

~ Reflected Passion ~

by Aurelia

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SEX DISCLAIMER: This story depicts a loving/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read them. If depictions of this nature disturb you, there are many fine tales available on the internet that are not based on this premise. This is a SWP (Sex With Plot) and carries an NC-17 rating, containing both lesbian and heterosexual couplings.

VIOLENCE DISCLAIMER: Nope. Except for a smack in the jaw, that's it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: For the sake of us poor souls who don't speak French, I have included the English translation in brackets in a couple of scenes where the meaning is not obvious. This is for the benefit of the reader only, and does not indicate that the character understands what is being said.

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FEEDBACK: Hey, I'm not a mind reader! If you don't comment, I can't give you what you want. So, let me know what you think at: aurelia_fan@yahoo.com.au

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Chapter 1

"Dale! Try the basement! Some new stock came in the other day!"

"Thanks, Mr. O'Brien!"

I know this shop, and many like it, like the back of my hand. I scour the flea markets, the waterfront antique markets and these little second-hand furniture shops every spare moment I have, always on the lookout for that elusive piece that would make my career. Don't get me wrong, I love restoring old furniture, but I also wish for the day when my break will come.

I had worked in one of those larger antique clearing houses when I first came out of school, reinforcing my love for all things old, but like any large organization, it was more interested in the politics rather than the preservation of beautiful furniture. It broke my heart.

So, now I work alone but, as they say, I have to 'pay my dues'. I certainly don't have the reputation or the finances to play with the big boys, so I have to resort to freelancing, restoring old furniture for those families on fixed incomes who are looking for a piece of 'old world' for their new homes. It's my bread and butter and it pays my bills. *C'mon Dale, it's what you chose to do...*

I reach for the light switch, fumbling around in the dark until I feel the familiar fixture. The light blinds my eyes for a moment, casting an eerie glow across the room packed with everything from bookcases to bed heads and cupboards, and some things that defy description. I walk gingerly down the stairs, feeling it creak under my own slight weight. These things must groan under the substantial weight of Mr. O'Brien.

The newest stock is, of course, closest to me. The older pieces are slowly gathering dust and spiders from their long hibernation in the basement. None of these move unless he sells something upstairs.

I'm on the hunt for an armoire for a client, its age is not important, but something that doesn't look like the modern stuff. Not that I can blame them. Today's furniture is all steel and chrome. There is nothing like the smell of real wood and old leather. It can permeate the room with memories of a long-forgotten age. Perhaps, to some, it smells like grandma's house, but to me it is history.

This shop is my last stop before returning to my loft. I've been wandering around most of the morning without success. I spot a couple of new armoires in stock and quickly shuffle down the narrow passageway in an attempt to get them. No wonder Mr. O'Brien never comes down here, he'd get stuck between the furniture.

While one is a little too modern, the other one has possibilities. I quickly check its condition, vainly trying to look inside through the narrow crack of the open door. Hmm... maybe. There is no ticket on it and I only hope it's in my price range. While I consider this, I wander through what is left.

I just can't help myself. I'm still hoping that somewhere in this jumble of wood is my future. I look through an assortment of old paintings leaning against wall. I usually steer clear of art, but I use the exercise to think. Can I afford this? I don't get paid for it until I deliver the restored piece. I look through the half a dozen frames, not really liking what I see. My love is furniture, not art.

Tucked away, behind the artwork, is a mirror... well, its frame anyway. The paint is thick and pock-marked, a hideous pale blue in colour, and it makes me cringe. I suspect there are many layers of similarly abusive paint underneath it. Still, there is something about it that is calling to me.

I ascend the stairs, holding on for grim death as the wood under my feet bends under my weight. How on earth do they get this stuff down here in the first place? Perhaps I don't want to know.

I find the portly owner at his desk, leaning over the morning paper with coffee mug in hand, just as I always find him whenever I visit. He watches me over his glasses, perched on his ample nose. "See anything you like?"

"Perhaps. You have an armoire down there. Not the pink one. The other one with the small carved panel in the top corner."

"Yeah. That only came in yesterday."

"How much?"

"For you, sweetie, how about two hundred dollars? You're my best customer."

Two hundred. I wouldn't get much more than that in profit if I bought it. Still, it would fit the bill and he usually delivers it to me for nothing. Do I want to spend any more time looking? Not really. I still have a lot of work back at home.

Before I answer I pause, not wanting to seem too eager about what I really want to ask him. "I see you also have an old mirror frame down there. What do you want for it?"

"I have? I don't remember it."

"It's sitting behind the paintings against the wall. Big ugly thing painted a hideous blue."

"Oh, that. Came in a lot sale."

"I'm looking for something for home." *Keep calm, Dale, you want this. Appear disinterested. Yeah, right...*

"Yeah?" His senses pick up my interest. *Damn...*

"If the price is right..."

He studies me, looking for that small hint that will give away how much I want it. He has me mentally jumping around on hot coals waiting for his answer. This guy should have been a cop. I would have signed any confession he shoved under my nose.

A huge grin splits his chubby face as he leans over and ruffles my blonde bangs. "Just razzing you, Dale. You are sooo easy."

I couldn't help myself. I let out a huge sigh at the relief. "So... "

"I tell you what, you take the armoire and I'll throw in the mirror for free, OK?"

"OK. You old rascal you."

"Monday OK for delivery?"

"Sure, no problem."

I grudgingly hand over my credit card, feeling the agony of the money slipping through my fingers like I'm giving blood. Mr. O'Brien lets out a belly laugh at my distress. "You are so priceless, Dale. The look on your face..."

I sigh, "Yeah, I know. It's positively painful." I leave the shop to the echoes of his laughter.

* * * * *

The rest of the weekend drags by, even though I have a lot of work to do. I'm eager to see that mirror frame again. Luckily the truck arrives mid-morning, depositing my purchases in the middle of my work area. I check the armoire and realize that it will be fine for my client. It is now just a matter of stripping it back to bare wood and getting some oil into its surface.

I turn my attention to what I have been eagerly awaiting the last two days. I move the frame to the large window, looking at it carefully. It is massive, and quite heavy, for a mirror and will cost a pretty penny for the replacement glass. The colour is truly horrific, that sickly baby blue colour, which probably means it had hung in a child's room.

I try to look past the pale hue that seems to blind my eyes to everything around me. I have to concentrate hard to take in the lines of the wood. It's a relatively simple frame, ridged around three sides and decorated with a massive scrollwork panel across the top. It would have been quite elegant in its day, and would be again if I have anything to do with it.

I'm eager to get started but I know that works comes first. I put it aside for later, trying to turn my attention to the armoire.

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It's been six weeks since I have stripped back the frame to its grain. I am pleased to find that the wood is still sound, and should come up to a nice mahogany colour when I'm finally finished. I have been feeding the dried wood with coats of tung oil and I am now ready for waxing before ordering the mirror. I have taken special care with this piece, taking my time to ensure it's done right.

It's especially dark tonight. The moon is in its first quarter and the low moonlight basks the loft

in a gentle glow through the skylight. I stand there, running my fingers over the soft, clean lines of the wood, fingertips learning every contour and dip on this beautiful creation.

I have done a little research to try to find its history, but there is nothing definitive about it to pin it down. It is perhaps 18th century but I can't be sure, or perhaps someone has made a good replica of one. Either way, it's going to look beautiful in my bedroom.

Closing my eyes, I gently caress the walnut frame, letting the history in it sweep over me. I inhale deeply and can nearly smell a faint scent - not turpentine, tung or beeswax - but a woman's scent. I continue to daydream as my hand sweeps over the swirls and valleys in the wood, the surface soft as a woman's skin.

I blush at the thought, as I have never touched a woman's skin but my own, but my mind cannot help itself. *Dale, you desperately need to get laid...*

It's been a while, a long while. My mind questions that. Why? I'm a normal twenty year-old female, why don't I have a boyfriend? I have to admit my experience has been limited and rather unsatisfying - which is probably why it's limited. I've lied to myself and said I was too busy with work because the other possibility scares me.

My mind turns back to the wood, my pale eyes watching myself sliding both hands over the frame in front of me. Images flash into my brain of a raven-haired woman whose piercing blue eyes look into my very soul, extracting each and every secret I have hidden, even from myself. "Viens à moi, ma chérie..."

Now I'm really starting to worry. Not only am I having delusions, but she is speaking French. I can't even hallucinate in my native tongue. Perhaps it is all that turpentine. I'm lucky my hair hasn't fallen out yet.

Despite this feeling of detachment, I can sense a tickling in the pit of my stomach, something I haven't felt in a long time. Would it hurt? It has been a while for even that. *Dale, you are a sad, sad woman...*

Contact is broken and the sensory input gone once I leave the frame. I lie on my bed and search for a suitable fantasy to suit my purpose. Where are those images that used to satisfy me? I struggle, because each time I find those fantasy images they are overridden by a face with blue eyes and flying dark hair. Defeated, I turn to the face that refuses to leave me.

Behind closed eyelids I search for her, listening for that deep, dark voice which, in a few words, flows over me like molten honey. It shakes me to the core. Despite my self-denial, I am taken with a woman who, for all intents and purposes, comes from my fertile mind. The harder I try the more I block her image, my sense of propriety stopping such thoughts.

My fantasy evades me and I struggle on without it, reaching for that elusive completion. My nimble fingers go through the motions mechanically, but I know that it won't happen. The harder I try, the more frustrated I become and the further away I get from what I so desperately want. I

lie there panting, knowing that there is only one way I am going to reach my goal, but am I ready for that revelation?

I pound the bed in defeat. I can't even get satisfaction by my own hand. I've got to do something about this before it becomes a real problem. I look over to the frame leaning against the far wall. It all started with the mirror...

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Well, today I finally see the completed mirror on the wall, and if I don't say so myself, it has turned out exceptionally well. It has taken another week before it is finally complete. Handing over the mirror to get the glass fitted felt like I had given away my child. Because of its heaviness, the glaziers are nice enough to hang it up for me.

It was hard to decide where to hang it. The loft is an open plan living space, formerly a dance studio, so I place it where I can take advantage of some reflected light. It's not quite in my bedroom but close enough for me to see it. I think about that and realize it's pretty sad.

My first night alone with the newly completed mirror and I feel very proud of myself. Finally, here is something of great beauty that I have brought back to life. I lie in bed watching it, slowly drifting off to contented sleep.

Something in the night wakes me, bringing me to alertness in a hurry. I grab the baseball bat near my bed and go in search of the sound. It is soft at first, like whispering, as I move around checking doors and windows. Everything is locked but I still hear it, now louder with low moaning, not like ghosts moaning but a soft guttural sound that seems vaguely familiar to me. I move around the loft and the noise seems to be coming from my bedroom... no, from the mirror.

I approach softly, feeling the coolness of the wooden floor on the soles of my feet. As I get closer, the moaning becomes more animated, a low voice speaking softly in French. My phantom woman has returned. I would know that voice anywhere.

The newly polished glass reflects my image at first, but slowly gives away to an image behind it. Seated on a large bed is a woman, a large naked woman. I close my eyes, trying to clear my mind of any thought, and re-open them. The image is still there - my raven-haired woman is seated on the edge of her bed, another, smaller woman kneeling between her spread legs.

I can't help myself, I gasp. Rather loudly it seems, because the woman opens her eyes, staring straight at me. Embarrassed, I back away and out of sight. I'm going to see a doctor tomorrow... or visit a gay bar tomorrow night. This has to stop before I do some serious mental damage to myself.

The sounds continue to emanate from the glass and I find myself drawn to them. Hallucination or no, I'm curious, as my previously unknown voyeuristic tendency shows itself. I feel like I'm on a balcony, looking down onto a stage as the play unfolds. The woman's eyes are closed, a

beguiling smile graces her full lips as the smaller woman in front of her is pleasuring her. I cannot see exactly what is going on as her tiny body is blocking my view, but my mind fills in the visual gaps. I may not be gay, but I'm not uneducated in such matters either.

I feel that tingling in my stomach again, gnawing at me as I watch them together. Those pale blue eyes open and watch me, her excitement rising with every second. She has not acknowledged her companion; her eyes are solely on me and I feel a light sweat break out on my skin, flushed with a rush of adrenaline, as she draws me in to feel her pleasure as my own. I am not aware that my own hands have wandered, imitating her stimulation, until I am slowly climbing along with her.

Passion-filled eyes move from me to the kneeling woman, demanding more in a deep, smoky voice that touches something very basic in me. "Oui Madeleine... comme ça... continue..." She looks back up to me for a moment before a strong pulse of excitement causes her head to roll back, drawing an anguished cry and exposing her swan-like neck to me. Her pale skin is slick with perspiration, trickling down her drenched body. I watch a bead roll down to her breast, hanging for a moment on a perfect nipple before dripping to her thigh.

My eyes are now riveted to the rest of her body. I had ignored it before, because I could not see past the intensity in her eyes. Perfect. Absolutely perfect. Each part of her is like finely crafted porcelain, pale but combined in perfect harmony and presenting a very enticing picture.

No more denial Dale... I can't fight this anymore, and the final acceptance of this fact lifts a great weight off me. I suppose I have always known it, but family and society had demanded my compliance. The only reason I ever had boyfriends was to please my family. I now finally understand that.

My mind mulls over this new revelation as I watch her. She is now babbling, but I know what she is saying. Her excitement is my own, and I can't help it as a whimper escapes me. My fingers find those places that stimulate me as I watch her hips move in that ancient rhythm that will bring her completion. She watches me as I watch her as we both reach for that pinnacle, sliding over the edge into oblivion as it takes us both. We cry out in unison as pure sensation rushes through us, joined together in mutual pleasure.

I stand there stunned and panting. Did I see it or is it all in my imagination? My fantasy takes a moment before standing, walking over on unsteady legs towards the mirror. I see her body in full view for the first time.

My eyes swiftly scan the room, noting the antiques liberally scattered around. I spot the discarded clothing and it looks old, perhaps a century or two ago. Looking back at my phantom woman, she is in surprisingly good health for a woman of leisure. Drawing my eyes over her from her feet, I take in the long legs, the flat, well-toned stomach, full rounded breasts and a beautiful aristocratic face. She still has makeup on - heavy pancake with dark outlined eyes and ruby-red lips - as if she had come from a ball or something. I can see the long, even planes of her cheekbones and high forehead. But most of all, those eyes, now closer to me, are a bright vibrant hue of blue, the colour of the sky on a bright summer's day. Exquisite.

