

There was a nip in the air the morning the Directors met. It was the week before the elections and not the sort of morning conducive to any sort of optimism, a squall having just debouched upon the coast, bringing with it a torrent that would pelt the city as it emerged from its groggy silence.

As with all such scenes, the rain had its way, washing the streets of their color, revealing what was buried beneath. As Pelissier's car transitioned from mild suburb to downtown squalor, he straddled the blurred line between two worlds.

The suburb was docile enough. Brown stone townhouses, ringed by wrought iron fencework, the streets were guarded by the friendly local officer. This officer would be the genial sort: plump, smiling, oblivious. He perhaps did not enjoy his beat but did not complain. He was, perhaps, known for his singing and, smiling, would escort the occasional local on their way. The rain was, perhaps, a nuisance, but clothed for the occasion he did not mind.

As the car plunged deeper into the city, things would change. Here, the local officer was less plangent—he did not sing. There was caution in his step as he took care to patrol near streetlamps. Bundled up in layers of clothing, morose loiterers would emerge from the dark and leer at him. The officer was not oblivious. Only the rain protected him and shivering in the damp he perhaps meditated that he had been transported here—through the darkness, into another world—against his will.

None of this would have touched the Director from the comfort of his automobile. Nestled in the bosom of his car, he enjoyed the comforts of his status and entertained the disdain that was his right. Inside, the space was warm. The rain did not touch him.

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The city was still asleep and like the others Pelissier would arrive to a nearly empty office. File in hand, the Director ambled through the halls, footsteps echoing through the great vaulted chambers behind him. It was early still, around dawn, but today the Director-General had commanded that they meet at precisely this time as a 'courtesy' to their guest who had requested the meeting. One can only imagine the consternation this would cause, exigencies notwithstanding. Knowing Lautrec, neither the Directors nor their guests would ever have condoned a meeting—a meeting of all things!--at such an ungodly hour had he not himself seen it fit to have it commanded, and that this 'courtesy' was merely an exercise of station for the sake of it. One wonders with what displeasure a man like the Grand Secretary would seek to impose himself on the sleepless Gendarmerie in such a way and especially on such a morning. Nevertheless, Pelissier and the others would attend. One imagines them being all in a mood, having just had their breakfast, silently alighting upon the lawn, dawn gloom billowing around them.

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Of the twelve Directors, only three were present at the conference room when Pelissier arrived, namely Cormorant, Vernier and himself. The others were not invited. Lautrec himself was absent. Pelissier tried to make himself comfortable as he waited for their guests to arrive.

As Director of the Department of Liaisons, it was Pelissier's job to manage the relationship between the Agency, its peers and the public. If anything, it was his job to make sure he knew everything going on within the Gendarmerie from the top down so as not to be kept on the back foot. He abhorred gossip but knew how to put it to use--and the whispers in the backrooms were restive.

Lautrec was treading thin ice. His decision to push forward with his plans over and above the will of the Secretariat did not sit well with his peers. As the role of the Gendarmerie had been, by tradition, collegial, the others took offense at Lautrec's high-handedness.

Lautrec, of course, had always been high-handed. It was the reason he survived three Viceroys and, save for a brief spell of disgrace, had been successively reappointed as Director-General every time. Pelissier himself had only been Director for five years, reappointed to a second term at the discretion of Lautrec himself. If rumor was to be believed, Lautrec survived by virtue of ruthless excision: he had engineered the downfall of successive would-be usurpers both within the Gendarmerie and without. In the words of his former master, as a servant of the Emperor, Lautrec had no peer.

But the Directors, being appointees of the Viceroy and themselves nobles of ancient extraction, saw the Director-General as nothing more than *\_primus inter pares\_*. While Lautrec was untouchable, that did not mean he was above reproach.

"Do you not think it a bit too excessive?" Klein chimed as the Directors broke their bread at the lounge.

"Think what excessive?" Pelissier replied.

"This entire imbroglio with the Parlements, I mean! Had we not decided--and by a large margin at that--not to intervene? As far as I'm aware the rest of us would not agree to such excessive measures."

"As far as I am aware we had held no vote."

"And we have you to thank for that," sneered the Director as he dropped two lumps of sugar into his coffee. Aside from Klein and Pelissier, Durant and Harrow were present at this discussion. Harrow was picking out crumpets from the buffet while Durant was silently stirring his tea.

