

TRENCH MAIDEN

PUCELLE D'TRANCHÉE

MARS MAXWELL

TRENCH MAIDEN

PUCELLE D'TRANCHÉE

MARS MAXWELL

COPYRIGHT© 2025 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ARCHER PUBLISHING

NEW YORK LONDON PARIS SYDNEY

ALSACE, FRANCE, WINTER 1917

SEVERAL DAYS AGO

Dawn's tranquil rise was shattered by the roar of gunfire and motorcycles. Renard leaned into the stolen bike, its sidecar bouncing wildly over the dusty country road. Bullets from the German pursuit force ricocheted off the back of his armored uniform like raindrops off a tin roof. Medieval plate mail was cumbersome, but did its job admirably.

He checked the sidecar's contents; a cocoon of wool blankets topped by a bullet-pocked helmet. After daring to steal the bike from a German outpost, Renard had no intention of giving it back.

"Maddy, stick 'em!"

The blankets flew into the air, revealing a thin young girl. The battered helmet slouched over a pair of determined eyes, while a dirty poncho and muddy boots contrasted wildly against her pristine pair of polka-dotted socks. Flashing a devilish grin, she revealed two stolen stick grenades.

A cacophony of German soldiers and twisted metal roiled into the air as a pair of explosions ripped through the countryside.

Madeline grinned, the heat and smell of burning fuel singeing her nose.

Renard tussled the dark mop of hair that hid under her battle-worn helmet. "Well done, mon petit chou."

They continued their journey, the motorcycle growling triumphantly through the hills. Madeline tugged at the lone blanket that hadn't fallen away and wrapped it around her. "Let me know when we're home" she said, then went back to sleep.

Morphine and Needles

Madeline steeled herself against the morning cold. Her boots, having barely survived a second winter, sloshed through a river of melting snow.

Before her rose a cathedral of gothic spires and prismatic windows erupting from every angle like a dark fairytale. Once a verdant haven for believers, its courtyard stood barren, save for a peculiar sight. A perfect grid of white sheets covered the ground, stripped from every bed that could spare one. Zig-zagging between them were two nuns who peeked underneath and then scribbled something in their notebooks. Peek. Scribble. Repeat. They moved like clockwork, having performed this task a dozen times over. Madeline shuddered as a wicked breeze howled around the church to lick the sheets like cresting waves in the sea. Beneath them lay fallen soldiers, their uniforms caked with mud and war. Smaller sheets near the cornerstone fluttered into the air like frightened doves. Even younger victims lay frozen in time, some still clutching their favorite toy, or a charred piece of their mother's dress. Their lifeless eyes stared into the clouds; tears stained with pallid ash.

Madeline froze. Her heart thumped like a drum, and her mouth ran dry like gunpowder.

"Cathedral." she whispered to herself, iridescent eyes darting to and fro.

What else?

"Trees with no leaves."

And?

"The grey sky."

What was the next part Papa told me? Something far from me, something close to me.

"My elbow."

One more. Don't forget your breathing.

"My fingers."

She stretched her hand out, covering the bare trees and solemn cathedral with her palm. Her fingertips had turned blue that morning after scraping frost from the ground to throw the last snowball of winter at her father. The surprise attack was countered with a warm hug before she headed out to the church for the day.

After a deep breath, Madeline entered the makeshift hospital as the nuns scrambled to cover the dead.

"Young Miss Rappeneau- you are late again!"

A tall serpent of a nun with a scythe for a smile snapped at the young volunteer. She reminded Madeline of a villainous dragon from the stories her father spun on stormy nights. Pale skin stretched over her cheekbones, and jagged wrinkles clutched a pair of beady eyes like raven's claws. Her black habit entombed her like a casket, draping to the ground and melding into the inky shadows that haunted the church.

"Each time you are late, a soldier loses his life. What would you tell a mother whose son had been killed by your boorish apathy?"

Madeline wanted to ignore the fiery rebuke, but clashing with the nun was a ritual that was not going to end today. “My apologies, Sister Caressa,” she answered. “And I would tell the mother that if I can survive without a mom, she can survive without a son.”

Used to the young woman’s hyperbolic retorts, but not immune to them, Caressa’s eyes narrowed. “Few would call your station in life as ‘*surviving*,’ Miss Rappeneau.”