We just stand there looking at each other, possibly wondering if we are imagining what has just happened. She turns away and walks to her companion on the bed, casting one final glance over her shoulder before turning her attention back to reciprocating the pleasure. I wait a moment longer, gracing her with a smile and turning away, deciding my brain has taken in enough for the night. Perhaps after a good night's sleep, it will seem clearer in the light of day.

Chapter 2

I wake the next morning, lying on the rumpled ruins of my sheets, contemplating what happened last night. Did it happen? Or was it just a fantastic creation of my fevered imagination? Did I want it to be real? Or was this my mind trying to accept my sexuality?

Half an hour later, I am no clearer on any of the questions I pose to myself. Is this a sign? I convince myself that it was all a dream, a wild fantastic dream, and hopefully this is the end of it. Then, why do I feel like she is not through with me yet?

I get up and go to the mirror but only see what I should see, my reflection, and nothing more. I look closely into the depths of the glass for any trick of light or perhaps some flaw in the mirror, but there appears to be none. I am baffled. I must be going nuts. That is the only conclusion. My life of solitude is finally catching up with me.

The frame is cool but warms to my touch as I run my fingers around the edges. I feel nothing. Not a tremor. In the light of day, my thoughts seem silly and frivolous, expressing my own inner desires for the love and comfort that has been missing from my life of late.

I get on with my work for the day, trying not to ruminate over last night, and manage to lose myself in the craft for a while. Despite myself, the time flies by and I'm pleased with what progress I have made.

Evening approaches and I'm filled with fear and trepidation at what the night will bring. On the one hand, I am terrified that I am imagining it all, and on the other hand, I am terrified that I am not. This roller coaster of emotions I am on is out of control, and I can do nothing but hold on tight and hope the ride will end soon.

* * * * *

Sleep is escaping me. I'm wound up like finely coiled spring and nothing is easing the tension. The bedside clock ticks slowly, and the sound is deafening in the quiet of the loft. My ears strain to hear any sound from the mirror but, to this moment, there has not been so much as a squeak.

I am so exhausted that my eyes close despite my apprehension, and I finally feel that creeping lethargy that will lead me into the arms of quiet slumber. Tendrils of sleep gently pull me in and

I doze off, unaware of voices murmuring in the distance.

It only seems like minutes later that I awake to hear that sound again, fresh in my mind as if it were only just spoken. Again? This woman must be insatiable...

I don't waste my time looking for the source of the noise. I get up and go straight to the mirror. Cautiously, I approach, not wanting to give away my presence, although I suspect she will know anyway. As I face them, she looks up, knowing the moment I have arrived. A slow, sexy half smile crosses those full lips, exuding a sensuality that extends to her eyes as they watch me watching her.

How does she do this to me? I am so lost in that intense gaze, pinning me to where I stand. I am helpless but to watch as she takes her pleasure, torturing me with images that I know will be branded into my memory and haunt me the rest of my days. Tonight is not a small woman, but a man. Is he her husband? Her lover? A total stranger? Does she care?

They are both kneeling on the bed and she is in his lap. A slow torturous rhythm alerts me to what they are doing, despite the fact that they are both naked. Her gentle whimpering is all I need to hear to know what she is feeling, perhaps not as intensely as last night, but pleasure just the same.

This voyeuristic tendency of mine causes me concern, but it doesn't stop me from watching them. No, watching her. There is no one else. My whole world has narrowed down to one tall, exotically beautiful woman, who, in passion's embrace, is showing me everything she feels in that one look. It is breathtaking.

By force of will, I keep my hands at my sides, steadfastly refusing to fall into this vortex of spiralling emotions again. As if to change my decision, she increases her pace on the man's lap, using the long, lean muscles in her thighs to raise and lower herself. Helplessly, I watch those muscles bunch and flex as she works her body into a frenzy, soft skin sliding over taut muscle and tendon. The light sheen covering her radiates in the candlelight, lending a heavenly glow to her body.

She leans back, extending her arms to brace herself on the bed, knowing full well that she presents herself to me. I lean forward, placing my hands on either side of the mirror, and hang my head in defeat, unable to watch any longer. Walking away will not silence her cries and I am broken, listening to her fulfilling her desire. When there is nothing but silence, I leave, not looking once to see her reaction. I am so very tempted to find my baseball bat.

* * * * *

I can stay away no longer. She has teased and tortured me for the last week, shamelessly flaunting her sexuality in front of me, knowing full well that I am watching her. Those bedroom eyes and that 'come hither' voice, low and hypnotic, call to me across time and space.

I stand before the mirror, watching her sleep. The curtains of the canopy bed are drawn aside, her tall, lithe body lying in quiet repose. I am spellbound. I have seen her body, for she has shown it to me many times, and it is burned into my psyche.

My fingers reach out to touch the solid surface, the barrier that separates me from her, and it gives way, allowing my hand to slip through. It shocks me that the surface has surrendered and it's an unexpected turn of events. My thoughts have now moved from dream to reality and the ramifications are now life-altering. I pull out my hand and examine it, looking for any ill effects of the experiment and I see none. I test the glass again.

I consider my next move. Do I go to her and risk not being able to return, or do I stay behind this mirror, forever wanting what I have forbidden myself to have? This is a momentous choice. I am contemplating giving her what I have given no other woman in my twenty years. I know this is a rash decision, but I am unable to stop myself.

I go to the kitchen for coffee, as my mind presents its case like a well-oiled debate, each side marshalling arguments for and against such a move. In a trance, I watch the clock slowly tick on, unable to decide who to award the win to. Perhaps that is my problem. I'm thinking too much with my head and not enough with my heart.

I know I am not sleeping well. The circles under my eyes deepening with every night's missed sleep attest to that fact. I am anxious, irritable and preoccupied with her. There is no choice in this. For my sanity, I have to go. I wash my coffee mug and return to the mirror.

I know that she sees me in the mirror as I see her. She has brazenly moved the mirror to overlook her bed so that I have an unobstructed view of her, or perhaps it is so she can watch me. I gather my courage and step through the glass with a certain amount of hope that I can return...

The room is in semi-darkness, lit only by the dying fire in the fireplace. I am cold and it takes me a moment to realize I am naked. I peek back through the mirror to see my clothes scattered in a pile on the floor. Well, now I know. Only I can come through, nothing else.

I put a couple of logs on the fire, trying to warm up my chilled skin. The embers burst into flame with the addition of fuel, casting flickering shadows around the high walls. I walk towards the bed and stop, afraid of coming closer. Her dressing gown is draped over a nearby chair and I reverently lift it to my nose, smelling a scent I had only dreamed of in my fevered imagination.

I put it on to cover my nakedness, feeling it slide over my skin. The scent drifts up to my nostrils, laying a cloud of swell-smelling perfume to waft around me. Slowly, my body warms to the feel of the soft lace, taking away the goosebumps that dot my skin.

I stand there mesmerized. Now that I am in the same room as her, I can see clearly every line and curve of her, her soft skin unblemished by makeup. She is much younger than I had anticipated - perhaps no more than 25 to 30 years old - so young, for a mistress of the house.

She shifts in the bed and I hold my breath, fearing that I will wake her up. Her body rolls towards me and I stand still, trying not to disturb the air flowing around me. She settles and I release my breath, wisps flowing gently over my parted lips. Before I have finished that single breath, her eyes open and watch me, pinning me in place.

There is no movement of body between us, only our eyes. Darkened orbs skim over me, leaving tingles in their wake. She hesitates and I know that the apparel I am wearing is not closed, the loose cloth hanging from my breasts, acting like a curtain of its own and hiding what I know she wants to see. I can see her mind filling in the details that are hidden in shadow, her gaze memorizing every detail of me.

Those eyes return to my face, not wavering, as she slowly pushes away the covers. A slow, predatory smile crosses her face, the full rose lips spreading into full blossom, as she watches my eyes return the favour. Her body is covered in soft linen and lace and I am not able to see what she is offering me but, unlike her, my mind can effortlessly fill in the gaps. She knows what I am thinking as if it is imprinted on my forehead.

"Who are you?" That deep, dark voice that has tormented my dreams, spoke. I am surprised that I understand her. Perhaps I wish to hear her speak French, the language of love, for that is what she speaks to me. In the throes of her passion, she has spoken directly to me, her tongue lovingly rolling over every syllable as if caressing it. Oh yes, she may have been having sex with someone else, but she was loving me.

I make no reply, but stand there dumbfounded. She sits up and moves her feet to the floor, lightly perching on the edge of the mattress. "Do you have a name?"

My name? What's my name? All thought has flown under her intense regard of me. Hesitantly, I step back, trying to keep distance between us. She stands and I feel myself having to look up. She towers over me by a good six inches and the force of her personality fills every corner of the room.

"Don't be afraid, little one." Afraid? I am terrified. She swamps my senses. I feel myself stepping back towards the mirror, searching vainly for myself. "Don't go."

Not today, perhaps tomorrow. I step back through the mirror, safe that the barrier is between us. She approaches the mirror, picking up the discarded gown and brings it to her nose. The smell brings a smile to her lips and our eyes meet, filled with promise for another day.

Those vibrant blue eyes slowly slide down my now naked body, gliding over my skin like a lover's caress. My secret is now out; she has seen me as I have seen her.

* * * * *

Chapter 3

Two nights have passed since I stood in her room. I have ignored her pleas to talk and I can't take it any longer

"Ma chérie... je t'en prie."

I have my pillow over my head, trying to block out that wonderfully hypnotic voice. She is like a siren of the sea, calling to me to shipwreck myself on her shore. But I know what she is like. Her appetites are varied and deep, and I cannot let myself drown in that.

"No. Go away!"

"Pourquoi?"

"No."

"Viens me parler... Umm, talk to me, ma chérie."

"No."

"Why? What have I done?"

She is going to keep bothering me until I explain. Sighing deeply, I wrestle myself out of bed and approach the mirror. As expected, she is sitting there waiting patiently for me, dressed in her nightgown. Those sad azure eyes staring back at me are nearly my undoing, but I stay strong. This can't happen. It will only lead to pain... my pain.

"No more."

"What is your name?" I stare back unmoved.

"Please, chérie, what is your name?"

I relent. "Dale Wincott."

"Dale..." She rolls her tongue over my name and I melt. This is not going well.

"And your name?"

"Françoise Marie Aurélie de Villerey." *Well, that is a mouthful.* She can see my stunned reaction and gently laughs, a deep throaty chuckle that tickles my senses. No, not going well at all.

"Please, chérie, call me Françoise."

"Françoise." Her eyes widen as I say her name, my own voice rough with emotion. *So, she is also vulnerable.*

"Why do you dismiss me?"

"Because we are from two different worlds."

"Of course we are, chérie. Even I can see that."

"I can't do this. You ask too much."

"I think you can, you just have to come to me."

"No, I can't. I will not be a one-night stand."

"Pardon? I do not understand. What is this 'one-night stand'?"

I had hoped to just end this without explanation, but I've backed myself into a corner and I will have to say why. "Each night there is someone new. I have seen you with your paramours, and I will not be one of your conquests."

She looks slightly shocked that I would think such a thing. "Never."

"I have watched you this last week making love, moving from one person to the next."

"They mean nothing, chérie."

"Stop calling me that. I have a name."

She sighs, "Dale..." I can't help but shiver every time she says my name in that deep alto voice. I should have let her continue to say 'chérie'; it was a lot safer.

"Mon Dieu, Dale, since I saw you I have no other 'paramour'. No one else, only you."

I nearly choke on her claim. "Yeah, right," I mumble.

"Pardon?" She is offended that I question her sincerity. I shake my head, trying to dismiss her, but she will not take that for an answer. "Tell me, chérie..." She deliberately uses that word to irritate me.

"Tell you? All right, I'll tell you. Every night, every single night, you have made love to someone, knowing very well that I'm there. Even before me, you are not loyal to one partner. What makes you think I'm going to change that?"

She shifts around on the chair she has placed in front of the mirror, as if she is attending to her toilette. "Chérie, I am a veuve... a 'widow'. I have no husband. What would you have me do?"

I know I am being unreasonable but I fear that once I give myself I will be cast aside, and I know

I cannot tolerate that. Maybe I am just looking for a fight to justify my need to keep her at arm's distance. I knew I was in trouble when I was in her presence the other night. The force of her personality and charisma was overpowering. I would drown in her and I wouldn't care.

"Why did you do that to me? Tease me."

"Tease?"

"Umm... torment."

"Ahh, torment. I cannot have you. Is it not the next best thing?"

She has a point. It is the best possible solution to an impossible problem. If I am true to myself, she has made me feel things I had never felt before, easing a tension that had been quietly simmering in the background for some time now. But I still can't help but feel that I am one of many in her life. I don't know if I can accept that.

Admittedly, since I had visited her she has been quiet. But two nights does not make a woman celibate. Isn't it only a matter of time before her sexual nature re-surfaces and she is once again seeking out companionship? I mentally step back from this conversation and slap myself in the head. We haven't even made love and I'm already possessive. Am I really being fair here?

"I may not like it, but yes it is. But I cannot let it continue."

"But, Dale, you can stop all this."

"I can?"

"All you have to do is come to me." An impish grin crosses her face, knowing she has won this verbal duel.

I gather what little dignity I have left and leave, crawling back into bed at the sound of her gentle laughter.

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The next night, she is at it again. This time, the sound is not muted but wild and untamed, harsh guttural cries screaming out my name. I know she is doing this on purpose, trying to wear down my resolve. When I can stand it no longer, I get up to go to the kitchen for coffee. I cannot help myself and look as I pass the mirror, seeing her smirk at me.

I hold my head in my hands, gazing down into the murky depths of my cup as the screaming continues. I'm glad that I have no neighbours, otherwise the police would be knocking on my door by now. Now that would take some explaining.

For half an hour, she continues her tirade, moaning in French and yelling my name frequently.

At that point, I am smiling at the ridiculous lengths she is going to get my attention. Should I be flattered that she is still trying to entice me over?

I wander back to the mirror, expecting to see a mass of bodies in full-fledged animation, but she is just sitting there, just as I had found her the night before, with a shy smile on her beautiful face. I can't help but return that smile, my emotion rising to my eyes. As I watch, I can feel a tear slide down my cheek.

I close my eyes, unable to look at her, and I feel a thumb gently wipe away the moisture. I look to find her hand through the glass, a sweet smile on her face in understanding. My own hand, of its own volition, has come up to cup hers and we stand there, spanning time and space, looking into each other's eyes, blue and green, acknowledging what was a simple truth.