"Even then, a vote would not have been binding," yawned Pelissier, who stared sleepily into his tea, "Besides, with the Viceroy roped into the matter, there is nothing we can do."

"That is always how it is with you, Laurent, isn't it? Rules, rules, rules. We stand at the precipice of a historic moment and that's all it is to you, \_Rules\_."

"Gentlemen," said Durant, "I would advise caution. You never know who might be listening."

"Oh come now," replied Klein, "we are all men of breeding here. Is there no... \_solidarity\_ between peers?"

"Solidarity, yes." Durant replied. "Secrecy, not quite. Who's to say that I won't tell any of this to Cormorant?"

"You mean that \_bulldog\_? Why would you? You and I both know that you hate his guts!"

"If this continues," continued Vernier, ignoring their squabbling, "we may very well renew war."

"Exactly my point," Klein replied, "Lautrec is no longer the steady hand at the helm. He is far too blinded by ambition."

"And you yourself are not?" Durant replied.

"Nothing but! And yet we as stewards of the Dominions must act in the name of the greater good especially when it is within our power. I think it is about time we stood up to do our duty."

Naturally, he would not go to Cormorant. High-minded words aside, it was never so simple. Klein has had his eyes on the Director-Generalship for years and so was given to such talk from behind Lautrec's back to the surprise of no one. Having been passed over twice for promotion, he blamed Lautrec for holding him back. The others were all a cipher and Pelissier was not inclined to speculate. For his part he was doing what Klein was telling them all to do: his Duty.

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It did not take long for the Devil to arrive. Accompanying the Director-General were their guests, the Grand Secretary of the Viceroyal Office and his Deputies, a total of five or so. While ordinarily it would be Pelissier's job to communicate with the Secretariat directly, he had been passed over by Lautrec who saw it fit to handle the issue personally. It need not be said that he was disgruntled. Yet, gentleman as he was, he was not like to throw a fit over a perceived coup. He had been informed--belatedly--and had been given the due courtesy of being allowed to handle the subsequent communications between the Gendarmerie and the Office but it cannot be said that the treatment didn't \_rankle\_.

There was, then, extensive back and forth between his Department and the VO. Whatever it is Lautrec revealed to the Viceroy, to Pelissier, it seemed, the revelation had left the Office spooked. Over the course of a week they had been demanding all sorts of communiques from the Gendarmerie. In particular they were demanding information on certain 'delicate persons',

inquiring as to whether their behavior raised any 'alarms' and whether certain specific transactions between these individuals were 'traced' and whether these transactions were 'actionable'.

\_A natural consequence of events\_. Pelissier could only comfort himself. It did not come as any surprise to him or to anyone that the Establishment was panicking on the eve of the Elections especially when they had previously convinced themselves that all would be well. Eager to avoid a scandal, the bureaucrats of the Office were now tripping over themselves to deal with the gangrenous end of their operation lest it infect the whole--with the only solvent to aid the amputation available to the Gendarmerie.

Upon entering, the usher guided their guests to their proper positions with the Grand Secretary sitting opposite to the Director-General at the end of the table while the Deputies and the Directors were seated along its length.

As Grand Secretary, Norbert Daladier was the second most powerful man in all of Rosalia. Yet, not quite young at sixty, one would not have guessed that he was any sort of political adventurer. There was that type of individual, who, entering the service, did so on the premise of largesse but only achieved it by possessing certain qualities. Charisma, for example, was highly prized but not necessary. It turned heads and amplified one's other qualities, as though it were enough that they possessed a peculiar gravity expected from the powerful. Daladier had none of that but he did have what one would call \_Reach\_. The secret was that one had to know the system better than those who thought they did--magnetic qualities notwithstanding. What Daladier had that others lacked was a fully-developed theory of pruning: he knew when certain limbs had to go and the good sense to relish doing it himself.

Ponderous, shabby, geriatric, Daladier had a habit of sinking into himself. In the words of one of his subordinates, he resembled "a crumpled paper bag"--the wit in question one day receiving the axe for this indiscreet moment of \_jouissance\_. With wiry hair, heavy brows and a thick, carefully combed moustache, visible liver-spots dotting his face like stains completed the picture of bureaucratic haggardness that was the outer token of his seniority. It was only when one caught a glimpse of his intense staring eyes that one discerned the black intelligence hiding within. After all, one did not amass power had he not himself betrayed a certain keenness essential to success.