“And few would call your station in life as befitting, Sister Caressa.” Madeline continued through the church doors. Each day under the head matron felt like a page from a twisted storybook, and she had little patience for it. She was tired of being stuck in the bowels of the chilly cathedral. Tired of seeing wounded soldiers. And certainly tired of the antediluvian nun. Frustrated, she imagined dragon’s smoke curling from the woman’s nostrils as she made her way to the changing room.

Église Saint Thomas cast its stained-glass eyes across the city like an ancient guardian. Built in the age of chivalry, its walls carried the scars of swords, arrows, and now bullets. When the German army threatened French soil, the great cathedral took on the role of hospital; its medieval doors receiving thousands of soldiers who risked all on the battlefield.

Madeline slipped into the repurposed kitchen where the air smelled of musk and mold. Rats could be heard scurrying across the floor if not for the faint hymns that echoed across the rafters. She pulled a wooden box from under the table where nuns used to say grace. Faded letters of an unknown soldier’s name marked the footlocker’s lid; once holding his secrets, now holding hers. Madeline let her mind wander, if only for a second. Who was this man? How did he die? Did he have a family, a

daughter? Questions like this were the furthest thing from her mind until her father's accident, but now they clawed at her thoughts until sleep carried them away each night. The rusted hinges of the box groaned when she opened it, revealing a bleached nurse's apron. Beside it lay a bullet-pocked helmet splattered with the same grime that soiled the small poncho beneath it. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she pushed the battle-worn garments out of sight. After donning the white smock and a headdress that slouched over her brow, she stuffed a large sponge into the apron's pocket. Careful not to burn herself (again), she filled a wooden bucket with water from a steaming cauldron.

Madeline closed her eyes and let out a weary sigh. Time to begin another day.

"Miss Rappeneau!" the dragon snarled, having stalked the girl's every move through her lair. "Miss Rappeneau, start with the operating rooms today. We are expecting an entire platoon within the hour. And do not slack off." She stared at Madeline with beady eyes, waiting for a response. "There must have been many girls that were late this morning, having caused such great loss on the battlefield" Madeline replied. She ignored the nun's glare as she passed beside her.

Past the cavernous dining hall and beyond the cathedral library lay a frigid chamber rife with medical instruments. The once ornate desk of a bishop was now covered with sheets stained crimson. "Another amputation," Madeline muttered to herself, balling them into a sticky orb. "Must've been a leg." With a sigh, she dipped her sponge into the steaming bucket and began to

clean. While scrubbing, she scanned the room for supplies to steal, with a particular interest in morphine and needles.

The walls of Saint Thomas quaked from the distant thunder of artillery shells. No less than a dozen war machines patrolled the murky outskirts of town to fend off the German Empire. Their cannons belched a terrible sulfur and their spidery legs spewed pungent oils as they stomped through the marshes like iron-wrought elephants. Madeline was accustomed to the stagnant air of the church, but the dark cloud of brimstone that drifted from the battlefield elicited violent coughs and a handkerchief speckled in red.

Crisscrossing the abbey all day kept her on her feet with the heavy bucket slapping against her thigh. She avoided high-traffic areas as much as possible, preferring the company of her mind to the mindless chattering of others. As a form of release -or perhaps a silly way to mark her territory- she let out the strongest expletive she knew each time she found herself in an empty room. Madeline felt empowered knowing the church might be able to control her time, but not her voice. And cleaning the great cathedral on a weekly basis had given her absolute recall of its layout. She knew this place better than Sister Caressa herself. Every room, every corridor.

Every hiding place.

As the Sun arched across the sky, she dragged herself back to the kitchen. Her pockets were heavy with pilfered medicines and the bucket heavy with bloodied water. Tattered boots -a size too small- squished with every step. She slumped at the wooden table and pulled them off, wincing as the left one rubbed against a festering gash. Her white polka-dotted sock had turned into a burgundy sponge that protested with a sickly sound as she peeled it from her skin, revealing the jagged wound a dead soldier's bayonet had left the previous night.

Fractured ridges crossed the scab like cracks through a parched desert. Luckily, there was no sign of gangrene, but Madeline knew it needed to be cleaned and stitched. The bishop's office reminded her of what Trench Foot could do to a leg, and her father's training reminded her how to prevent it. She grabbed some nearby supplies and steeled her nerves before disinfecting and suturing the wound.