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Despite my reservations, I give in. Like the Titanic, I know I am going on a voyage to disaster and will probably end up going down with the ship. She is my iceberg, crashing against me and breaking me in two, leaving me to either sink or swim.

I take her hand and step through, feeling that familiar coldness as my clothes leave my body. Consciously, I try to cover myself, but find my hands are held firm by long, strong fingers. Françoise guides me towards the fire, grasping her dressing gown in passing. She wraps me in the cloth, her body surrounding me in warmth over the soft material. We finally touch and it is heaven. Why have I fought this?

We both face the cheerful fire, watching fiery embers float into the air and up the chimney flue. There is no sound but the crackling of the flames and the settling of the house. It is strange not to hear the constant sounds of civilization - traffic, sirens and far-off voices - which have been a constant presence in my life. The silence is deafening to my ears. A gentle breeze wafts over my hair as my phantom woman rests her chin on the top of my head.

Her arms encircle me, drawing me closer to her body. The flimsy material is no barrier to what I feel pressed into my back and it is strange. The realization of what is about to happen hits me and I stiffen, not sure if I'm prepared for something so foreign to me.

"What?" Her soft, whispered voice is concerned.

I don't want to appear foolish but what do I do? She will find out sooner or later, and perhaps now is the best time before I do something wrong. "Ah, I've never made love to a woman before." I hold my breath, awaiting her reaction.

A strong hand comes up to my chin and pulls my face around to hers, tipping it up to meet her eyes. Her finger gently runs down my nose to stop at my lips. Unconsciously, I open my mouth, letting her finger slip inside. Those blue pools darken as I watch, my tongue running around her digit enticingly.

"I would never have known," she whispers, "ma chérie". She draws out the endearment, deep, soft and full of want. I can feel that familiar pull deep down, unable to move as she moves in, slowing pulling out her finger and replacing it with her soft lips.

That first touch is electric and we both withdraw with astonished looks. This is going to be something special and profoundly life altering. Is all this meant to happen? Is this our destiny?

Her large hand reaches behind my neck and pulls me in, her mouth seeking out mine in need. Our exploration is slow and purposeful, lips and tongues discovering each other for the first time. Françoise is not demanding but very gentle, not wishing to scare me, and I am grateful for her consideration. I know this woman is very experienced and knowledgeable, and I am worried about stumbling in this dance we have embarked on.

Her fingers caress my face, pads slowly sliding over my cheeks, and her eyes follow the path her fingers are taking. This close, I can see how blue those eyes are, and there is a vibrancy to their paleness that make them glow in the low light. I look up as she is mapping my face, mapping my own terrain with equal thoroughness. Françoise is truly an extraordinarily beautiful woman. "Incroyable..." She giggles. The woman actually giggles. "Did I say it wrong?"

"Non. Incroyable, indeed." She pulls me into a hug, my face resting in the crook of her neck. Instinctively, my tongue darts out, licking the flesh presented to me. The tang of it sits on my tongue, appealing to my taste buds like a rare vintage wine, and I must have more. I nip and taste her, finding her pulse point and concentrating my lips on that spot until she whimpers. Her breathing picks up, uneven wisps brushing my neck.

She is content to let me explore, and I continue to taste her, getting drunk on her intoxicating skin. I cannot help it. I am addicted after one morsel. I move to the other side of her neck, indulging myself once more in this veritable feast. She is not idle while I feed. Her hands slip under her dressing gown and are feeding on me themselves, sliding from one end of my back to the other. Her touch is fire, leaving cinders in their wake as they move across my heated skin.

I am totally swept away by the gamut of emotions running riot through me. Like a bolt of lightning from the sky, I realize this is what has been missing from my life. She has awakened me and I finally see it all so clearly now.

The cloth slides from my body with barely a whisper, falling at my feet. The chill is quickly replaced by warmth as her hands are everywhere, sensitising my body to what is about to come. Her lips return to mine, attacking me with more urgency as our passion rises. My mind quickly reaches meltdown as she draws a hunger from me that I thought I would never have.

All thought is driven from me except the need to love and be loved. I reach with trembling fingers for the ties on her gown, unable to grasp them firmly. Her hands come up to mine and help me in my mission to find her skin. I look up into those eyes, thankful that she is letting me set the pace, even perhaps slowing me down to enjoy the journey first. My emotions are set on full speed ahead and the scenery is flying by too fast to enjoy the view.

I step back a moment and take a deep breath. A smile tugs those sensuous lips in front of me, amused at my impetuous nature. I raise my eyebrow at her and her smile broadens, filtering up to her eyes. She taps her finger on my nose in delight and I snap at it in frustration, trapping it in my mouth and sucking furiously. That'll teach her to laugh at me.

Little did I know what effect that would have on her as her eyes drop to my mouth. I watch the colour darken in her irises, settling to a midnight blue as her raw sexual energy rises to the surface. Sparks fly from those eyes, boring into my own as if it were a tangible thing.

Her nightgown is quickly discarded and she pulls me to the bed, drawing me down with her to the clean sheets. Her hands bury themselves in my long blonde hair, massaging my scalp, while her lips find mine, teasing and nipping at me as she tries to control her raging emotions. I know she wants to ravish me in the worst way possible, but she fights herself to take her time. She wants it all and will do what she has to do to achieve that. I am forever grateful for her love and her passion.

She buries her face in my neck, willing herself to calm down. I lie still, waiting for her to continue when she is ready. We just lie there, her body covering mine. My hands touch her back, idly tracing the defined muscle I find there. Slowly, I run my fingers up and down, feeling the strange sensation of soft, velvety skin.

Warm lips tickle my neck and I giggle, my body convulsing in reaction. Another nip and I laugh again, my hands instinctively clutching at her back. The muscles under my fingers clench and bunch as Françoise raises herself up on her hands. Her raven hair acts as a curtain around our faces, darkening our eyesight. I feel her approach me and a tongue reaches out for its mate, meeting in a dance of domination.

I have no intention of dominating her but I play the game nonetheless, enjoying the utter freedom in just being with her. I absorb each and every emotion she introduces me to, not wanting to miss a moment of this first time, a time that will forever leave an impression on me. Despite all my best intentions, I have fallen for her... hard.

Those wonderfully soft lips move down my chin and traverse my neck, reverently placing mere whispers of a kiss across my skin, lightly brushing the fine hairs and alerting me to their passing. She continues downward, occasionally stopping on her journey to investigate an errant piece of skin.

I feel her approach where I want her to go. A slight rasp is heard over the snap and crackle of the nearby fire, her tongue tasting my breast, slowly circling her target in ever decreasing circles. My fingers are in her hair and I try to bring her down to ease my agony, but she won't be rushed. I meet resistance and growl in frustration. Those tormenting lips smile against my skin, knowing she has won this round.

"Please..." I am not above begging for what I want.

"Non... pas tout de suite, mon amour." Her voice rumbles against my skin, vibrating into me. "Patience." That French accent, spoken in low sensual tones, hits me in the basest of ways. I explode in a flurry of motion and flip her over so that I am on top of her.

"Please," I repeat, and see her smile, one side of her mouth tipped up in invitation. "D'accord, ma chérie." I'm beginning to love that endearment.

I slide my body down hers, feeling skin against skin, and shivering with the sensation. I had never, in my wildest dreams, expected it to be like this. So gentle, so freeing, so wonderful, so exciting and so... right. Was it who she was or what she was? Perhaps it was both. Now is not the time to analyse this but to just enjoy.

I sit up, her pubic bone resting against me intimately. I look down at her, drawing my fingers down her soft, silky skin, coming to rest on her chest. She again smiles that half-smile, so sensuous and beguiling, silently tempting me to continue. My eyes track down her body to where my fingers are caressing her, learning her terrain inch by precious inch.

I draw a gasp from her and know I have found my starting point. Lips replace fingers, feeling skin slowly and thoroughly give way under my questing tongue. Her breathing becomes ragged as I continue to roam, touching, tasting, teasing and frustrating her like she had me only moments ago.

"Ma chérie, please."

Two can play this game. "Non." I continue my discovery of her. Nimble fingers help in my search, feeling her response to me under their tips. Her skin has a fine sheen of sweat as she writhes under me, trying valiantly to manoeuvre me to her advantage. I know that she can easily take what she wants, but she tries to stay within the rules of the game.

I am unaware that my own body has not been idle while I have been learning my craft from a very willing teacher. I stop mid-assault when I find a particularly sensitive area. Without conscious thought, I throw my head back, finding I have lost contact with reality. I swivel on her, trying to find that elusive spot that will send me over the edge. I am not aware of anything - not the woman underneath me, the air that I breathe nor the coolness of the room.

It hits me like a cyclone, sweeping away my senses, leaving me flailing in the maelstrom. I forget to breathe as wave after wave of excruciating pleasure flows through me. I am undone and helpless, unable to gather any strength to stop myself. Time has no meaning and it seems to go on and on, pulsing through me in slowly decreasing intensity until I am limply sitting on her, twitching in time to my own heartbeat.

She places her hand between us and I feel her thumb, stimulating me as no one had before, sending me into another series of contractions. I had no strength before, but now I am truly exhausted, my body reacting to her without my permission. My eyelids refuse to open, they are so heavy. One of her hands is resting on my hip, holding me in place as she continues to play me.

"No... no more." I beg her to stop, feeling myself teeter from exhaustion. I force my eyes open to look at her. Those blue eyes are nearly black as she watches me, her sexuality cloaking her like a suit of armour. What am I to do? She has taken every bit of energy out of me and I have nothing to give her in return.

Françoise pulls me down into her embrace, cuddling me as I continue to twitch in the aftermath. She reaches down and pulls up the blankets, wrapping us in a cocoon of warmth, silently watching me as I drift off to sleep.

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Chapter 4

I have no idea how long I have slept, but it is not long enough. My body is a dishrag. She has taken every bit of strength I have and I struggle to summon the energy to move. Finally, her warmth is seeping into me, slowly filling me with renewed vigour to continue. A gentle hand is drawing idle circles on my back and I look up to see my fiery French phantom staring into the fire, her strong aristocratic features outlined in the warming glow. Her mind appears to be miles away, unaware that I have woken up.

I turn to my own introspection. That was... I just can't find the words. I have misgivings about my stamina, but I want her again. I examine my energy reserves and figure I can just manage that before I give out.

My hand is on her stomach, idly circling her belly button. I can feel her head turn and sense her eyes on me. Raising my gaze, I look into soft sky blue eyes, smoky with undisguised simmering passion.

"Tu es si belle, little one." Her smile extends to her eyes, sending her laugh lines skittering across her face. "Bien. Très bien."

"Yeah?"

"Yes." Her long fingers come up to my chin, tipping me to meet her soft, enticing lips. I cannot help myself. I am putty in her capable hands. My lips attach themselves to her neck, but she stops me. I don't understand. She rolls me onto my back and looms overhead. "No. Let me show you first."

"You don't need to..."

"But I want to. Please chérie, let me." What can I say? I'm not stupid enough to say no. I would be an idiot not to want what I had just experienced to happen again. It might just kill me, but hey... what a way to go!

I acquiesce to her request, lying on the cool sheets with my arms spread outwards. Surrendering without a fight, I let her do to me whatever she wants. A sly smile crosses those perfect features and I start to worry. What ideas have I put into her head?

She wastes no time and heads straight for my breast, latching on like a newborn and drawing an excited whimper out of me. How does she do that? One touch, one look and I dissolve into a puddle. As she suckles, I feel my strength return, expanding exponentially to my rising passion.

My frustration is building inside me, and I don't know how much longer I can leave her alone while she has her way with me. I rise to my elbows and watch her every move. She looks up from her work, continuing to draw me into a whirlpool of passion and desire.

For a moment, my head falls back as she bites down playfully, that twinge of pain triggering nerve endings across my skin, finally settling in my groin. I growl quite loudly, causing her to look up in concern. I glare at her and see her eyes widen at my feral look. As I watch her eyes darken with her own want, I mutter those two words we both want to hear.

"Take me." I know nothing more has to be said. She will carry out my wishes as her own, taking me to heights I hadn't even fantasized about. Gone is the gentleness she has shown me, replaced with a demanding touch that sweeps me away, leaving my defences shattered.

She blazes a path down my body, hungrily devouring all she finds, until she reaches her ultimate goal. My voyeurism re-surfaces as I watch, eagerly taking in every nip, kiss and lick she imparts. Carefully, I study the mistress at work, for I know I will be tested later, as her large hands hold me still, long fingers nearly spanning my waist.

Slow, sensual moans escape me and she looks up. Electric blue eyes peer at me through a curtain of midnight black hair, full of undisguised lust and passion. A long, pink tongue peeks out between full, moist lips, presenting me with a hint of what is to come. I am taken with an image so visually erotic that I dare not move for fear of breaking the spell.

I am slipping further into a state of deep hunger, and nothing has ever felt so raw and demanding as the want I feel right now. In slow motion, I watch her head dip, her tongue extending to reach me and make contact. At the moment she finally touches me, I crumble. I have no will but the need to feel the pleasure she is giving me in this one perfect moment, feeling that intimate touch for the first time with such abandon.

I know I should be embarrassed at the position she has me in but I cannot summon up the strength to complain. It is such a sweet, sweet torture that suspends me on the verge of pain. I cannot help myself. I have to look again. Her eyes open, watching me as I watch her, her hunger reflected in those lapis depths. I try to keep eye contact as she continues her exploration, learning every dip and curve of me intimately, but it becomes too difficult.

My head falls back and my brow wrinkles in concentration, feeling nothing but the pounding sensations narrowed down to one point on my anatomy. She has found me. "No, please!" As much as I want to end it there, I feel the need for her to surround me - to feel her power and her

sexuality flowing through me. I pull on her arm, silently asking her to join me in mutual pleasure.

My raven-haired beauty lies beside me, resting herself on her elbow so she has full access. One arm cradles my shoulders while her other hand glides down my torso, taking up residence between my legs. She ravages my mouth, drawing the very breath out of me with her passionate entreaty.

Her touch is rough and torturous, but not painful. She has expertly found my desire buried deep within me, bringing it to the surface with infinite care. I abandon every deep-seated inhibition I have and just feel the kaleidoscope of emotions rushing through my psyche.