"You know, Lautrec, when I woke up this morning," Daladier said as he took his seat, "I did not expect to say to myself, 'why, what a lovely day for a meeting.' Not only am I soaked to the bones, but the only breakfast I've had was a disgusting plate of cold sausage and a tomato."

The Directors and his Deputies shared a bout of laughter.

"If you don't mind my saying, you picked possibly the worst time to call for a meeting: too early for it to be worthwhile and too late for it to matter!"

Lautrec grinned, "You know how they say time waits for no one? Well, it works both ways."

"Yes, I'm aware. And yet we would not have needed this godsforsaken meeting had we been doing our jobs, wouldn't we? Only the dead have the patience for this!"

"And what better use for our remaining time, then? Fortunately for us we are very much alive and must make do."

"--if the chills don't get us first!"

The sound of briefcases clicking open began to fill the room as the guests seated themselves. Stacks of paperwork were then piled on the table with all the ceremony of a game of cards. A deputy then asked the usher whether there was any coffee and then dashed away to quickly get a cup. Spectacles, foggy from the cold, began to be cleaned and the sound of dry coughing interrupted the silence. It took ten or so minutes of unceremonious shuffling for the room to find its center even as the awkwardness began to die down.

Lautrec, at last seeing his guests comfortable, motioned for Pelissier to begin.

The Director cleared his throat and adjusted his spectacles. "We've been in contact with the Viceroyal Office and they are requesting a report on our stance vis-a-vis the Rosalians and their elections. As all of you are aware, our dear Lautrec has taken it upon himself to convey our misgivings regarding the present business and their recent conference has put the Office on high alert. They are keen to know whether we have any information that might be of use to them."

Director Vernier was the first to chime in, "I thought we had agreed that we should not intervene?"

"Yes, well, circumstances have changed," replied Pelissier. "You could say that Claude's mission to the Viceroy was quite successful and that now the machinery is turning, so to speak. The Viceroyal Office is keen to know whether our agency finds it convenient to employ certain 'countermeasures' in anticipation of coming events."

Pelissier paused for a moment to ensure that everyone was on the same page. "The Office wants a full report--in writing, no less--indicating our official opinion and the steps the Office ought to take including any and all intelligence related to the matter. With the elections to be held in a week, the Viceroy's agents are eager to prevent a scandal."

"Yes," Daladier said, mousy voice filling up the room, "I find the situation quite fascinating. Heretofore, we had been told that the present course we have adopted is the best out of a bundle considered. Do you not find it concerning, for instance, that we seem to be woefully unprepared for the threat certain liabilities pose? What we in the Office would like to know, first, is why this is happening now of all times."

Lautrec took up the response, "If I may, I would like to say that this is, categorically, not the first our Agency has raised the alarm on behalf of the Office."

Lautrec was neither being coy nor mistaken; the Gendarmerie had raised the issue in prior discussions with the Emperor's Privy Council over the past months, and the Viceroy's staff, being present at those meetings, knew this. In particular, a report entitled \_Threats imposed by the Parlements sur Rosalias\_, submitted by the Gendarmerie, had made the rounds throughout the upper echelons of the Imperial administration only to be consistently deprecated wherever it went.

"So I am told," Daladier replied. "But that does not explain why we are so vulnerable at present."

"Indeed," Lautrec continued, "but not for lack of trying. The Gendarmerie has on several occasions raised the issue with the various offices of the Empire to no effect. For reference, I would direct your attention to the various reports published by our Agency over the course of the deliberations."

"What are you insinuating then?" Asked Daladier.

"Merely that the reason behind our unpreparedness is that the Empire has, or, rather, it's stewards, have chosen to be negligent."

"Are you suggesting that the fault lies with the Viceroyal Office?" replied Daladier with a glare that could burn a hole through stone.

"Not at all." replied Lautrec, neatly sidestepping the insinuation. "This goes further up, all the way to the Privy Council."

Daladier nodded. The report had passed over important Viceroyal channels during the deliberations in order to expedite what Lautrec expected would be a swift decapitation of the opposition. However such a coup did not materialize. With the Marquise La Grange and her allies occupying the very top of the Imperial hierarchy, it was a simple matter for them to quash Lautrec's initiative.

