wriothesley answered: “Because nobody understands what wrongful imprisonment does better than somebody who lived it.” Lucien thought about it, then agreed. He still lived in Poisson, still occasionally woke expecting a guard bell, still had moments where open doors made him nervous instead of comforted. Still ate eggs, a lot — apparently eleven years of institutional breakfast had created very specific culinary grievances.

Élodie returned to mechanics, not Martel Engineering — the company was under investigation, and portions had been placed under external administration. She'd been offered apprenticeships elsewhere and chose one in Fleuve Cendre. Antoine was grounded; I hadn't known it was possible to ground someone so thoroughly that several organisations knew about it, but Élodie achieved it. Freminet visited anyway. Apparently they were building something. Nobody would tell me what. That concerned me.

Charlotte finally published the first major Triangle Network article. No protected identities, no sensationalised victim details, no confidential evidence. I read it twice, then messaged her: Good. She replied: THAT'S IT??? So I added: Very good. She sent twelve angry stickers. Journalists.

My departure for Mondstadt was scheduled for Monday. I spent Sunday evening packing. Badly. Naturally.

Wriothesley sat on the bed watching me place a Kamera lens into a bag, remove it, place it in another bag, decide I needed the first bag, then forget where I'd put the spare battery.

"Nightstand."

I stopped. "What?"

"Battery."

I looked. There. "How?"

"You've checked the same three locations six times."

"I have a system."

"No."

Clorinde stood inside the wardrobe helping me choose clothing, because apparently I had packed seven formal outfits and two casual shirts for an investigation that might involve old archives, rural travel, and abandoned trade routes.

"I can wear suits anywhere."

"You shouldn't."

"Rude."

She handed me a jacket. Mondstadt style — simpler, practical. I stared at it. I had owned it for years, hadn't worn it in Fontaine once.

"You kept this?"

Clorinde looked at me. "You kept it."

Right. I touched the fabric. Old. Familiar. Chantal's jacket. Not literally. But close enough.

Navia was sitting cross-legged on the rug reading Celestine's copied correspondence. "There's a reference to Dawn Winery."

I looked over. "What?"

"Forged wine manifests."

Wriothesley groaned. "I already dislike this."

I smiled. "Why?"

"Because you plus a winery plus a criminal mystery sounds expensive."

"I have self-control."

Three people laughed. I stared. "Terrible household."

The bedroom door opened, and Lyney walked in carrying his luggage. I blinked. "You're staying here?"

"Our departure is early."

"So?"

"So I thought your husband might object less to my climbing through the window tomorrow morning if I simply slept inside."

Wriothesley stared. "I have never approved of the window."

"Yet you married her."

"What does that have to do with windows?"

Lyney pointed at me. "She understands."

"I do not."

He put his luggage down, then saw the jacket in my hands, and his expression softened. "That's from Mondstadt?"

"Yes."

"Old?"

"Yes."

“Chantal?”

I looked at him. There was no teasing. Just curiosity. I sat on the edge of the bed. “Yeah.”

He came over, sat beside me. “So—”

Oh no.

“What?”

He smiled. “Am I finally meeting her?”

My first instinct was defensive. Then I thought about it. Chantal. The girl who grew up beneath Mondstadt’s windmills. Who knew which alley took you fastest to the city gate. Who knew the sound of tavern music drifting across the plaza at night. Who knew the smell of dandelions after rain. Who had people there who remembered her before Fontaine. Before law. Before The Steambird. Before Wriothesley. Before Clorinde. Before Navia. Before Lyney. Before Shaun became the name I reached for first.

I looked down at the jacket. “She isn’t another person.”

“I know.”

“She’s me.”

“I know.”

“I just—” I exhaled. “Shaun is who I built.”

Lyney listened. “Chantal is who remembers what existed before.”

No one spoke. Wriothesley stood and came closer. Clorinde sat on my other side. Navia closed the file. I looked at all of them.

“This is going to sound stupid.”

Navia immediately said, “No.”