She whispers to me in French, some endearments I recognise and others I don't, but I don't really care. That deep, smoky voice rolls over those words that speak to my soul, their meaning found in the intonation and the desire. Those low words spur me onto a higher level of arousal, and I am unable to stop my hips from moving with her hand. She watches my face, taking in the flushed skin and the darkening orbs, a slow smile breaking across her face as my breathing picks up, gasping for air that I cannot find.

I don't want to jump into the abyss alone and I reach for her. She questions me but I reach up and draw her down, my arms strengthened by the adrenaline flowing through me. I take her mouth, plundering it in search of her hidden treasure. She vainly tries to keep up her ministrations but her body is now blocking her hand. I raise my leg and she gasps, the stimulation taking her by surprise.

"Come with me." I am desperate. I need her like I need air. She moves along me, sliding back and forth in slow deliberation as her drive rises. Her hipbone has replaced her hand and every movement is pressing on me. I have to stop kissing her because I can't breathe, puffing and blowing like I've just run the marathon, and feeling a little light-headed as I try to drag in precious air.

My hands come up to her back, and I feel those long, lean muscles working hard, bunching and flexing with effort as Françoise pushes us both into a frenzy of passion and towards our completion. So close... I'm so close that I can nearly taste it. I lend my hands to the effort, slipping down to her cheeks and pulling her towards me. My head tips back as it rolls over me like a thunderstorm.

Bolts of lightning and thunder crash around us both as we stand in the downpour. The sound is so loud in my ears that I don't hear myself screaming out in pleasure. I am overshadowed by the sheer power of this connection, and it leaves me shaking, knowing that what I had experienced before pales in comparison. My iceberg has turned out to be a rescue ship.

Françoise has collapsed on top of me, her head buried in my neck and panting furiously. Moments pass and neither of us move, as much from not wanting to as unable to. She slowly lifts herself and our eyes meet, startled with the events just passed.

"Mon Dieu!" She didn't have to say that twice, I knew only too well.

Despite my happiness, my insecurity sits on my shoulder like a little devil, whispering into my ear, "Iceberg ahead", and asking me to tread water. This woman, this vibrant, sensual woman, cannot possibly be interested in me, a sexually inactive young kid who is lonely and love-starved. I feel a deep sadness for my life and what I have let myself become. Françoise has made me realize how much more there could be if I let it, but I am unable to convince myself that this is nothing more than what I had feared most - my dreaded 'one-night stand'. Now that she has had me, she will move on, and I fear that my rescue ship has now run aground. It is a foolish notion, I know, but I cannot help it.

We lie there exhausted, waiting for heart rates to return to normal. I turn my head and look around the room, a gentle smile touching my lips as I look at the beautiful furniture scattered around. I am envious of her lavish décor. In a far corner stands a wooden dummy, supporting her panniers and ball gown.

I turn my head back to Françoise. "What year is this?"

Calm blue eyes watch me. "1789." Why does that year seem familiar to me?

"And are we in France?"

"Oui, ma chérie. Anjou. This is the Château de Montreuil-Bellay. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

"Dale..." My heart patters at the sound of my name from those beautiful lips. "What year do you come from?"

"Ummm..." I just hope she doesn't have a heart attack. "2005."

"Mon Dieu!" *Mon Dieu indeed.*

We have spanned over 200 years by some magical trick of the mirror. I look over to the item in question, studying it in loving detail. It is exactly the same as the one I had left behind in my time, its mahogany lustre glowing in the dying light.

"Come. Let us sleep. We will talk in the morning."

I cannot summon the energy to argue and close my eyes, watching her do the same as my eyelids droop those last few millimetres.

* * * * *

It is still dark when I awake, the fire now burnt down to dying embers. I feel a whisper of a

breeze across my shoulder as my lover sleeps, her gentle snore breaking the silence of the night. I lay there for a moment, knowing what I must do, trying to summon the energy and the will to return home.

Slipping out from under the covers, I shiver at the chill on my skin. I place a couple of logs on the fire before I go and, with one last look over to the sleeping figure, I pass through the mirror to my loft. It is a cold place, not only from the coolness of the air, but the loneliness that greets me. Even the clothes that I find cannot warm the emptiness in my heart. I look back through the mirror at Françoise, silently thanking her for the wonderful memories that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Sleep has now left me and I go to the kitchen for a hot cup of coffee. While breakfast is cooking, I look into the depths of the cup, wondering what to do next. The food before me is hot and filling but I have no taste for it, eating because I have to, not because I want to. Nothing in this life appeals to me anymore, and as I watch the early morning sunlight filter in through the skylight, I consider my jobs for the day with little enthusiasm.

I wander back to the mirror, the window gone with the rising of the sun, and all I see is a young woman with mussed blonde hair, flushed skin and a dazed look in her eye. I know only too well what has put that look there and I desperately want that look again. Do I go back to her again, or do I say 'no' and preserve my heart? There is no point in fighting this, for I fear that my heart is already hers, despite what my mind is trying to convince me of.

By mid-morning I have given up on trying to get any work done because my mind is two hundred years away. I turn my attention instead to the date she gave me, 1789. Grabbing my bag, I head downtown to an internet café to do some surfing. My worst fears are realized when I discover the significance of 1789 in France - the French Revolution. A further search reveals that her château was ransacked during that turbulent time, but no mention is made of the fate of the owners. I don't need to see that in print. I know what happened to French aristocrats in that period of history. They all met with Madame Guillotine.

My insides churn at the realization of her predicament, and somehow I have to convince her of the imminent danger. She may not believe me, so I have to find some evidence. My shaking fingers fly over the keys, transmitting their urgency to the computer, in search of a French bookshop. I have to find something that will make her understand.

I am in luck. There are a couple of large bookstores nearby which carry French texts. I only hope that I can find what I am looking for - a French history book. The first shop proves to be useless and my hope rests with the second. My pulse is racing with worry and apprehension, not only for her but also for myself.

I stand in front of the bookshop, my heart thudding heavily against my chest. *Please, oh please be the one.* The doors slide automatically open as I approach, the cool air conditioning hitting me like a wall. There is no point in me looking, so I approach the man behind the desk.

"Yes? Can I help you?" The tall, thin man looks down at me, his wire-framed glasses perched in his long, thin nose. He even looks like a snob.

"I'm after a history book on France in French."

Without a word, he turns away and heads over to a nearby shelf, sifting through the volumes there and removing one. He places it down on the counter and I look up in question. "Does it have a section on the French Revolution?" I know I am showing my ignorance, but I have to be sure.

He draws in an audible breath and his look is even more hostile. He opens the book at the appropriate page. "There, madam." Before he closes the book I make a mental note of the page.

I pay the ridiculously high price for the book and feel a lot better armed with my evidence. It is mid-afternoon and only a few hours before I can see her again. I am wandering aimlessly down the street towards home, not really aware of anything around me. Something catches my eye and I stop, looking at the store display.

A slow smile crosses my face as the nature of the shop hits me. *Oh yeah...* I would never have considered shopping here before, but that woman has made me wanton and desperate. A slight scent of perfume permeates the air as I enter the establishment.

I have no idea where to start as I scan the racks and racks of lingerie, bras, panties and camisoles. What image am I going for? A blatant invitation, I think. I dismiss the bras and panties and go straight to the lingerie, staggering back in horror at the outrageous price tags.

Something catches my eye and I hold it up. It is really disgusting the price they are asking for what has, in effect, about as much material as a handkerchief. But I'm going for impact here and I think this will do the trick. Despite my mind telling me that I've made the wrong decision, I walk with a lighter step towards home... towards her.

* * * * *

Chapter 5

"Dale?"

I let her wait a little before I make my appearance. I have been scrubbing, bathing, trimming and plucking for the last two hours in preparation for this minute, so it will not hurt for her to wait too.

I have spent a good deal of the time left to me before her arrival thinking about what I would be doing. Do I warn her? How will her disappearance affect history? There is no evidence of her after the Revolution, so would it have no effect? Is that because of my interference? I have to risk it; I cannot leave her alone to certain death. Just in case, I write a note and leave it on the

table. Should I choose to stay, my parents will find it on their next visit.

"Mon amour?"

Oh God, that French. It just goes right through me. I think she does it just to make me suffer. If she does... it's working.

"Françoise?" I drop my voice to its lowest register, teasing her with my own brand of fire. A low moan makes me chuckle.

"Chérie, please come."

"And why should I?" I am in the mood for a little seduction.

"Not tonight, please. I need you."

"You do?" I clear my throat and drop my voice. "Ah, you do." I move into her line of sight and a whimper escapes her lips. The image I am presenting I can see reflected in the lust in her eyes. The lingerie, if you could call it that, is sheer and pretty well leaves nothing to the imagination through the thin veil of material. It is just enough to see it all, but not clearly. A tease. But underneath I have on a miniscule bikini. After all, I have to have something to remove if I'm going to strip in front of her.

Those beautiful sapphire eyes scan my body, starting at my blow-dried hair and moving down, hesitating at two points that I want her to see. Those eyes widen in acknowledgement and I know I have her in the palm of my hand. I mentally flick off my little demon sitting on my shoulder, leaving all doubt behind.

"Jésus, Marie, Joseph..." My wicked temptress is openly drooling and I like this effect I am having on her.

"What do you want?" There is really no point asking her this, because I can see it all in her eyes, but this is part of the tease.

"You know." Her voice has a hard edge to it and I know she won't take much more. If I draw this out too long she will come and get me. Would that be such a bad thing to have her in my world?

Françoise is a proud woman, even I know that in the short time I have known her, so coming to me will have to be her decision, not mine. Then it hits me like a bolt out of the blue. That is why she waited for me to come to her... it was my decision all along. My heart melts at the consideration she has shown me, and it is one more coin on the scales tipping in her favour.

Turning away from the mirror, I present my back to her. Even from where I am standing, I can hear her breathing, a soft laboured sigh that ends in a groan with every exhalation. A gentle smile crosses my lips at her reaction. I tip my head around over my shoulder, making sure my pale hair has swept over my face and I give her my best seductive smile.

Her hands are grasping the frame of the mirror and from here I can see, they are turning white. I reach up and grasp the ties on the bra, slowly drawing out the cord until it pulls free. As I reach up to untie the lace around my neck she sees my back, the light muscle moving under my skin. Her gaze is scorching me as it travels down to my bottom, visually caressing my unbound skin.

"Dale, please." She is begging now, and I think she has suffered enough. I grab the sides of the thong and pull them down, knowing full well what I am presenting to her. I quickly glance at her and see her eyes widen to an almost comical degree. As I turn around, a hand comes through the mirror. "Ah, ah... naughty, naughty." I slap her hand and it disappears back from where it came. Those hungry eyes now roam over me, taking in everything that I am offering her. I find the straps to the sheath and pull them down, allowing the flimsy material to slowly slide down my body, her eyes tracking its movement down to the floor.

Stepping through the glass, I am set upon by a she-devil who is intent on driving me to the brink of insanity. She has me up against a wall begging for mercy before I have even realized that there is a struggle. It is my own fault, I know, and I am not sorry for the predicament I am in, but I have no leverage to reciprocate the pleasure she is giving me.

"My love, please." There is a hesitation as I whisper, but no lessening in her strength to pin me against the wall. Those piercing eyes bore into mine, looking for the truth of what I have just uttered. "Yes... my love." The sweetest smile crosses those full lips, melting my heart. My hand comes to her face, caressing the soft cheek so close to my own.

Those hands that my body have come to know begin to move, claiming areas that are now no longer forbidden to them. Her lips latch onto my throat, laving the area thoroughly, and I cannot help but moan under the onslaught. I am a quivering mass under her talented hands, as she brands me as her own.

My mind has mentally thrown up its hands in defeat, knowing that for better or worse I am bound to this woman body and soul. I no longer fight what is inevitable as my hands come up to her back, pulling her in tightly as she takes me.

So lost are we in the pleasure that we do not notice another person in the room. My eyes open to see the woman who had been with Françoise that first night I saw her in the mirror, the young woman called Madeleine. My lover continues to ravish me and I am barely able to acknowledge the presence of the third party, so great is the pounding pressure inside me.

I watch the young woman watching us, taking in the gathering storm clouds on her brow, but I can barely stop the flood of sensations exploding through me. Cries fill the room as I am overcome, feeling Françoise shifting under my hands as she brings me to completion. My eyes watch the young girl leave, but I am speechless.

Panting, it takes me a few moments to get my breath back. This woman is going to kill me... I know it. Her passion knows no bounds and it is all directed at me.

"What's wrong, chérie?"

"That woman you were with the first night... Madeleine... she saw us."

"My maid? This is none of her concern."

I hold my tongue for the moment, waiting to see the outcome of the next day or so, but I fear that the time is fast approaching where waiting will no longer be an option.

I draw her to the bed, feeling decidedly underdressed, and quickly remedy the situation by stripping off her nightgown. She has accommodated me by at least getting rid of all her various undergarments before I arrived. Perhaps she does not wish to waste any time either.

I have already decided not to leave in the morning, so I have all night to find out all her secret desires and passions. I am intent on discovering everything I need to know to keep her happy. A tall order, I know, but nevertheless a worthy cause. My happiness is at stake here, and her well being.

Looming over her, I straddle her waist, resting back on my haunches as I grab her wrists. She looks at me in confusion, until I lift them over her head to the bed head. "Stay," I whisper. An elegant eyebrow rises at my impudence. I give her a half-smile of my own, a sad imitation of her own perfect invitation.

Lowering myself to within a hair's breath from her face, I stare into those eyes that have mesmerized me for the last week. In so short a time, I have surrendered the careful nurturing of my life and my career, willing to give up everything for this mysterious woman, whom I know virtually nothing about.

Where has my sanity gone? My innate sense has taken over control of my common sense and reasoning. I am working on nothing more than my emotions to rule my life, leaving me vainly searching for my rescue ship to pick me up and save me from drowning.

A bead of sweat trickles down her brow as she waits for me to move. My eyes roam over her face, finally getting the chance to study her up close. What an extraordinary woman. There is softness there but I can also see great strength in the line and curve of her jaw. Laugh lines gently frame her lips, just waiting to be amused, while her high cheekbones are smudged with a hint of colour from our recent exertion, touching her with a rosy glow. Her aristocratic features are highlighted by her long aquiline nose, lending a touch of elegance to her youthful good looks. And those eyes... oh, those eyes are the centre of her, a bright piercing blue that strips you bare with their intense stare. They are the windows to her soul and my connection to her.