That is not to say that the Viceroyal Office had no say in the matter. On the contrary, they had chosen, explicitly, not to exercise their executive powers as they did not deem it expedient. It would provoke the ire, they said, not just of the Rosalians but the Establishment itself--of which Daladier, in insisting, personally, that the Viceroy cannot and should not do so, was fully aware.

They thus dodged the responsibility through a thoroughly bureaucratic legerdemain: the Viceroyal Office, being itself invested with no power to determine the Constitutional nature of the Convocation, would therefore be working outside its jurisdiction should it pass any decision on the matter. And thus the issue was neatly shunted up the administrative ladder.

Lautrec was not blind to the implications and neither was Daladier. On the contrary, the fact that both his and Daladier's hands were clean at the onset of the farce meant that the opportunity to exploit the exposed flank presented by their opponents was never more available than at present. It did not, of course, escape Lautrec, nor would it surprise anyone, that Daladier had intended to play his trick had the issue gone sideways. It was, furthermore, no secret that the Grand Secretary had always been eyeing a position far closer to the Emperor than he had hitherto been capable of reaching. Lautrec, in turn, needed allies higher up the chain of command: what better way of gaining one than creating one himself? Thus, events as they stood created space for maneuver: the trick need merely be played. For now at least a little theater was necessary.

A hush fell over the room as Lautrec paused. Only the clatter of the stenographer's machine broke the otherwise tense stillness of the meeting. The stenographer, who had been dutifully recording the substance of the meeting, finally caught up and the clatter ended. With nothing being said, the stenographer looked up to see both Daladier and Lautrec looking down at him.

[Perhaps a "historical" aside would be in order? The narrator could explain how such an account of the meeting came to be recorded.]

"I assume everything is in order?" Daladier asked the stenographer.

"Yes, milord." said the stenographer as he once more bowed his head over the machine.

"Had this conversation taken place without the authority of the Emperor," Daladier continued (the clatter began again), "I would certainly have taken exception to your assertions. Do you mean to imply, for example, that the offices of the Emperor willfully \_chose\_ inaction in spite of the full awareness of the threat?"

"Only that the fault falls squarely on the shoulders of certain individuals."

"Would you care to identify them explicitly?"

"Of course. I mean none other than the Marquise La Grange,"

Daladier smiled. "Ah, Her Most Honored Grace the Chairwoman of the Privy Council."

"That is correct."

"What are you suggesting, then?"

"That it should not surprise us that the Marquise should so vehemently support the cause of Mediation even in the face of the hostility of our enemies. That, among other things, under her

supervision the Establishment has been left exposed in such a radical manner due to conflicts of interest."

There was yet another moment of silence as the room collectively digested the exchange. In the background a clock ticked and the kettle steamed. Meanwhile, the people present considered the silence even as the stenographer recorded the conversation at a furious pace. At last, steepling his hands as he leaned back on his seat, Daladier broke the stillness: "And thus we come to the substance of the meeting. I would like to begin by discussing the practical steps we ought to take in anticipation of the coming calamity? Do the Directors have anything to say?"

Vernier was the first to react but was cut off by Lautrec who motioned in the Direction of Cormorant to say, "I believe Director Cormorant is better informed?" Vernier sneered but settled back down.

The room turned collectively toward the Dracon.

"If I may," began Cormorant, "I would like to reiterate my concern raised in previous meetings that the stance we take could have dire consequences if we choose inaction. We are servants of the Empire. If we do nothing then we may very well fail in our duty."

"Very well," replied Daladier, "What do you recommend?"

"A thorough cleansing of the Rosalian hierarchy."

The officials of the Viceroyal Office began to look at each other as they struggled with comprehension.

Daladier raised an eyebrow and shot his deputy a look. The deputy, taking note, then raised a question, "I presume you mean a particular office?"

"On the contrary," he responded, "We recommend a thorough purge of the Secretariat, root and branch."

"On what grounds?" The Deputy asked.

Cormorant leaned back and said, "Treason, of course."

Half of them chuckled the way one would at a distasteful joke. The others shook their heads in disbelief.

As Lautrec's scowl remained unchanged, the chuckling stopped.

"You're serious, aren't you?" cried one of the officials.



Daladier raised his hand and the aide fell silent. "Would you care to \_operationalize\_ the suggestion?" Daladier asked.