By day's end, it felt like she had scrubbed every inch of the antiquated cathedral. But her rewards were plenty: several bandages, antiseptic solution, a new surgical knife, and one coveted vial of morphine. Exhausted, she retreated to the kitchen one final time and yanked off her soiled apron. A curious whiff brought a wrenched face and a fit of coughs. Into the wash bin it went. The medical supplies were stashed in her carrier bag beside the footlocker. All in all, it was a good day's haul. After a satisfying sigh, she headed out the door.

A column of troops formed a valley of dirt and anguish to the cathedral's entrance. Madeline slipped past Sister Caressa, who busied herself chastising an officer for allowing his Unit to track mud into her lair. As soon as she stepped outside, a bitter tang attacked every one of her senses. She quickly cupped her hand across her nose and mouth, scurrying past a lone soldier who sat on the steps wheezing in pain. Madeline hurried through the growing field of white sheets until she crossed the cobblestone road opposite the church. She didn't dare a single breath until she was safe. The young medic was all too aware of what mustard gas could do beside give her nightmares.

Virgin snow dusted the city's roofs like powdered sugar, and the sun sat over it like a dollop of golden butter on sliced rye. Madeline waited on the curb; eyes fixed on the foreboding

cathedral. She wondered how many of those heavy stones it took to build it, then wondered how many ghostly sheets lay in the courtyard in front of it.

She shuttered and looked away.

Although spring was near, winter refused to lift its icy claws from the small city of Strasbourg. It was times like this that made Madeline pine for the comforting embrace of her simple yet resilient trench outfit.

Restless, she imagined letters forming in the haze of her breath as she practiced her German lessons.

Hallo. <hello.>

Auf Wiedersehen. <goodbye.>

Sei still oder ich schieße. <be quiet or I'll shoot.>

She clutched her carrier bag when a mechanical growl rumbled through the streets. A sleek motorcycle rounded the corner, eventually pausing in front of her. It was olive green, crusted with mud, and seemed to shiver in the frosty weather. She hopped into its sidecar and signaled to the driver. He wore a dusty leather jacket and green-tinted goggles perched above a field of stubble.

“Bonsoir, ma petite,” he greeted. With a twist of the throttle, the two sped off.

Renard glanced at his daughter, a hint of fatigue in his eyes. “How was your day at the hospital, Maddy?” he asked over the engine’s roar.

Madeline grumbled. "Papa, you know I don't like being stuck in there." They turned down another street, passing a string of horse-drawn carriages.

"You don't like the hospital. You don't like the Scouts. You don't like school. Just what *do* you like?" Renard asked, facing yet another stalemate in understanding his only child.

"Sister Caressa is still looking for mothers willing to teach again. And I don't want to be in the Scouts. All they ever do is sew uniforms and tend gardens. I want to be in the trenches helping soldiers. I want to help our country, papa."

Ambition flows through her veins like fuel through this engine, Renard thought. "You are helping la Republique in the church. You are helping la Republique in the Scouts. Besides, your..." he paused, considering his words. "...how are you feeling today, ma fille?"

Madeline glared at her father, annoyed that he yet again brought up her condition. "I have it under control papa. I swear." She pulled her bag in front of her and showed its contents like a thief with a king's ransom. "Look at these supplies I found for us," she said, changing the subject. "There's even a new scalpel and some morphine. Now we have three full bottles: two for our missions, and one for you."

Renard nodded as they turned onto the dusty road that led home. "While I cannot say I approve of stealing from the church, I do appreciate the thought."

-DO NOT READ CHAPTER TWO - UNDER CONSTRUCTION-

-2-

Renard spread a crumpled map across the kitchen table, causing it to wobble on its uneven wooden legs. He pointed to a section marked with red lines and circles. "We have a new mission," he stated. "Earlier today, there was a skirmish that didn't go well for our boys. Many made it back, but others weren't so lucky."

Madeline leaned closer. "Will the Army make a rescue attempt?"

Renard removed his goggles, pain hiding behind his heavy eyes. "There will be no attempt. I was told that the unit is an acceptable loss."

Madeline's lifted her lilac eyes to meet his. "But for us, no loss is acceptable."