My fingers lovingly study her face, idly running over her arched eyebrows down to her cheeks. I do nothing more than feel that soft skin, looking into her eyes, showing everything that I am in mine. Perhaps it is too early, but I cannot help myself. "Je t'aime." My words come out as nothing more than a whisper with the intensity of the moment.

Those laugh lines wink at me as her face breaks into a shy smile. "Moi aussi, mon amour."

What sweet words to come out of that mouth. Her hands begin to move. "Ah, ah, no..." They return to their former position. "My turn." Taut muscles vibrate under her restraint, showing to me in vivid relief the strength in that long body, and once again making me realize that I am but a lamb being hunted by a fierce lioness. She does not instruct nor demand anything of me, but willingly lets me lead the way, showing me her implicit trust in my judgement. I only hope that I am up to the challenge.

Slowly, ever so slowly, my lips slide down her. I know she is impatient, but I will not be rushed. "Nous avons toute la nuit, mon amour." My French is bad... really bad. I admit it. Perhaps it will improve under her tutelage. She chuckles at my crude pronunciation, but frustration resides in her eyes. She is going to have to wait, but I can see the wheels turning in her head.

"Please, don't rush me. I need this as much as you do." Her brow wrinkles in confusion. "Umm... I'm learning. Give me time... please." A minute nod is the only reply she gives me. So... it's not a matter of me taking what I want but what she will allow me to have.

I know I had decided earlier not to fight her for domination in this... whatever it is. A tryst? A fling? Dare I say a relationship? But that smug look of confidence in her eyes, making me feel like a dog being thrown a bone, nearly makes me want to turn this into a battle. I doubt there have been many, if any at all, that have controlled her fire, but perhaps when I am more confident about what I am doing and am sure of her responses, I may do just that.

With that niggling thought floating around in my head, I am going to take all night if need be to see how long she lasts before she takes her pleasure. So, I set about discovering the sleekly muscled body beneath me, whose shimmering skin is alight with perspiration in the flickering candlelight.

Leaning towards her ear, I whisper, "So how do you get your body into such good condition?" Electric blue looks look back in wonder. "Don't know?"

"Of course I know, Dale." *Damn, that name again.* "I was just not expecting the question."

"So, what exercise do you do?"

"I do a lot of riding."

"I know you do that..."

"You do?"

"I saw you the other night..." *She obviously didn't get the joke. Now I'm gonna have to explain... damn.* "... with him." Shock crosses her features at the thought that I would even think of such a joke, let alone say it. A blush slowly creeps up my face and I lower my head in embarrassment. *Well, that fell flat.*

A long finger tips up my chin up to meet her, merriment dancing in those sapphire depths. "Very clever, ma chérie. Excellent." She pulls me down into a hug, briskly rubbing my back in comfort and affection. Thirty seconds. I last thirty seconds before she has distracted me. I can see that I'm going to have to get lots and lots of practice at this. Lucky me.

"I would have just thought that with life at Court you wouldn't have much time."

"Court bores me. That is why I live here." There is more to this, I can feel it.

"And...?"

"No, nothing else." Her lips say one thing but her eyes tell a completely different tale.

"Yes, something else." I lower my voice, keeping it loving and nurturing. "Tell me."

Her brow wrinkles and her lips purse. It takes a moment or two before she answers. "Well, chérie, look at me..." I do as she asks and I know my own pale green eyes hold a story of their own. An affectionate smile crosses her lips at the compliment.

"I don't see any problem."

"I am tall."

"No... really?" She is the mistress of understatement.

"Do you know what it is like to be so tall at Court? I may as well be bald."

"Why are you worried about being so tall when you look as beautiful as you are?"

"Merci, mon coeur. But when one is not interested in all the gossip that flies around, being so tall just makes me stand out. I feel very naked."

My lips break into a lascivious grin. I cannot help it. A mental image of her standing in the midst of all that pomp and ceremony in nothing more than a smile just makes me sweat. No wonder she has paramours lined up out the door to be with her. My jealousy rears its ugly head at the thought.

"Mon trésor, you have nothing to worry about. There is only you." I look at her quizzically. Has she become a mind reader? "Your brow has a wrinkle in it." To illustrate the point, her thumb rubs over the spot, smoothing the crease out of the skin.

"So, Françoise, are you saying that you hate Court and you are hiding out here in the country?" The body underneath me rolls as she laughs out loud.

"Well, Dale, I would not have put it so bluntly, but yes."

"And you can get away with it?"

"For now, I can. I have a ball here at the château tomorrow night that I have to give. I'm sorry, chérie, they are my husband's friends, not mine. I am bound to keep up appearances, even if it is only in his memory. However, I would like it if you could come as my guest."

A ball! To experience something only found in the history books would be something, that's for sure. "I don't speak French. That could be a problem." Indeed, a big problem.

We lie quietly as she turns her intellect to the problem. A minute or two passes before she answers. "I have a solution, but you may not like it."

"Let me hear it."

"The only way they would not talk to you is if you are a servant. But I want you by my side, so would you be..." *This is the nasty part, I know it.* "... my manservant?"

I don't quite understand. "I will dress you as a woman in men's clothes. You will be by my side all night. No one will talk to you unless I wish them to."

Ahh... now I get it. I'm going to be paraded as her sexual plaything. A woman in men's clothes in this time is considered a perversion, unless, of course, it has sexual undertones. Am I going to be able to put up with all the snickering and staring?

"Never mind," she murmurs. Her feelings are hurt that I do not agree to the game.

"Is it that important to you?"

"Yes, it is. I want you with me. If I have to go alone, you will leave again. Please..." Her voice is barely a whisper. "Don't leave me alone."

She rolls me over so that I am underneath her. We lie in bed, her head resting on my chest, not pursuing anything more than silent comfort. Her hand is idly caressing my stomach, copying the random patterns in her mind. My own hand is buried in her thick hair, fingers gently massaging her scalp, allowing her time to make sense of all this mayhem.

A small, frightened voice carries over the cooling air. "Will you stay with me tonight?"

"Yes, sweetheart, I will stay all night."

"And tomorrow? Will you stay tomorrow?"

"Yes, I will stay tomorrow."

There is a small nod of that black-haired head and we drift off to troubled sleep.

* * * * *

Chapter 6

I wake in the early hours, feeling the pull of the mirror, but choose to ignore it. She needs me and I will stay with her for as long as it takes. I feel a pair of long arms tighten around me, pulling me back into slumber.

I wake much later, the sun streaming in through the large leadlight window. Daylight, and I'm still here. The bed is empty and decidedly lonely without my French firecracker. In a panic, I search the room, finally finding her sitting in a far chair watching me. My heart is thudding in my throat, and I'm feeling quite dizzy. Clutching my chest, I collapse to the bed gasping for air. I've just had a panic attack because I couldn't find her. *Sad, Dale. Pretty sad.*

She rushes over to the bed, grasping my hand. "Dale? Are you alright?" I cannot answer, so in the end I give her a weak nod. My eyes are riveted on her as my breathing calms, not wanting to let her out of my sight.

"Come. Have something to eat." She pulls over a tray of food towards me, and fluffs up the pillow behind my head so that I am sitting up. No one has ever pampered me before, and I find that I am enjoying this attention very much. She watches on benevolently as I have my fill, quietly accepting the offer of food from my fingers. "Will you ride with me this morning?"

"You mean I get a chance to ride?" A wicked grin crosses her lips at my jibe.

"You can ride all you want, chérie." My heart rate picks up at the image in my head.

"And I am riding with you naked?"

"As much as that thought is appealing... no. Madeleine has dropped off some clothes that I hope will fit."

Madeleine... there is another problem. Having to get clothes for me is going to add fuel to the fire burning in her.

"Françoise, what day is this?"

"Day?"

"The date."

"Ah, jeudi... jeudi 16 juillet."

My mind races in an effort to put all the pieces together. Two days ago, the French people were storming the gates of the Bastille. News of the revolt should have filtered out to here by now. Tonight there is a ball and most of the aristocracy in the general area will be in attendance. Add to this, one jealous maid who is looking for a little revenge. I have my answer.

"Sweetheart, I will come with you to the ball tonight." I can see the quiet glow of joy in her eyes with my acceptance.

"Here, find one that fits." She hands over the pile of clothes and shoes and disappears out the door. There are dresses of varying sizes and lengths, all sturdily made of coarse cotton. Obviously, they have been rounded up from the servants.

My lover returns just as I am struggling to get a dress over my head. The life is nearly scared out of me as a pair of hands descends on my body, and it takes a few seconds before I recognize those fingers that are squeezing me through the material.

My muffled voice ascends through the layers of clothing. "Where did you disappear to?"

"Just arranging some clothes for tonight." I can hear the happiness in her voice alone, without having to see her face, and it warms my heart to realize that I am having as much effect on her as she has on me. My ego preens under the thought that this wonderful woman wants me... plain, old me.

I stand docilely as she patiently buttons up the back of the dress. Before my brain has stopped me, I mutter "How on earth do you get out of this in a hurry?"

A chuckle fills the air. "You don't, *très chère*. You need great patience. Either that, or you rip all the buttons off." She hesitates for a moment, then mutters, "Perhaps I should find some more dresses..."

I can't help it... I blush. My body responds to her urgency without prompting from my brain. She has come around to face me and that sexy, half-smile of hers is reflecting my own thoughts as if it is tattooed on my forehead. Yep, life with my French aristocrat will certainly not be dull.

I finally take note of what she is wearing and I gasp. She is in men's clothes and I must say that she is gorgeous. My mind puts her in skin-tight jeans and I start to drool. Better still, skin-tight leather... oh yeah... on the back of a large, powerful bike. Perfect.

She stands at ease, letting me look my fill, quietly enjoying the undisguised look of lust in my eye. Her body is certainly built for pants and shirt, but I cannot say that with any great certainty, as I have not seen her in all her finery. But the image before me is very pleasing to the eye, and I cannot stop myself staring, my eyes sweeping from her feet to the top of her head, and everything in between.

The fine cotton and lace shirt is tucked into her breeches, the flounces lying on her breast from

the open collar. The soft brown breeches fit like a second skin, showing her long legs to great advantage, tucked into knee-length boots. She wears no other adornment and her hair is flying free... simple but elegant.

"Wow," I breathe. That smile again.

"Wow, indeed." She replies, as I feel her own eyes sweep over me, doing exactly what I had done to her moments before.

A familiar tickling starts in the pit of my stomach. I drag her to the door. "Let's go before those buttons go flying." She chuckles at my comment and takes my hand in hers, leading me out into the world beyond these doors.

The château is so beautiful... and enormous. She quickly shows me around, and I take in the beautiful marble staircase we descend to the massive foyer. The impossibly high ceilings loom overhead, elaborately decorated and very impressive. But somehow it doesn't seem the sort of place that this woman next to me would have picked as her own.

"This is my husband's château, chérie." There she goes, reading my mind again. "Come." She leads me outside towards the stables. I can feel the stares of her staff as we make our way across the gravel courtyard toward the distant buildings. The enormity of the situation hits me as we stroll across the grass verge. If she comes forward in time with me, she will be giving up all this. I can barely support myself. How am I going to support her as well? I guess I'm going to find out.

Her large hand tightens around mine in comfort. Does she sense my unease? I shake my head and dismiss the worries for the moment, content to just enjoy the sun, the warmth and watch the young woman attending to the tall horse in front of me. Leaning against the doorjamb to the stables, I watch as her muscles flex under the shirt as she lifts herself into the saddle, causing my heart to beat just that little bit faster.

I can't stand it and turn away, allowing myself to look back over the expanse of land that takes in Françoise's estate. It is a magnificent piece of realty and I feel a deep sadness for what is about to happen to it. A movement at the house draws my attention, and I see Madeleine standing in the shadows watching us. Françoise's dismissal of the little maid is going to have ramifications. As to what that will entail, only time will tell, but I plan on staying close to my dark-haired companion for as long as it takes to ensure her safety.

"Dale." The low murmur causes a shudder to run through me. *Every time she says my name... amazing.* Her large hand reaches down to mine, lifting me as easily as a child into her lap. I am wrapped in those securing arms and she shifts the horse into a gentle walk out of the stables and through the back gate to the meadows beyond. I look back over my shoulder to the smaller woman back at the château, watching her turn and enter the kitchen door.

The beautiful steed speeds up to a slow canter, his gentle rolling run shifting me into my lover's chest with each heave. It is a slow, hypnotic rhythm which is slowly sending me off into a

pleasant lethargy. My hands rest on her muscled thighs and I feel them shift with each movement. I cannot help myself as I idly caress them, my mind wandering back to the bedroom and feeling those thighs wrapped around me, gently holding me in place as she makes love to me. *Oh yeah, she's an expert at riding.*

Little do I realize that my idle exploration has had its effect on my large friend sitting behind me. The horse abruptly changes direction and picks up speed, heading for a distant building. I look up to the face looming above me, reading her intention in those darkening depths. Looks like I'm going to get some more exercise...

The battered building turns out to be a disused barn, numerous holes attesting to the fact that it has not been used in a while. The lathered horse pulls up and she has dismounted, with me in her arms, before the poor animal has had a chance to stop completely. She purposefully strides inside, throwing me onto a pile of hay. I can see her breasts heaving and she is flushed, a soft moan escaping her lips. She stands there like every secret fantasy I have never acknowledged, exuding a sexuality that is drawing me in with every breath.

"Please, try to save the buttons," I whisper. "I have to wear this back to the house."

That comment earns a smile from her, and she relaxes, knowing that I will not refuse her. My dream woman extends her hand to help me up. "Permetts-moi?" She moves behind me and undoes the buttons as quickly as her trembling fingers will allow her. My body breathes in gratitude as she peels away the dress, her hands following the path of the material.

Françoise reaches for her own clothing. "No, let me," I whisper as I close the gap between us. As fast as she has undressed me, I am as slow with her, making undoing each button seem like an eternity. My lips reach in and kiss each piece of exposed skin, breathing in her scent like it is oxygen. My hands run over the soft cotton, feeling her nipples pebble under the slide of the material over her breasts. I continue to keep my touch light, gently rubbing her until she is squirming and grabbing my hands to stop the torture. She grabs my chin and pulls my focus up to her face.