"Certainly," Cormorant said, "we can begin with the interrogation of minor officials at the local level. Our goal is to build up a network of incrimination so that we can ease into flushing out all subversive elements higher up the regime."

The Deputies began speaking to each other in agitated whispers. However, with no concerted resistance forthcoming, Cormorant continued.

"The issue is the presence of liabilities. What is needed is to open an investigation into any and all possible foreign assets embedded in the Establishment hierarchy. The erection of a surveillance apparatus will greatly ease the inquiry, arrest and ultimately the replacement of compromised officials with those either useful or loyal to the Emperor."

The Deputies were now a maelstrom of consternation and wild disbelief. \_Preposterous\_, some of them claimed, \_Unacceptable\_, cried others. The Directors, however, were unanimously silent.

Across the table, Lautrec and Daladier were silent eyes locked in a mutual scowl even as the room simmered over "this blatant exercise in impunity". \_We will not be party to this\_, cried a deputy, \_Surely this is illegal\_, cried the others.

When the guests calmed down enough for discussion to continue, Lautrec motioned for Cormorant to proceed. As he picked up the lost thread, he was heckled across the table.

Cormorant pressed on in the face of opposition. Lautrec, meanwhile, simply leered at them. The deputies began to look with desperation at Daladier, hoping for reassurance. Daladier, on the other hand, did nothing.

Lautrec continued. "The phrasing may be alarming, but perhaps some context would ameliorate it's rather shocking implications? My right honorable friend, the Director Cormorant, would you care to clarify what it is we mean?"

Cormorant shifted in his seat. "Yes, of course. What we mean is that it is imperative that we open an investigation into the loyalty of the officials under our purview. As has been raised in the forgoing discussion, the gross negligence displayed by the officials of the Secretariat--not excluding those higher up in the Privy Council--gods forbid--in the matter of these unrecognized threats to Imperial integrity requires scrutiny. However, we can only do so with the permission of the Secretariat itself, this being a primarily \_administrative\_ issue."

The bureaucrats tensed and began whispering to themselves. Meanwhile, Daladier merely nodded, interested. One might say that he was amused. His eyes were locked on Lautrec and despite the chaos never broke his stare. After a moment, he emerged from his thoughts. "We

are aware of the general principle laid out by the Gendarmerie," he said, with a limp gesture. "But first we need to be apprised as to what it is \_exactly\_ we do not know. I am sure my colleagues and I would most certainly find it instructive."

"Daladier," cried one of his deputies, "You can't seriously be considering this!"

Daladier ignored him and paused as though meditating on the clatter of the stenographer's machine. Slowly and deliberately, he began, "The Secretariat would thus like the Gendarmerie to officially outline the general direction of the Agency's sentiments so that we can better coordinate a solution."

With that, Lautrec nodded in the direction of Cormorant and the Director began his presentation.

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As the lights went off, the room seemed to shiver in anticipation. At the center of the room the holographic projector whirled to life and panels of arcane light began to form.

The presentation itself took the better part of an hour. Cormorant began by discussing the vulnerabilities created by the present dilemma (familiar territory for all involved at this point) and began outlining the relevant facts raised by recent Gendarmerie investigations.

He began by discussing the recent terrorist attacks and their connections with certain persons of political interest, how these persons were connected with certain candidates connected to the elections, and how certain candidates had connections to radical groups in the past. He raised the issue of the increased sophistication of the terror attacks and how the terrorists were able to acquire regulated substances to fuel their operations.

Pictures and documents were passed around, holographic displays of persons of interest arranged in neat matrices both implicated and condemned. Every detail was exhaustively described. Men and women alike were either arrested or stalked and the suspect mingled freely with the convicted. With the help of a mountain of quotidian detail, Cormorant reconstructed for his audience a nascent conspiracy birthed at the very footsteps of Imperial power.

With every revelation, the Deputies of the Secretariat sank deeper into their seats. At last Cormorant arrived at the recent discovery of ten metric tons of dynamite discovered at an unlicensed location and how such a stockpile, unlisted in the official ledgers, could only have been acquired had regulators themselves been responsible for their transfer.

The deputies were alarmed at the accusations and raised several feeble objections: that the revelation was merely an oversight, that the accusation did not hold weight, that the Secretariat was not at fault. Cormorant brushed them aside as he transitioned from petty regulators to the questionable associations of higher officials.