I smiled faintly. “I think I’m scared somebody’s going to call me Chantal and I’m going to—”

“What?” Clorinde asked.

“I don’t know.” Feel thirteen? Sixteen? Like every year between then and now collapses? Like leaving never happened? Like Shaun becomes something temporary? I couldn’t explain it properly.

Wriothesley crouched in front of me. “Then decide before you go what you want people to call you.”

I looked at him. "That's allowed."

Simple. Of course.

"You don't owe Mondstadt the version of you it remembers."

My throat tightened. Lyney added, "And you don't have to kill that version either." I turned toward him, and he shrugged slightly.

"You're allowed to have both."

Shaun. Chantal. Not enemies. Not masks. History. Continuity.

Navia smiled. "And if somebody gets confused, give them the relationship chart."

I laughed. "Absolutely not."

Wriothesley looked toward Lyney. "We should give him one."

"I have been asking."

"No."

Clorinde kissed my temple. "Go home." I looked at her. Not go investigate. Not go solve it. Go home. "And find out who you are there now."

That hurt in a good way. I nodded. "Okay."

Monday morning smelled like rain. Fontaine's station was crowded. Lyney stood beside me with one suitcase; I had three. He stared.

"What?"

"You're going for an investigation."

"I need equipment."

"You packed shoes in the photography case."

"Organisation."

"That word continues to do remarkable work in your life."

I ignored him.

Wriothesley stood in front of me. He had already given me four separate reminders involving meals, sleep, legal jurisdiction, and not entering abandoned buildings without telling anyone. "Anything else?"

"Yes." I sighed. "Of course."

He kissed me, long enough that Lyney looked away theatrically. When Wriothlesley pulled back, his forehead touched mine. "Come home." Fontaine home.

I smiled. "I will."

Clorinde hugged me next, then whispered, "No duels."

"I wasn't planning one."

"Good."

"Unless—"

"Shaun."

"Fine." She kissed me. "Call." "I will."

Navia nearly knocked me over with her hug. "You better send pictures."

"Obviously."

"Not evidence pictures."

"Fine."

"Pretty Mondstadt pictures."

"Yes."

"And food."

"Yes."

"And you."

I smiled. "Yes." She kissed me, then stepped back.

Neuvillette stood several metres away. I stared. "You came."

"I was informed there would otherwise be complaints."

Wriothlesley smiled. "You wanted to come."

Neuvillette ignored him and handed me a sealed diplomatic packet. "For Acting Grand Master Jean."

My eyebrows rose. "You contacted the Knights?"

"Yes."

"Officially?"

"You are entering another nation to investigate an international criminal operation."

"Right." Law. Borders. Things I occasionally forgot existed.

“The packet grants you formal judicial-cooperation status from Fontaine. It does not grant you authority to practice Fontaine law in Mondstadt.”

“I know.”

“It does not permit independent searches.”

“I know.”

“Or seizures.”

“I know.”

“Or arrests.”

“I KNOW.”

He looked at Lyney. “Make sure she knows.”

Lyney smiled. “With pleasure.”

“I hate both of you.”

Neuvillette’s expression softened. “Safe travels, Shaun.”

“Thanks.” Then, quieter: “Good luck, Chantal.”

I froze. He realised immediately. “Was that inappropriate?”

I stared at him, then smiled. “No.” Strangely — no. It didn’t feel like being dragged backward. Not from him. Not now. “Thanks.”

Furina came running onto the platform three minutes before departure. “WAIT!” Everyone turned. She carried a cake, of course.

“I made travel provisions!”

“That is cake.”

“Precisely.”

“Cake is not travel food.”

“You’ve said many incorrect things, but that may be the worst.”

She shoved the box into Lyney’s hands. “Protect it.” He bowed. “With my life.” I pointed. “Protect YOUR life.” “Also that.”

Furina hugged me. “Bring me something from Mondstadt.”

“What?”

She thought. “A bard.”

“I am not kidnapping Venti.”

“I did not name anyone.”

“You didn’t need to.”