"Tu aimes jouer avec le feu, ma petite?" Her molten eyes tell me what her words cannot. The lamb is confronting the lioness. I know my smile is a predatory one by her reaction alone. *Yes, I like playing with your fire.*

Turning back to my ministrations, I slowly, ever so slowly, unbutton the shirt and reach for the buttons in the breeches. If I take much longer, she will be the one returning with damaged clothing, not me. Her patience is gone and she makes a move to take control.

"No!" my voice is harsh, I know. "Why do you keep doing this?" She is puzzled by my change of tone. "Every time I'm about to make love to you, you stop me. Why?"

She looks a bit sheepish and I feel a stab of pain in my heart. "Don't you want me to?" I am stricken. I reach down for my discarded dress, vainly trying to find the bottom to slip it over my head.

"Dale, please."

"No. You obviously don't want me to touch you, so..."

"Please, ma chérie, don't do this to me."

"To you? To you? What about me? I so desperately want to make love to you and you won't let me? How do you think that makes me feel?" Tears are scudding down my face and I am unable to stop them. I am so hurt and confused.

She grabs me and pulls me into a hug, my head resting at the entrance of the open shirt, my breath blowing across the skin of her breast. "There is a reason, Dale, but not what you think. Please, chérie, listen to me for a moment." She guides me down to the sweet-smelling hay, pushing me back until I am on my back looking up into her face. A soft thumb comes up and wipes away my tears, resting there long after the moisture is gone.

She marshals her thoughts before speaking. "Je t'aime, mon amour. You know that, don't you?" I eye her warily, taking in her words with a certain amount of trepidation and wary optimism. "Do you remember what you said when we first met? You didn't want to be my... how did you say it? Ah... 'one-night stand'. Do you remember?"

I remember all right. It is my greatest fear. "And what was I doing all that week before you came to me?" She doesn't need to tell me that. I know intimately what she was doing all that week. A light sheen of perspiration breaks out on my brow at the thought.

A lone finger comes up and wipes off the offending wetness. Those sparkling blue eyes track down to mine, capturing them effortlessly. "I know what is going on in that pretty head of yours, Dale. You are waiting for me to use you and throw you away like I had done all that week." A blush creeps up my face, answering her question for her. Yes I am. I am waiting for that betrayal.

"Chérie. I will wait as long as it takes for me to convince you of my good intentions, as much as it pains me. I am not interested in anyone else but you, nor will I ever be." She grabs my hand and places it through the opening of her shirt, resting it on her uncovered breast. "If you feel you can accept my truth, then go ahead. I will not stop you."

I think long and hard, looking up through the veil of dark hair to those eyes which, I am finding of late, cannot lie to my heart. She has been most attentive and, true to her word, she has not even so much as looked at anyone else since we became lovers. I know I have said to myself that I am lost to her, but can I admit that to her? This is about as much as her claiming her fidelity as it is about me giving myself fully to her.

I look up to see the sun streaming in through the hole in the roof, casting its fiery glow on the loft above. Pushing her aside, I rise, extending down my own hand to her and pulling her up. I resume my undressing of her, continuing to draw impatient sighs from her with each exposed piece of flesh. Finally, I have her naked, just as I want her.

Taking her hand, I lead her over to the ladder, indicating where I want to go. I can feel her heated gaze on me, her head only inches away from my backside as we ascend the steps to the loft. Lazily, I stretch out on the hay, absorbing the heat of the sun's rays in quiet enjoyment. My eyes track over to Françoise standing there watching me, her eyes appreciatively roaming freely over my sun-drenched skin. I lay my hands over my head in supplication, offering her what I have offered no other... my heart.

She is gentle and infinitely caring, perhaps in deference to our earlier chat, and I am grateful, floating quietly in a sea of sensual lassitude. But this is not how I want it to end. I flip her over so that she is underneath me, my slight weight pinning her to the ground. I am hit with a sudden attack of nerves, because I have never made love to a woman before. This is my rite of passage and the outcome of my life with this woman comes down to this one act.

Sensing my apprehension, her hand caresses my face, calming my rattled nerves, her eyes conveying her utter trust in me. "It will be fine, Dale. Je t'adore." The love of my life reaches behind my neck and slowly pulls me in, the muscles in her neck standing out in relief as she reaches those last couple of inches to make contact.

We spend what seems an eternity just kissing, feeling our connection through this mere touch, and allowing the intensity to build, giving me precious moments to be attracted to her sexual magnetism. I am allowed to tease, torment and study without interference from her, learning what pleases her and what excites her. It is an interesting journey and, without the pressure to perform quickly, I am finding it most enjoyable, my insecurity washing away with each cry and moan she utters.

I am surrounded by heat. The sun is beating down mercilessly on my back, adding to the heat in my blood stirred up in response to the body underneath me. Beads of sweat dot the pale skin, infused with her scent, begging me to taste her time and again. My hands are impatient to find her and, of their own accord, have taken up residence on her breasts, slowly caressing her. I feel her response under my fingertips and cannot help but smile against the damp skin. Her own hands find me, buried in my hair, and encouraging my lips to follow. Finally, I oblige her, tasting her erect nipple for the first time, feeling the bud swell and grow on my tongue.

My ego grows in leaps and bounds, feeling her respond to me. I had serious doubts about my own sexuality, but it seems they are unfounded. Despite my misgivings, I know that I have been in hibernation until she arrived, and I am blossoming under her welcome attention. I silently thank God for sending me to that old second hand furniture store all those weeks ago.

I discover that my tongue is a wonderful, sensual instrument of its own. It can taste and feel every texture of her, bringing my nose close to her so that I can breathe her in. My senses are flooded with information about the woman underneath me, and I am eager to learn more. I have tormented myself long enough and move on to where I ultimately want to go, thoroughly mapping the great expanse of skin between me and my destination, and intimately learning every dip and curve of her long body.

"Oui, mon aimée. Je t'en prie, j'ai besoin de toi." We both know where I am heading, each with a different, but ultimately similar, goal. Finally... finally, I am at the crossroads. Here is where I will either falter or take that final step in my apprenticeship. We both sense the importance as I hesitate. She rises on her elbows to watch me, and I imitate her from two nights ago, my blonde hair hanging in my eyes as I watch her, feeling that primal urge wash over me. My tongue peeks out, tempting her with a visual image that has been haunting me ever since she touched me.

Those intense eyes darken and a low animal growl emerges from her throat, putting my own senses on edge. A smile touches my lips as I hang suspended above her, waiting a little longer than she is comfortable with. "Dale, please, I am begging you. Pas maintenant, ma petite." It is intoxicating, to have this much power over someone's pleasure, and easily corruptible.

"What do you want, eh? Do you want me now? If I leave you hanging, will you ever find satisfaction, Françoise?" My words are blazing in her eyes, desperation raging through her frustrated body. I dip my head and touch her once, backing away. My taste buds explode with the new taste swirling around in my mouth. It is exotic, tangy and so, so right. I am eager, but I have the sudden compulsion to stamp my own claim on her.

"Will anyone else be enough, ma chérie?" A whimper escapes those full lips and a look of desperation resides in those beautiful eyes. Slowly, that mop of black hair shakes. I bring my head back up to hers, feeling my desire for her rise up to my gaze and express itself to her. "I will be here for you, sweetheart. I will do my best to make you happy." A look of gratitude crosses her features, followed by an agonised sigh.

I have made my point and go back to pleasing her, intent on putting her out of her misery. I resume my position between her legs, feeling her thighs shiver with anticipation. My cheek rubs her skin, its softness brushing my facial hairs and tickling me. It is a pleasant sensation and I indulge it for a little while longer before her impatience draws me back to the job at hand.

I look up over the terrain in front of me to that face quivering in anticipation. Dipping my tongue once more, I begin studying her, looking for angles and hidden responses, watching her closely for hints to her excitement. Unconsciously, her hips move with me, directing me to where she wants me to go. There is no hurry to this exploration as I read this particular book from cover to cover, absorbing every nuance of meaning within its pages. I savour, I taste, I explore and I enjoy every aspect of her, finding myself lost in her essence.

My French woman becomes more animated and her cries reach a crescendo as I discover the centre of her, allowing her to control her own pleasure, as I am the instrument of her completion. It is a beautiful sight, watching her crumble under my attention, leaving her shaking in its wake. I lie where I have finished, watching her heart beat a rapid tattoo in her rapidly expanding chest. My cheek returns to that soft place, idly rubbing over her inner thigh in contentment. We are complete.

* * * * *

Chapter 7

While Françoise is gasping for air, I hear a faint noise outside. Not natural, but a random pattern. "Shhhh. I think there is someone outside." The sound stops for a moment, then resumes. We both scramble over to the edge of the loft and look down. "Where are my clothes?" Why do I keep asking these inane questions?

"Probably the same place mine are, chérie." *Well, d'uh.*

The ladder shakes under the strain of both of us trying to get down as quickly as possible. "Perhaps a friendly squirrel?" Those beautiful lips purse in aggravation. "No?" Despite a thorough search, the clothes cannot be found. My mind immediately focuses on the one person who would do such a thing out of spite. I look over to my companion to see the gathering storm clouds. She is pissed... really pissed.

From where I am standing I can feel the anger roll off her, the energy skittering across my skin, letting off tiny electrical charges in their wake. I can sense the menace rising in her, and it affects me in a way I would never have expected in a million years. This element of danger in her has me excited, and I can't help my reaction to it.

I watch her prowl from one end of the barn to the other, barely keeping her simmering anger in check. She looks over to me and stops dead in her tracks. I lower my head, not wanting to be caught with such dark feelings rolling inside me. But she knows me; she has looked into my eyes and discovered the truth. Am I prepared to tackle such complex emotions so early in our relationship? By the look in her eye, I don't think I'm going to have a choice.

I am on my back in the hay without preamble and set upon by my lioness, intent on feeding on my flesh till there is nothing left but skin and bones. And I couldn't care in the least. She has reached inside me and found my dark heart, feasting on it with great relish.

There is no giving here, only taking what she wants. I finally see the deepest part of her - her eternal fire that burns so brightly that it reduces my soul to ash. It is fierce, and demanding, and consumes everything in its path. I am a veritable lamb to the slaughter.

But what I receive in return is wild, frantic and totally beyond anything I could even imagine to experience. I am lost, so totally lost, cast adrift in an endless ocean, forever to exist in infinite torment. I cannot return to my time without her. If we are caught or she refuses to come, I will stay here with her until our dying day, which will probably be only a week or so.

Those talented fingers find me, demanding a response, and I bend to her will, giving her anything that she asks of me. And she asks for it all. I twitch to the rhythm she sets me, my body spasming at her command.

That French hellion is everywhere and I cannot focus on any one spot that she attacks. My mind is sluggish and refuses to make sense of what my body is feeling, prepared to float in a pool of sensual delight in which I just instinctively react.

Whimpers escape me and I beg her to stop, but she doesn't listen, driving me higher and higher until I am gasping from the thinness of the atmosphere. She has covered my body with hers, frantically trying to reach her own satisfaction. I desperately try to make my limbs move, but she has stripped me of all strength. I fight hard to lift a hand and place it where she needs it, allowing my fingers to help her in what she seeks most.

"Dieu tout puissant, Dale, tu me rends folle. There, oh yes, there." I can barely support her weight as she moves, her muscular body rippling with the exertion. I fight to open my leaden eyelids to watch her in her passion, and I am breathless. That wild mane of dark hair is in disarray, plastered to a face contorted in pleasure. Her head is thrown back in a frantic search for completion, her mouth open in a silent cry. It is so beautiful to watch her in such an intimate pose. Here is pleasure at its most primal, and it is glorious.

We both collapse in a heap, Françoise's sizeable weight pushing me deep into the straw bed. Minutes pass before either of us can move. "This is all your fault," I mumble. An elegant eyebrow rises in question and sheepishly, I relent. "OK, it's both our fault." She can live with that.

"Now where are my clothes?" Back to the problem that started this frenzy of lust. A frown crosses her brow. "Don't start me again."

She rolls onto her side and looks deep into my eyes. "What happened here, little one?"

I give a slight shrug but I know that won't be enough of an answer for her. "You got angry and I got excited. Who knew?"

"You liked it when I got angry?" Confusion laces the question.

I shrug again. How can I explain what I don't understand myself? She brushes my nose with the tip of her finger. "We will talk about this later." *I suppose we will.* "For now, let's get home." What was my comment earlier about riding naked??

Luckily, the horse is still there, but I suspect that is all part of the plan designed for maximum embarrassment. What our saboteur hasn't counted on is the sheer torture of the ride back to the château.

I feel the entire length of her along my back, her skin rubbing invitingly with every jolt of the ride. I know she is feeling the torture as much as I am, for her hands cannot stay put and are idly sliding over me most distractingly. On top of that, sitting with leather sliding between my legs is about all I can stand. By the time we have arrived back at the stables I am a bundle of nervous energy, looking for anything to ease my ache.

The staff watches our approach and I can feel my sweet Françoise's ire rising again, keeping pace with her approach to the house. I walk a few steps behind her, allowing her to take care of the matter without interruption. She cares little for her nakedness at this point, staring down each and

every one of the servants standing in front of her. One by one their heads drop, unwilling to look into those eyes of fire. Even Madeleine has backed down under her intense stare, looking intently at the ground.

"Si jamais je découvre qui a fait cela, je n'aurais aucune pitié pour le coupable! Je ne tolérerai pas un tel affront! M'avez-vous bien comprise?" ("If I ever find out who did this, I will have no mercy for the guilty! I will not tolerate such an affront! Is that understood?") Muted silence meets her tirade and the servants file back into the house, not once looking back. She calls out to one of the men, "Jacques, occupe-toi du cheval, je te prie!" He sets off towards the stables at a run, not wanting to inflame her anger any more.

My excitement is at fever pitch as I watch her verbally dress down the hired help. This is ridiculous, I have to do something about this. I can't keep popping off every time she gets angry. At this rate, I'm never going to get any rest. She turns around and walks toward me, her eyes seeing what I am trying to hide.

"Oh, pour l'amour du Ciel, Dale. Stop it!" But she cannot help a sly smile at my predicament. Her edginess and my ardour cool at her approach. "You have a problem, little one?"

"Tell me about it. What am I going to do?" I am on the verge of tears at this loss of control. I am ashamed of myself, feeling that I have been labelled a pervert in her eyes.

"Come." Françoise leads my trembling body up the stairs to our bedroom hideaway, tucking me into bed like a lost, forlorn child. Perhaps I am. I hear her speak to someone before she joins me in bed, the curtains drawn to preserve our privacy. Visibly calm, she turns her attention to me, resting her head in one large hand as she waits for me to speak.