The meeting went on like this as Cormorant thrust and the Deputies parried. Minor and higher official alike did not escape the Gendarmerie's gaze. At the tail end of the duel, Cormorant had stained every agency with connections to radical politics and while he did not necessarily damn the Establishment, the Establishment did not emerge unscathed.

With a deft sidestep, Cormorant then drifted into arcane territory as he tied together forensic speculation and political action. On average, the typical magistrate was a member of some political club or other. These political clubs are unregulated. If individuals with relationships to radical groups are capable of condoning, if not necessarily facilitating, the destruction of state order, consider just how vulnerable the Empire is in its Dominions if we fail to root out individuals of radical persuasion?

"What's more is that these radicals are now in a position to determine the fate of the Empire," Cormorant concluded. "Should his Majesty's agents sit idly by as the foundations of the Establishment are sapped? Clearly political action is not only opportune but necessary. The Empire must not be sold to the highest bidder much less left to rot with neglect. Decisive action is the only way to save what's left--ruthless excision the only viable solution--before these foundations give way and with that whatever duty is due by us to the nation at large. Only with the assistance of all the Emperor's agents can these enemies of the state be stopped."

As the lights went on, the Deputies were silent. Throughout the ordeal, Daladier sat motionless, quietly observing the chaos from the comfort of his seat. There was no mistaking it. He had been outmaneuvered.

Unlike his deputies on the other hand, his face was not fixed like a mask. On the contrary, it was the very picture of serene grace. After a long pause where none present dared utter a word, Daladier broke the silence. "Very well," he said, nodding sagely, "the Viceroy will consider your proposal."

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A quarter past the hour after the conclusion of the meeting, Lautrec invited Daladier and Cormorant to his office for refreshments. Seeing no harm, the Grand Secretary cheerfully accompanied them where they each shared a glass of double-malt Verginaud, courtesy of the Director General. Daladier, himself typically sober on most days, considered a fine glass of brandy a small but welcome indulgence after an otherwise interesting if drearily melodramatic confrontation.

And interesting it certainly was. While the Grand Secretary had not been privy to the extent of their liabilities, their character was generally beyond doubt. The difficulties raised by the present course of events were, of course, concerning, but the opportunities they otherwise presented to the observant were, if anything, tantalizing. It only made sense to take the bit in hand and have himself led. For now.

With the conclusion of the day's discussion and the promise of future cooperation, the Gendarmerie could call this skirmish a win. Cormorant's coup, the surprise with which it took his Deputies, and the unequivocal need by those present not to oppose it, was one of the finest strokes of policy that Daladier had the pleasure of being subjected to.

There was, of course, the matter of alternatives. Given what they already knew, Lautrec could very well have made his move--with all the subsequent drama that implied: dark secrets as they are being dragged screaming into daylight. He himself could have been detained or sacked, if only for the unavoidable accusation of personal and staggering negligence.

This could very well have been the first move in a protracted fight, of the Emperor's Offices slinging mud at each other, of officials telling on other officials in order to survive--and what a fight that would have been! The drama was palpable. The Director-General could very well lead a mad crusade against the Establishment, positioning himself as a hero, immortalizing himself as a martyr fighting in the name of the Emperor and his subjects against the grey, omnipresent and inevitably stifling bureaucracy.

Not that the Establishment would not allow this, holy and pure had this crusade been. In response, the powers that be would move against him with the slow but inexorable gravity of a glacier. Was the reason he chose the path of least resistance? So that, in aiming for the head, he did not expose himself to a thrust to the gut?

Outside, the summer squall had receded into a drizzle as the sun began to poke out of the clouds. Inside, the three men were enjoying polite conversation, crystal glasses in hand, to the tune of an old gramophone. Daladier could not help but notice the slight air of affectation that seemed natural to Lautrec. He had heard that the Director-General was quite the raconteur but had not expected the Emperor's Gargoyle, for all his mastery of the calculus of power, to possess a striking charm and a gift for phrase. If anything, Daladier observed, the Director's baroque personality was at odds with their general perception of him.