The departure bell rang. I looked at everyone one last time. My husband. My wife. My girlfriend. Friends. Family. Fontaine. Home.

Then Lyney touched my hand. "Ready?"

I looked toward the train. North. Mondstadt. Another home. A different one.

"No."

He smiled. "Good."

"What?"

"Means you're taking it seriously."

I rolled my eyes, then stepped aboard.

Hours later, Fontaine disappeared behind us. The architecture changed first, then the landscape — stone softened into grass, waterways gave way to open roads, the air changed. You could always tell. Mondstadt wind had a particular way of moving. Fontaine air carried water. Mondstadt carried distance. Freedom. Memory.

I sat beside the window. Lyney slept against the opposite seat with his hat tilted over his face. Celestine Roche's case file rested unopened in my lap. For once, I wasn't reading.

Outside, fields, trees, and then, eventually, windmills. My chest tightened. There it was. Mondstadt. The city walls in the distance — familiar, smaller than memory, larger than emotion.

I hadn't realised I was holding my breath until Lyney spoke. "You okay?"

I looked over. His hat still covered his eyes. "You were awake?"

"Yes."

"Annoying."

"Boyfriend."

I turned back to the window. The gates drew closer, and I could already imagine the people inside — Jean, Kaeya, the Knights, the taverns, old roads, old acquaintances. People who might know Celestine Roche. People who might remember the earliest Triangle routes. People who might remember me.

The carriage slowed, and we entered the city. A guard checked our papers, then looked at mine, then at me, then back at the document. His expression shifted — not suspicion. Recognition.

My stomach tightened. “Martin?”

I smiled politely. “Yes.”

He stared for another second, and then something dawned. “Chantal Martin?”

There it was. Twenty years of memory compressed into two words. I expected something inside me to recoil. Instead, I breathed. Lyney’s hand found mine, and I looked toward him, then back at the guard.

“My name is Shaun now.”

He blinked, then smiled. “Shaun.” No argument. No demand for explanation. Just adjustment. “Welcome home.”

Home. The gate opened, and wind moved through my hair. Somewhere in the city, bells rang. And for the first time in years, I entered Mondstadt without pretending I was only visiting.

I had come for Celestine Roche. For the origins of the Triangle Network. For whatever had happened to Augustin’s sister twenty years ago. For the missing House operative. For forged identities. For the name trade. For the mysterious C buried in old correspondence. For the Martin family records that had apparently been used twice.

But standing beneath Mondstadt’s walls, another mystery suddenly felt just as important. Who had Chantal Martin been? And how much of her was still waiting here?

I tightened my grip around Lyney’s hand. He smiled. “Where first, Advocate Martin?”

Ahead of us, Mondstadt spread open beneath the windmills. The Knights’ headquarters. The cathedral. The market. Angel’s Share. Old streets. Old ghosts. Old friends. And somewhere beyond the city, a twenty-year-old secret connecting Fontaine’s corruption to Mondstadt’s past.

I smiled. “First?” I looked toward the city I had left. “We go home.”

Then the wind shifted. A single folded piece of paper blew across the stone road and struck my boot. I stared at it. Lyney stared too.

“No,” he said.

“I haven’t done anything.”

“You’re looking at it.”

“It hit me.”

“That does not legally obligate you to open it.”

“I’m a lawyer. I know that.”

I picked it up. Lyney sighed. “Of course.”

The paper was old, not ancient, but weathered. One side blank. On the other, a black triangle. Beneath it, written in faded ink:

Welcome back, Chantal.

Lyney stopped breathing. I stared at the words. The guard behind us was already gone. Crowds moved normally. Windmills turned. Someone laughed in the plaza. A bard played in the distance. Mondstadt looked exactly as it always had. Free. Bright. Open. Safe.

I folded the note once, placed it inside my coat, then looked toward the city.

“Okay.”

Lyney slowly removed his hat. “That tone worries me.”

I smiled. Not Advocate Martin. Not entirely. Something older. Something Mondstadt remembered.

“Apparently—” The wind caught my hair again. “—we’re already working.”

The End