I am mortified, trying to turn away from her intense regard. "No?" No. I cannot start this conversation. "First of all, chérie, do not be ashamed. I am flattered that you want me that much." My eyes rise to meet hers, her image blurred by the tears in my eyes. An errant finger rises to wipe away my wetness, her hand remaining to caress the soft skin in silent comfort.

"I think we both know the answer to this, but do you want me to dominate you?"

She waits patiently while I give the question some thought. My mind is vehemently denying it, but I have to question my heart. What is it I want? I don't think this is what I need, but what other explanation can there be? Those blue eyes watch my inner turmoil with interest. She knows the key to my dilemma, but she is waiting for me to figure it out. My distress rises with each passing moment, all thought thrown into disarray.

Finally, she puts me out of my misery and answers her own question. "Do you remember back to when you first saw me?" *Oh, yeah.* "And you reacted to me having sex?" She uses 'having sex', not 'making love'. I nod. "What was it like then? It was not gentle was it, my sweet? It was rough and demanding. Satisfying my animal instincts, n'est-ce pas, Chérie?" It was primal all right, that is why I touched myself in front of her.

She can see my mind slowly moving the bits of the puzzle around to fit into the bigger picture. "I think, mon amour, you are just reacting with plain old animal lust to my own heightened emotions." *Oh God, I hope so.*

I struggle for my own words. "It's just... just... when you are all worked up, I just go crazy." I stop. "Thinking about it, you have never directed that anger at me. Yeah, that must be it... I just get excited by your dark fire." *Please, oh please, let that be it.* I look up into darkened eyes. "So, where do we go from here?"

"Just as we have always done, chérie. You have done nothing wrong, mon petit chat sauvage. Now, I think a bath is in order." The curtains are pulled aside to reveal a bath, a weird-looking bath. I stop her movement.

"Can I ask something of you?"

"Of course, Dale."

"Tonight, at the ball?"

"Yes?"

"If I ask you to take me upstairs, you will come? No questions asked?" I can nearly see her mind heading off to bed again, but that is not what I'm asking. It is probably easier to let her think that and avoid an explanation.

"You are insatiable, my dear." I just smile in reply. *Yep, predictable as the day is long.*

"Is that a yes?" I bat my eyelashes her in mock invitation and a laugh erupts from her chest. "Yes?"

"Yes." She swats my backside as she leaves the bed.

* * * * *

This bath, if that is what you could call it, is barely more than a huge ceramic bowl. My ass is sitting in about a foot of water, barely covering my intimacy. It has a backrest but my legs are dangling out onto the floor. Despite the cheerful fire next to me, the water is cooling rapidly and I am scrubbing within an inch of my life so I can get out and get warm.

So engrossed am I in my washing that I do not hear the door open and close, and I nearly jump out of my skin when a large hand descends on my shoulder. I look up to those warm eyes that know my very soul, and she responds in kind. I look up and down her tall frame, covered in a long, flowing dress.

"Wow. You are dressed." An elegant eyebrow rises in mock indignation. "Well, I've never

actually seen you dressed formally before."

"Well, ma petite sauvage, I quite like what you are wearing." Those intelligent eyes scan me as I sit awkwardly in the tub. I pass over the cloth I have been using in the bath.

"Well, it's time to wash the clothes, so can you wash my back, please?"

I am probably making it hard for her to kneel in the layers of petticoats and dress, but I am not going to pass up this opportunity to soak up her attention, and neither is she, by the swift effort to comply with my request. Those large hands, so strong and yet so gentle, flow over my skin in a slow, sensual massage, allowing my body to float in a pleasant haze of lassitude.

I glance over my shoulder to look at her face, finding reflected that same contentment that I know is written on my own. A slight blush colours her features when she realises she has been caught daydreaming. Our eyes meet and a mutual understanding passes between us, reaffirming what we had both uttered only yesterday.

A shiver passes through me and I can stand the cold water no longer. "Sorry, the water's cold." She stands and offers her hand in assistance. I am finding it exceedingly difficult to get any leverage to get out of this bucket, my legs hampered by the rim of the tub. After much huffing and puffing I extricate myself, water sloshing out onto the carpet. "Sorry," I mutter.

"Never mind." She moves to the door and pulls the dangling tassel. The young maid arrives, hostility written in her young features. "Madeleine! Viens éponger l'eau, je te prie." I cannot bear for this mere slip of a girl to see me naked, studying and criticizing me as I stand there. Françoise steps between us, holding up her nightgown as a barrier while I dry myself beside the fire. I watch the young woman as she cleans up, her eyes continually reaching for mine in confrontation.

"Merci, Madeleine. Tu peux disposer." My adversary leaves, but not before she offers one parting glare in my direction.

"She hates me."

"Why, chérie? You have done nothing to her."

"Oh, yes I have. I have taken you away from her."

"She is but a servant, Dale. She does not matter."

And that is the reason for the downfall of you all, Françoise. It's that aristocratic attitude that has set events in motion even now.

Now is not the time to discuss the political machinations currently ruling France, but perhaps another time when we are safe and can look back at this time with a certain amount of detachment and hindsight, my French delight will have a chance to see where it all went wrong.

Françoise sits in a nearby chair watching me dry myself in front of the radiant heat from the fire, idly studying my muscles shifting under my skin as I move. I turn around to face her, taking in those eyes, darkened to a midnight blue, slowly raking over me in hunger. It all seems so effortless, this interaction between us. One look, one silent invitation has us wanting each other all over again.

"So, my love..." Her lips turn up in quiet joy. "Where did you learn English?" I am diverting her away from her lascivious thoughts, and she knows it. There is no time for this. The ball is only a few hours away and soon the room will be filled with servants, all primping, pushing and tucking to get their mistress ready for the occasion.

"I spent my early years in London, Dale." She watches my reaction and impudently smiles. *The wench.*

I struggle to find my voice. "How so?"

"My family attended Court there for a number of years, until I was about fifteen." She goes silent.

"Then what happened?" I am too busy finding the armholes of the dressing gown to take notice of the silence a few feet away.

"Then I was forced to marry my late husband, le comte de Villerey."

I look up. "At fifteen?"

"It is common practice, chérie. It was an arranged marriage to a very wealthy man." But I could tell that she harbours a great resentment for that act.

I know the answer even before I ask the question. "And how old was he?"

"Sixty-three."

I cringe at the thought of having sex with a man my grandfather's age. Those intelligent eyes take in my reaction, sadly acknowledging what is showing on my face. I reach for her, pulling her head to my breast in comfort. I stroke the dark hair under my fingers, and I feel a gentle shudder in the body wrapped around me. What a tragic life, to be trapped in a loveless marriage to a man who obviously valued the ownership of a beautiful young girl over everything else.

So much of this history contributed to who this woman is now, explaining the string of sexual conquests left in her wake. Françoise's family had abandoned her to wallow in a relationship that was physically abhorrent to her, left her to never find love or contentment. This moulded her, living life to the fullest, but without the trust or love of another human being. Sex became an act to fulfil her loneliness, not an instrument for love, and her heart was cleverly hidden from sight.

It is such a sad, sad story for one who obviously was desperate to love and be loved. I grab her chin and lift those glistening eyes to mine. "I will stay with you until the end of our days, Françoise, in which ever time you desire. I give you my heart as you have given me yours."

A sigh escapes those full lips as tears slide down her cheeks. My thumbs rise to brush them away and are caught by her own hands, soft kisses touching my palms in silent thanks.

"When did your husband die?" I whisper in deference to the emotion of the conversation.

"Three years ago."

"And how old are you now?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Ten years?" Ten years of hell I would imagine, by the look on her face.

"But all his money does not make up for those ten years, ma petite sauvage"

"What is this, 'sauvage'?"

"You are my little, umm... hellcat. So, for you 'chat sauvage' is 'hellcat'. It literally means 'savage cat'."

"Your hellcat, eh? Hmm, I can live with that. So, you have not married again?"

"Many have tried, but I am not interested. A lot of them wanted my money, others wanted the title. None of them wanted me."

"You can keep your money. I am not interested."

"I know that, chérie. I have known that from the moment I saw you in the mirror." She pauses. "And what about you, little one? Where do you come from?"

"Boston, in America."

"Ahh, yes, having tea with the English."

I chuckle. "Not recently, no."

"And what is life like in your time?"

"Well, for one thing, we have a whole different room to bathe in. Washing ourselves becomes a big part of modern life."

"I wish some of my fellow Frenchmen would learn from you and bathe, mon amour. I am so sick

of all those horrible perfumes that they all seem to wear in the hope of covering the smell."

In a mock whisper, I utter "They get the point soon enough. What else? We don't ride horses any more. The carriages move by themselves. Food comes in packets instead of gardens. And we can fly through the air."

"Stop! Stop! I am feeling dizzy."

"We have come a long way in 200 years in some things, my love. In other things, we have not shifted one day."

* * * * *

Chapter 8

I lie on my stomach on the bed, watching in fascination the flurry of activity taking place in front of me. A couple of hours have passed and her hair is now piled on her head in a mass of curls, and I still have to figure out how it is staying put. Poor Françoise. I am grimacing in sympathy as her whalebone corset is being tightened. She is hanging on for grim death to the bedpost while Madeleine is taking great delight in pulling the life out of the ties, sending me a wicked smile as I look over my lover's shoulder. *The little witch.*

My young aristocrat's face is beet red with the pressure on her torso, and I can stay silent no longer. "Enough!" Françoise looks up at the first word I have uttered in Madeleine's presence.

"Cela suffira, Madeleine. Tu peux disposer." Our eyes follow the servant as she leaves. "What is wrong, Dale?"

"She is doing that deliberately."

"Of course she is, chérie. She has to make it fit."

"But you are not looking at her face. She is hurting you."

"Ah, ma petite sauvage. Defending me, are you?"

"Against her, I sure am. She'd just better watch it." My ire is growing at the nasty little games this woman is playing. I look up to find sapphire eyes watching me quietly, filled with a mixture of love and hunger. Well, it seems she feels the same way when I get angry. *Heh.*

"Sorry." I mumble.

"Dale, please don't be. No one has ever stood up for me before. I... thank you, chérie."

"You're welcome, my love." I look at the body in front of me and I hurt for her. The corset has

pulled in her figure to an impossible degree and it makes me wonder how she breathes. Her breasts are nearly overflowing over the top, ready to pop out if she so much as raises her voice. "How do you put up with that?"

"I don't know. I hate wearing this thing, but it is what we women have to endure for the sake of fashion."

"I bet a man designed this."

"I'm sure you are right, little one." She wriggles around, trying to find a comfortable position in the torture device. "Now, let us get you ready." She holds up another corset in my direction, a sly smile plastered on her face.

"Do I have to?"

"Well, I suppose not, but don't you want to know what it feels like? Besides, I want everyone to know that you are a woman... my woman." That possessive tone sends a chill down my spine. Her woman. Can't I do this one little thing for her?

I strip off the dressing gown, turning to face the bedpost and muttering, "I hope I don't live to regret this..."

She chuckles as the material encircles my body. Slowly and methodically she begins feeding the laces through the eyelets, waiting until all the holes are filled before tightening it. I can feel my pulse in my eyeballs with each tug of the ties, slowly squeezing the life out of me. "Holy hell! How do you live with this?" I am nearly in pain with the tightness of the corset, the whalebone inserts are digging into my flesh with great gusto.

"Well, chérie, we have been wearing this since we were children, so we have been living with this discomfort for many years."

"Come with me to the future and wear it no longer. Please!" I am having second thoughts about living in this time with her, especially if it means wearing this torturous piece of clothing. Françoise ties off the corset with a flourish and I stand up straight, wriggling around until I can find a position that doesn't pinch or jab too hard. My breathing comes in shallow gasps as I try to stop myself from hyperventilating. I look over to my French woman to see an amused look on her face. "Laugh all you want. This is painful!"

"Oh, I know, little one, I know."

"Then why wear it?"

"Most of the time I don't. That is one reason why I keep to myself, so I don't have to wear all this. It is very unhealthy, Dale."

"I know that. In my time, the underthings are next to nothing. You remember when I stripped for

you?" Those eyes darkened. "I can see that you do. Those small bits of material underneath that I took off are about what we wear as undergarments."

"That is all?"

"Yep. Not much more than that. And women wear pants all the time. It is not frowned upon."

"Oh, chérie, what I would give to move around with that much freedom."

"All you have to do is take my hand, Françoise."

A sad smile crosses her face, "No, Dale. My place is here. I do not belong there."

"What about me? My heart is with you, so where do I belong?" She cannot answer that because there is no good outcome. I know what is best for her, but I am walking a fine line between what I want and what must be. I only hope that I can seize the moment when it presents itself and save both our souls.

* * * * *

I am glad that I don't have to make polite conversation to anyone, being left alone to just enjoy the lavishness of the costumes and the setting of the ball unfolding before me. While I am presentable in my frilled shirt, coat, breeches, hose and slippers, I am nowhere near as fancy as the lords and ladies who are guests of Françoise. Still, her staff has worked a miracle to find clothes for me in a matter of a few hours.

The pain from the corset keeps my mind focused on the comings and goings of the large room, not allowing me to daydream as I stand next to the hostess. Françoise is conspicuously ignoring me, despite the fact that she keeps me close, lending credence to my position as "her woman", as she puts it. Hoarse whispers from behind raised fans reach my ears, and for once I am thankful that I don't understand a word they are saying. I don't want to know the colourful language being used to describe me. There are one or two brave souls who approach Françoise and politely ask who I am, but I have no idea what her answer is, only that her eyes skitter to mine every time she is thinking of a reply.

I move away to look at myself in the mirrored wall, studying the stranger facing me. She is right, the corset makes my figure look fuller, and there is no doubt that I am a woman. This strange little game of dressing me as a man has me curious, but I do it for her and put up with the snickering.

I can smell her before her image appears behind me. The tall headpiece that she wears adds another foot to her already imposing height, and I look like a little mouse next to her. But there is an unmistakable leer about her perusal of me, her eyes following the line of my body, from the tip of the powdered wig to the buckled shoes on my feet.

"Incroyable, ma petit sauvage." She is such a sweet talker.

"Couldn't find me a dress?"

"Well, first of all, Dale, I wasn't looking for a dress. But I don't think I would have found one to do you justice in the short time anyway."