It is often said that the spaces a person inhabits reflect their true nature. Daladier, for example, assumed that the Director's political agility would correspond to a visible display of it in the world around him. It was nothing but. The Director's office was above all austere--one could say it was comfortable in spite of itself: decades of political work reflected not in the haphazard accumulation of idols of power but in the expression of a certain neatness. It was as though, between the imposing rosewood desk and the leatherbound books arranged in spotless rows on oak shelves, nothing of the messy things that made up a life threatened to interrupt the sterile order of the room. This struck Daladier as both appropriate and strange: what better representation of a life lived solely for the sake of maneuver? The common trappings--the visible artifacts of joy, laughter and family--being absent was perhaps mere baggage for what was essentially the baggy monster of the state? On second thought, Daladier mused, perhaps he was not truly wrong. Perhaps this is why he could maneuver so resolutely? So that, ultimately, he could pretend to be not quite human?

"I must say, Claude," Daladier chimed at last, interrupting the pleasant chatter they had been engaging in, "when Pelissier rang our Office last week, I was certainly not expecting this."

"Neither was I," said Lautrec, "Truth be told, I had expected events to take on a more quotidian character."

A lie, Daladier mused, then continued. "Ah," he said, spotting something interesting, "You play often?"

"Oh my," Lautrec responded, chuckling with embarrassment as he turned to the chessboard set on the table. "Yes, but mostly through correspondence."

"Rather old-fashioned, don't you think?" Daladier said.

"I find that games tend to be a lot more interesting when I and my opponents have had time to think, wouldn't you agree, Cormorant?"

Cormorant nodded, "Not unless its the Marquise of Primavera, no?"

"Indeed," said Lautrec with a chuckle, "She never had the patience to play the way we old-timers do."

"You have a game going on currently?" Daladier asked.

"Several, actually. But this one's different," replied Lautrec. "The Gendarmerie, you know, hosts competitions for our young officers."

"Is that so?"

"Winner gets to be defeated by the Director-General himself." Cormorant said. Lautrec and Daladier laughed.

"Oh, yes. This one is against a young officer in our club. Quite talented, actually. Very aggressive--but reckless. Not blessed with the patience we older players are expected to possess: but nothing he can help, no?"

"I take it that you find this particular game satisfying?"

"Quite. You see, to get this far one needs a talent for misdirection. Or, at the very least, an eye for posing a dilemma advantageously. He is, however, much too confident. You see, what maturity affords is a breadth of perspective when faced with challenges. Take this position, for example. If I take his gambit, I put myself out of position. If I refuse, I set myself back. What he does not notice is that a timely sacrifice at his flank ruins his plan in its entirety..."

Daladier noticed the look of abstraction in Lautrec's eyes then cleared his throat to catch his attention. "That being said, I would like to move on to more \*official\* matters." Lautrec straightened himself and Daladier continued, "specifically, I would like to sound out your scheme. How certain are you that it would pan out?"

"As certain as night follows day." Lautrec replied.

"And yet you must agree that it would clearly antagonize certain.. erm... \*vested interests\*?" Daladier continued.

Lautrec smiled. "There is this funny idiom the youth use... how does it go?" Lautrec mused. "Ah, yes. 'One does not make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.'"

"And the world a mere batter for the fortunate baker," replied Daladier. "But, tell me, if you are so certain that it would draw the ire of the establishment, why pursue it? Surely there is a greater scheme at play aside from the \*merely strategic\*."

"If the survival of the Empire does not motivate us, what are we as servants of the Emperor? The vitality of the Empire is dependent on its foundations. Where these are weak, the Empire is sure to collapse. Why not, then, replace these mere shells with real stone?"

"And you believe that these weak vessels in the Establishment are the enemy?"

"More than that. They are a true obstacle to security. You see, the great problem which confronts us at present is that we are pressed for action on two sides--we are trapped in a dilemma, so to speak."

Lautrec took a black Pawn, a black Bishop, and a white Queen from the nearby chessboard and arranged them so that the chessmen threatened to take the Queen on their turn. With the pieces in place, Lautrec continued "On the one hand we have the Arrivistes--the radicals, with their claim against the legitimacy of the Empire--Let us say they are this pawn. On the other we have Latia," said Lautrec who gestured at the Bishop, "who we now know has infiltrated the Empire. Now suppose we have ourselves trapped in the middle. With either possessing the initiative, it would be a simple task for our two enemies to pull on both sides and sever us down the middle. Even with the superior instrument, we lose our piece: the Pawn takes the Queen. With control of our institutions, Latia and her allies are, by design, in possession of the initiative"

Lautrec rearranged the board "Suppose, however that we take the initiative instead: turn our captors against each other? Or eliminate one before the other could act? Then it opens up the board, allowing us the freedom to choose where to strike. The Queen now takes the Bishop and then threatens the Pawn's line of advance." Lautrec continued, "Life... is not so neat as a game of chess but neither is it as rigid. One could say that, with a little bit of imagination, we poor chessmen can break the bonds imposed on us by the game--provided that we understand its

nature. Ours is the superior instrument, Daladier, but success depends on whether or not we perceive it."

