

Walking toward her, oblivious to the gawkers around him, was Angélique's bohemian friend Charles, an aspiring poet if she recalled correctly, a slender fellow with a dandy's sense of fashion, disheveled black hair, and a full beard and mustache. He staggered down the boulevard covered in Paris yellow mud, obviously drunk (still? already?) and juggling three skulls.

“Charles!”

Jacqueline ran to intercept him. He stopped, and the skulls clattered to the pavement.

“What in the world are you doing with these?”

Charles hiccupped as he bent down to gather them up, then began juggling again. “I thought it was obvious.” He tossed one to her, chuckling. “Death, while in life, should be no less a part of it.”

She examined the skull, but it was unmarked. “I mean, how do you come to have these skulls? Where should they be? Surely your delight in the Empire of the Dead doesn't extend to grave robbing?”

He leaned a hand against her shoulder, grinning into her face. “You wound me, Mademoiselle Jacky. But I forgive you. For I am in love, and

when I'm in love, no one goes unforgiven." He took back the skull. "No, I found these upon the ground near a slight aperture that most likely leads to the developing ossuary below us, to speak of the Empire of the Dead. The Catacombs."

"But they're closed to the public."

He set a finger to his lips. "Which is not to say how these three escaped."

Jacqueline drew a sharp breath. Skulls from the Catacombs! Six million skulls, at least! "Charles, can you show me this aperture?"

He drew himself up, wiped a finger across his mustache, sniffed, and burped. "I'm not sure. I can try to retrace my steps once I remember where last I drank."

Jacqueline snatched his lapels and shook him. "Charles, I need—I need you to remember!"

"Easy, easy." He brushed her off. "I remember. There was a dead crow in the road. Near ... the Tureau Noir."

"Up this way, then." She headed north, dragging him with her.

"Yes. A dead crow. Legs in the air like a whore."

“Charles!”

“But pulsing with life. Don’t you know? Full of maggots. I think it was crushed by a cart. It looked like it was breathing, the way the maggots swarmed within, pulsing and writhing. The irony upon irony quite fascinated me. A carrion bird, itself carrion, dead but appearing to be full of life. Much like this city. Modernité, my dear Jacky. Life goes on not despite, but because of the rot.”

Jacqueline wagged her head. “You are one morbid soul, Charles.”

“I? I’m not the one looking to climb down into the Empire of the Dead.” He pointed at a streetlamp as they passed it, swaying to that side with the motion. “You’ll need light.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Probably more than just a candle or two. I’ll work that out.”

He turned her off the boulevard to a side street and then a narrower closed alley. “Here,” he announced with a dramatic flourish. “Le derrière d’Enfer.”

The buckled pavement had tilted up and separated from the street. Where they had once met, a long opening had caved inward, just wide

enough to let a slender body pass. Jacqueline stooped to examine it and found the yellow earth worn smooth.

“Someone comes through here regularly. It must be fairly usable then.” She stood and wiped her gloves. “I’m almost willing to hazard there are candles and lanterns stowed just inside the entrance, but I won’t wager my life.”

She went back to the boulevard to get her bearings and pointed west. “Rue Saint-Georges it is.”

Charles held back and bowed. “Not I. I have a rendezvous to keep with my beloved. I wish you good fortune on your hunt, Jacky.”

She hurried back to him and kissed him on the cheek. “You have been an invaluable help to me, Charles. Thank you.”

He blushed furiously but grinned as he saluted her and walked away. He began to whistle, indulging in the shocked glares of passersby.

Jacqueline headed back to the Barrière d’Enfer and hailed a fiacre. She stopped first at her house to change into clothing more appropriate for exploring the tunnels below the city. Suitably attired, she then took another fiacre to Rue Saint-Georges, number 10. No more than a

run-down barn, really. The temporary home of the “Adolphe Sax Musical Instrument Factory.”

Entering the factory redolent of mineral oil, solder, and burnt brass—all the fiery, bitter, metallic smells of a comfortable workshop, Jacqueline moved past the many worktables crammed into the small building, each occupied by three or four workers assembling saxhorns. Like a veritable brass band in waiting, one table held basses, both E ♭ and BB ♭, another held euphoniums, baritones, each to its own space in various stages of assembly. She barely had room to pass through, there were so many tables. Briefly, she lingered beside the worktable containing her personal favorite, flügelhorns, daring to trail a finger along the scrollwork on a bell, recalling the sensual effect the instrument had evinced in her when the virtuoso Jacques d’Ile had rendered several nocturnes and preludes in concert one enchanting evening chez Liszt, before moving forward past the cornets and a particularly crowded table filled with the bells of Sax’s pet project, the darling of the more radical composers, the saxophone.

Fortunately for her, due to the current conditions of his workshop,

Adolphe Sax was willing to interrupt his work on musical instruments of his own design to cast brass tubing and sheets for her to bring in extra funds, hoping to soon buy himself a real foundry.

As she moved through the factory, she could hear Sax on the far side, engaged in a lively discussion with an older man. They broke off as Jacqueline approached.

“Duval!” Sax greeted. “Meet Hector Berlioz. Jacqueline Duval.”

Berlioz kissed her hand perfunctorily, then took a second look at her, assessing her odd habiliment. Shrugging, he returned to Sax. “In any case, do not be surprised by commissions from Germany as I complete my tour. Will you be able to handle them?”

Sax waved him off. “Of course! Absolutely! By November, I’ll own half this block, I’m sure of it.”

“Good.” Berlioz shook his hand enthusiastically. “Until my return then, my friend.”

He strode out of the factory while Jacqueline shook her head. “Sax, you know you can’t—”

“Tut!” Sax stopped her. “You have no idea what I can and cannot

do.”

She smiled wryly. “I know you’re broke.” She reached into the inner pocket of her coat and brought out a wad of francs, which she pressed into his hand. “I hope this helps.”

“Every sou, each écu,” he replied with a grin. “Where shall I deliver your order?”

She gave him the address. “One more thing, if I may, Sax. I need a lantern. A Mueseler, if possible. Do you have one to lend?”

He wagged his head, chuckling at her. “You are the strangest woman, Madame Duval.”

But he did indeed have a safety lantern for her, and she came away satisfied, more so because she had managed to leave his shop before he started playing some new incarnation of his saxophone for her. She much preferred his flügelhorn.

Jacqueline debated returning chez Brodeur to retrieve Monsieur Claque, but she realized the huge machine wouldn’t fit down the gap in the street. Crossing her fingers that her mechanical friend wouldn’t cause any chaos, she headed back to the alley and the furtive entrance to

the Catacombs.