"Why am I dressed like this?" Then it hits me. "You are trying to shock all these people, aren't you?" To prove my point, her arm slips around my waist, pulling me closer to the tightly enclosed body behind me. "You are such a trouble maker."

"I know. Je t'aime." Those two words fade off to a whisper, her eyes shining with undisguised affection, while that sexy smile of hers melts me like chocolate in the midday sun. *Hmmm, chocolate... I'll have to try that one day.*

My eyes seek out those shimmering blue pools above me in the mirror, and the emotion flowing between us vibrates in the air. There is something ancient about what exists between us, something that has spanned more than just the two hundred years that separates us. Her gaze holds me in her spell for what seems an eon and volumes are spoken in a few seconds, neither of us daring to speak for fear of breaking the ethereal calm surrounding us. There is a finality to this, I can feel it. Our destiny together is sealed.

Our reverie is broken by the approach of one particular middle-aged gentleman asking for a dance. I can see that she is loathe to reply, but etiquette demands that she be the perfect hostess and accept the invitation. I move over to a large table laid out with mountains of food, idly munching on some delicacy, the taste of which I cannot place. It is such an odd sight to see my lover, a tall, beautiful woman who, with the impossibly high hair that is the fashion of the day, towers over most of the men in the room, and being escorted to the dance floor by a midget. My mood deteriorates as he woos her, slipping past her closer than the dance requires, whispering as he trots around her in an elaborate mating ritual.

I can stand it no longer, and move myself over to the window for some fresh air, ignoring the sly glances from the women and the open ogling from the men. For once, I nearly wish for a dress to cover my legs from the frank perusal. A cool breeze wafts in, sliding over the heated skin of my flushed face. I look out into the darkness, nearly wishing to be out in it to give me some anonymity. I see someone move from the kitchen door towards the front gate, darkness shrouding the identity of the lone figure.

Françoise is still busy dancing, her partner now a portly, balding gentleman whose splendiferous clothing is a sight to behold. He makes me think of an ageing peacock spreading his feathers in the hope of finding a mate. I reach the door and look back to see my French woman amusedly watching her dance partner huff and puff as he tries to keep up with the lively music. I slip through the door and scamper across the open ground to the far trees, making my way silently towards the front gates.

Muted voices force me to slowly approach. I cannot understand them but I can see the faces in

the light of a lantern. Two rough gentlemen, probably farm workers by the cut of their clothes, are talking to the person from the house... Madeleine.

"Est-ce qu'ils sont tous là?" ("Are they all there?")

"Oui. Madame de Villerey est là-bas, elle aussi." (Yes, Madam de Villerey is present as well.) I pick up Françoise's name.

"Va prévenir les autres et dis-leur de se hâter. On va tous les avoir au même endroit." ("Go tell the others to move in quickly. We will catch them all in one place.") One of the men moves back through the open gate to beyond.

"Il est temps de faire payer aux aristocrates toute la misère qu'ils nous ont donnée depuis des siècles." ("It is time to make those aristocrats pay for all the misery they have brought on us for centuries.")

"Mort aux aristos!" ("Death to the aristocrats!") The young maid moves quickly back towards the house.

In the far off distance, I can see numerous lanterns moving towards the gate, illuminating a large group of men. I do not wait around to see what they will do, for I know what is to come next. Stumbling in the dark, I try to move quickly towards the house, my heart beating frantically in terror. My time has come.

* * * * *

I barge through the front door and lock it behind me. Grabbing a nearby chair I slip it up under the handle and wedge it in place. A large hand grabs my shoulder and I scream, my heart now beating uncontrollably in my throat.

"Where have you been and what are you doing?" On any other day, that whisper would have sent shivers down my spine, now it only terrifies me.

"Err.... I went outside to get some air and I thought I heard a prowler."

"Prowler?"

"Ummm... Someone trying to break in."

"That is a bit foolish I think, mon coeur. There are forty guests here. He is sadly outnumbered."

"Still, better not take any chances."

Her look tells me she doesn't believe one word I am telling her. It is a pretty sad lie, even to my own ears.

"Can you take me upstairs, please?" She doesn't believe that either. "I'm feeling a bit dizzy with this corset, and I want to lie down." That she believes. I guide her hand to my pulse, letting her feel the rapid pounding under her fingers.

"Chérie, of course. One moment." Françoise approaches her dance partner and excuses us. Slowly, we ascend the stairs, heading towards the door at the end of the corridor. We are just about there when Madeleine steps in the way.

"Madeleine, laissez-nous passer, je te prie." ("Madeleine, out of the way please.")

"Madame, je puis prendre soin de votre amie pendant que vous retournez auprès de vos invités." ("Madam, I will look after your companion while you return to your guests.")

"Madeleine, écarte-toi." Françoise is upset, I can see that, because the young maid is refusing to budge. There is no time for this confrontation and I must now step in.

"Tell Madeleine that she cannot have you. You are mine."

"What?"

"Please, my love. Just do it."

The young woman looks to her mistress in question. "Elle dit que tu ne peux plus m'avoir. Je suis sienne."

Anger rolls across her features suddenly and she approaches me, standing inches from my face. "Elle était mienne avant votre arrivée. Je ne vous laisserai pas me la prendre."

My lover is taken aback by whatever this woman has said to me. "Well?"

"Umm... I was hers before you and she is not going to let you have me." Her embarrassment at being the object of dispute is clearly written on her features.

Madeleine's features contort into rage and she yells at me, "Si elle ne peut rester mienne, personne d'autre ne l'aura!" ("If I can't have her, nobody will!")

"And you think you're going to stop me?" I let my own anger surface, letting sparks of fire emanate from my eyes, telling her in no uncertain terms that I am prepared to fight for what is mine. No translation is needed. My very posture tells her all she needs to know.

There are loud voices at the front door, followed by banging from some sort of battering ram trying to break in. A sly smile crosses those thin lips that face me, hiding a secret she thinks only she knows.

I smile back in a similar fashion, hiding my own secret from her, and planting the seed of doubt

in her. Madeleine is babbling at me, and I know she is cursing me with every evil word she can muster. The front door is beginning to splinter under the assault and it will be only a matter of a minute or two before they are in the house.

The young maid is getting more frantic in her gestures and I cannot wait any longer. "She is mine, you bitch!" I mutter with deadly intent and ball my fist just before I slug her in the jaw. Françoise watches mutely as her servant staggers and collapses unconscious to the floor. Her eyes widen and track to me, her jaw hanging open in dismay.

"Can't explain now." I grab her hand and drag her through the bedroom door just as the front door gives way. I bolt the door, again shoving a chair under the handle.

"Strip!" My lanky French woman's brain has seized up, clearly unable to process what I just said. I step behind her and quickly undo the laces, pulling frantically to get her out of the dress. "Do it! Get your clothes off!"

Slowly, she begins to respond, dragging the material off her shoulders to pool on the floor. Stepping out, she begins to remove the panniers, placing the frame on a nearby chair. I wrestle the laces out of the corset, leaving her to undress the rest of the way. I grab at my own clothes, flinging them far and wide around the room.

There is faint screaming and yelling emanating from downstairs and the sound of approaching footsteps. A loud banging on the door makes us jump.

"Ouvrez! On sait que vous vous planquez là!" (Open! We know you are hiding in there!)"

"Ignore it!" I bark at Françoise, who is clearly in a daze. In the background, voices are shouting "Vive la Révolution!" and "Mort aux aristos!" Stripping the bed, I tie whatever material I can find together to make a rope, flinging it out the first story window and securing it to a banister.

The bedroom door is starting to give way under the constant pushing by the men outside. I grab my lover and hoist her up onto the bench under the mirror, shoving her through with little help from her. The chair begins to move and the crack in the door widens. I clamber up the sofa and pull myself through, feeling the rest of my clothes fall away from me, just as the door opens fully to four large unkempt men armed with pitchforks.

I push Françoise to the floor, grabbing a blanket and throwing it over the glass, blocking out the light from my side of the mirror. I fall on top of my large companion, placing a hand over her mouth and motioning silence. As we lie there, sounds of destruction travel through the mirror, cupboards splintering, material tearing and a final sound of glass breaking.

* * * * *

Silence greets us for a long time as we lie on the floor, shivering as much from fear as from the cold. I stand up and peek behind the blanket. Françoise's mirror has been destroyed and the

connection is severed. For better or worse, she is now living with me in my time.

"What happened?"

"Come, sit." I pull her to my bed, looking at the perplexed look on her face. I mentally gather my resolve and wonder how to explain what I know. "You know I come from the future." She nods. "So, you know that I am also aware of what has happened in the past... including what just happened then." She nods again.

"Three days ago, on 14th July, a civil war began in France." I can see the incredulity in her eyes. "The people rose up to overthrow the aristocracy." She is struggling to understand, and I gather her into my arms in comfort.

"Pourquoi?"

"You have so much and they have so little. It is as simple as that. Well no, it's more complicated than that, but to the common man that is all they see."

"But why did you bring me here?"

"Because you would have died."

"I think you exaggerate, little one."

"No, most aristocrats that were captured... were executed."

"No," her whisper is lost in her tears. I have gutted her, I know. Her whole world has crumbled and I am the bearer of the bad news. She is in shock and I wrestle her under the blankets of the bed, grabbing the extra blanket resting over the mirror to add to the pile.

"Do you want some time alone?" I make a move to leave her, but a large hand comes out and grabs my own.

"Please, chérie, stay with me." I don't want to leave her, but I will if she wishes it. I pull her into my embrace, feeling the chill not only of her skin, but of her heart. My once confident she-demon is an empty shell of herself, her beloved France shattered along with her soul. We lie there quietly for some time, eventually drifting off to troubled sleep.

* * * * *

I wake to an empty bed and miss her presence already. I roll over to inhale her scent off the sheets, detecting a faint aroma. "Françoise?" There is no response but the slow tick of the bedside clock. Panic grips me and I jump out of bed. Shafts of sunlight stream in through the skylight, hitting the wooden floor in a random pattern. Dust motes dance in the flickering light, gently floating in the warming air.

I call again. "Françoise?" The floor is cool under my feet, but I don't feel anything but the thudding of my heart and the terror streaking through my soul. I find my woman seated at the kitchen table, her head in her large hands, and an open book on the table. Red-rimmed eyes greet me and I can do little but pull her into me, holding her as she weeps for her fallen country.

Long moments pass as I soothe her tortured soul, knowing that she will want some questions answered. "What do you want to know?" I whisper. Her head tilts up and I cannot help but wipe away the glistening drops sitting on her pale skin.

"You knew and you didn't tell me?"

"I couldn't, sweetheart."

"You did not trust me?"

"I trust you with my life, but there was much more at stake than my mere mortality." She wants more. "If I had told you and you did one thing differently... one thing, Françoise, it could have changed the whole outcome of history. You could not save them, my love. I risked an awful lot by saving you."

"Maybe you should have left me behind as well."

I am shocked. "You would have preferred death than to be with me?" The pain is so great that it feels like she has stabbed me, her silence shredding me and leaving me to bleed slowly. I back away and crawl back to bed, rolling in a ball in despair. She does not follow me, but quietly weeps over the book.

I don't know how long I just exist, not trying to feel anything, but it hurts too much. I know that she has lost a lot, but I thought that our love would mean something to her. Perhaps I am wrong. I watch the light crawl across the floor towards the end of the bed, the hours slowly draining away with the shifting sunlight. Finally, she comes into the bedroom and crosses to the mirror, her hands gliding over its surface as if trying to incant some magical spell to open the door again.

"It's gone." My voice is flat and emotionless, much like how I am feeling.

Shuffling over to the bed, she perches on the edge, her hand reaching for my foot. "I'm sorry, chérie." I watch her through tear-streaked eyes, waiting for something more... something to give me hope. "Je t'adore" she whispers, my heart grabbing onto those words as a lifeline. Perhaps my rescue ship has returned to save me after all.

"I'm so sorry, my love. You have lost everything"

A bittersweet smile crosses those swollen lips. "Not everything, chérie." She can see my look of inquiry and stands. Crossing over to the mirror, she presses her hands around the top of the wood, shifting her fingers in a random pattern until there is a faint click. She prises away the

scrollwork panel at the top and lifts out a cloth bag, returning to the bed with her prize. Unending the bag, out tips jewellery... a pile of very expensive jewellery.

"What...??!"

"These are the jewels of my husband's family."

"Ahh, the family jewels." Françoise gives me the first genuine smile I have seen since we left her time.

"They are very..." she wrinkles her nose up in distaste.

"Gaudy? Tasteless? Showy?"

"Yes, gaudy. I do not like to wear them, so I hide them here. They are all I have left of my life, chérie, but I give them to you. We need to live, do we not?"

We certainly do. My mind has been in shock of late but that thought had crossed my mind earlier. I would have provided for her if I had to, I knew that before I risked everything.

"Understand one thing, Françoise, I don't want your money, I only want you. Having said that, if we sell your jewellery at least we can live comfortably, but I can support both of us if I have to."

"I know, mon amour, that is why I am offering. If I doubted your intentions, I would not have shown you the secret of the mirror." She shifts closer on the bed, her skin pebbling with goosebumps.

"I think the first thing I'd better do is buy you some clothes." I grab the blanket off the bed and wrap her in it, briskly rubbing my hands over her cooling flesh, finally taking refuge under the bedclothes. We lay some moments in the little cocoon of warmth, just soaking in the closeness to heal the open wounds.

"Mon coeur, can I ask you a question?" The voice is muted in the enclosed space, hot air breathing against my breast in a most enticing fashion.

"Sure."

"Why the sheets?"

"I wanted them to think we had escaped out the window."

"And stripping off of the clothes?"

"For one thing, you never would have been able to climb through in all the clothes you were wearing. Besides, all that material sitting right under the mirror might have given them a clue as to where we went."

"Why?"

"Because if they knew it was the mirror, they might have been tempted to destroy it completely, and none of this would have happened. No mirror to lead me to you. But since both you and the mirror are still here, it seems they left it intact."

"Ah... I'm sorry, chérie, I should not have said what I did."

"You were in great pain, sweetheart. You could not help but lash out."

"But in doing so, I hurt the one thing I had sworn to myself to protect."

"Me?"

"You, ma petite sauvage."

I snuggle into my French aristocrat, using my body heat to warm her. "Welcome to the 21st century, my love."

THE END

If you enjoyed the story and would like more, drop me a line at aurelia_fan@yahoo.com.au I would love to hear from you.

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