"And yet you must agree that your scheme implies nothing but the destruction of the present order."

"There has never been a regeneration of the body that did not first stem from the recognition of illness. Impending collapse necessitates harsh medicine even when that medicine requires the body to void itself from both ends."

"And you believe that... \*war\* is the necessary treatment?"

"Not if we can help it. Only a reshuffling of the board, so to speak."

"If you are not careful this may very easily mean war."

"You are not thinking clearly, my dear Daladier. What better reason for the perpetual existence of the Empire than a perpetual war waged on behalf of her subjects?"

"Ah! And there's the conceit. You suppose they would be grateful!"

"Not at all. Only that they would be silent."

Daladier nodded and fell to thought. He had underestimated his opponent. "You know," Daladier began, pausing tentatively as he contemplated the crystal glass in his hand. "There is a saying," he said, "that the liver is the seat of the soul. It is said that while the heart knows fear only intoxication reveals Truth."

The rain, at last, gave way to a mild midday sun. There was warmth for a brief moment--a sunny spot amidst the gloom--even as the rain was expected to return. Daladier raised his glass. Inside, a thimbleful of amber liquid sloshed about as he turned the glass to catch the light. Lowering his glass, he then sat back and said, "I have a proposition to make."

"I'm all ears," Lautrec replied.

"If we are to frame this scheme as an administrative issue, it will have to be carried out through legitimate channels. My proposition is to establish a committee to oversee an investigation into political crimes under the ambit of the Viceroyal Office."

Lautrec clapped his hands. "Excellent," he replied, "Exactly what I was hoping for. The Gendarmerie will pledge its full cooperation."

"And, of course, we will need to appoint a chairman to head this committee."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"I will."

Lautrec and Cormorant looked at each other.

"I assume there are no objections?" Daladier said.

Cormorant nodded at Lautrec and the latter responded, "None whatsoever."

"Wonderful," replied Daladier, "I look forward to it."

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And so an agreement was reached. Before leaving, Daladier stipulated conditions for their alliance: the Gendarmerie would have a free hand in the investigation, with the assistance of all offices under the purview of the Viceroy, provided that the investigation be primarily administrative in nature. This created a division of roles between the contracting parties. On the one hand, any and all criminal proceedings will have to be pursued independently of the Viceroyal Committee which the Gendarmerie is free to pursue if it so desired. On the other hand, the committee would assume responsibility over any and all officials investigated and sacked. This meant that the investigation, removal and replacement of investigated officials must first be approved by the committee before either the removal or appointment takes on the force of law.

Lautrec could not help but notice the air of self-indulgence that clothed Daladier as they negotiated their respective duties. With both parties satisfied, Daladier, Cormorant and Lautrec shared one last toast before the Grand Secretary left the room.

With Daladier gone, Cormorant breathed a sigh of relief while Lautrec's eyes remained locked on the doorway even after Daladier had passed. "That certainly went well for us, don't you think?" Cormorant mused.

"Did you see the look on his face?" Lautrec began, his face locked once more in a scowl.

"You mean earlier? How could I not?"

"What we just witnessed was the look of recognition. He protests, but not too officiously."

"He knows more than he's letting on."

"He and the deputies with him."

"As we predicted. And, as predicted, they are likely to go to their clientele with this information."



"Correct. Not that we won't manage. I have confidence our assets would keep us apprised."

"Daladier was very keen on the stenographer. Shall I massage the report?"

"No. No need. Daladier is more likely to work with us if he believes we haven't backed him into a corner."

"You do not fear their response to our playing this game?"

"All great enterprises involve a modicum of risk. This, my dear Cormorant, is a mere tax on entry."

"They will move against us if we're not careful."

"Hence the need for subtlety. Cold feet?"

"No. Not at all."

"Good. This game has only just begun."