Renard was one of the few who wore trench armor, a luxury reserved for French Army officers. Its use had a rich history; starting from employing metal to protect one's body during war in the times of Charlemagne, then artistically sculpted and painted during Richard the Lionheart's rule, and finally adapted to the bullets and bayonets of the Germans. It featured a dull

breastplate split for increased mobility, with a thick slab across his left shoulder painted white with a red cross. To allow the use of long rifles and blades, his right arm was left mostly unprotected. Underneath was a leather outfit, designed to keep rain and other fluids from spreading sicknesses that killed as many soldiers as a bayonet did. His boots were encased with cowhide and steel, ensuring sure footing in the muddy trenches. Finally, a helmet ensured safety from German snipers concealed hundreds of yards away. Renard felt proud and confident wearing his suit of armor, even though it was heavy and cumbersome.

Madeline had an easier time preparing for the mission. Her light armor was stolen from a rear battalion officer and crafted out of the finest materials to protect her from shrapnel should she find herself within whispering distance to combat. A thick yet lightweight poncho kept her agile and stealthy while providing enough cover to hide in plain sight. Textured in earthy browns and greys, it was a far cry from the impractical reds and blues of the official French uniform. The smallest helmet they could find slouched anxiously on her diamond-shaped head, with a leather strap that ran beneath her chin and securely buckled to keep it in place. A metal bracer made of the same dense metal as her father's suit was fastened to her left arm with rogue strings of leather. Thick cloth was added between her shirt and it for comfort, and it had an open palm design to aid in dexterity. Lastly, Madeline wore her favorite white socks with red polka dots. They were standard for every mission without fail.

Madeline felt free and adventurous wearing her light armor, even though it was risky and dangerous.

"I still don't understand how you are able to wear those things in your boots" Renard said as he picked up his helmet. Madeline smiled. "It's because they're lucky." She grabbed her medical kit and slung it over her shoulder. "*N'est-ce pas?*"

The journey to the trenches had always been a drawn-out task. Sometimes by horseback and other times silently tucked away in the rear of an army supply vehicle. But with the new motorcycle unwittingly gifted to them by the Germans, tonight's excursion was much more expedient. The two combat medics sped through the countryside at a fantastic pace, kicking up dust like a wild stallion. Yet as with most blessings, this one came with a curse. The bike was fast, but it was also loud. They left it hidden behind a shield of bushes half a kilometer from the trenches and hiked the rest of the way. Madeline took a last look for the sleek machine before cresting a hill into the dense woodland.

"We're not leaving *Lapine* there forever, are we?"

Renard furrowed his brow. "Ah. We have a name for it already?" he chuckled. "No, mon petit, we will not abandon your mechanical friend."

The word *friend* was an odd concept to Madeline. *Imagine... a person you trusted and enjoyed being with!* And Renard didn't count, being papa and all. She kneeled to tighten her boot laces; red velvet straps made from her mother's favorite hair ribbon.

She was sure that if the war hadn't taken her, *she* would be the only person she'd consider as a friend.

Trees shook in fear when a mortar split the air between volleys of gunfire. The two medics pushed toward the chaos. The younger one climbed one of the towering cedars and peered through the canopy.

"What can you see Maddy?" Renard asked.

She scanned the battlefield with a stolen monocular and watched muzzle flashes illuminate the evening sky like dancing fireflies. "I think nine on our side and 20 or so on theirs." She clambered back to the ground. "Both sides are dug in deep. Luckily the Kraut have not charged yet. Maybe it's because our trenches are reinforced by this forest."

Renard followed her gaze, taking in the trees and shrubs that encircled them, the cedars and firs swaying gently in the evening breeze. He nodded in agreement, his face grim and determined. "Let's get closer and see if we can help. We can use the cover of the trees." He gestured for Maddy to follow him and began to move. They crept silently through the undergrowth, keeping an eye on the battle, until they reached a small clearing just outside the range of gunfire.

Renard grimaced. "Or maybe because they're waiting for something more effective. Come petit. We haven't much time."

The only type of the firefight that Maddy never enjoyed was one where she knew she'd be outnumbered. The second was when the enemy knew more than her, which was rare thing to begin with. There was also a hidden item that stoked her fears: the thing called mustard gas. It was a nightmare in viscous form, and she had witnessed the terrors it could wrought. And if there was anything that could be changed in the war, that would be it. The fighters in the trenches could be heard screaming as the corrosive toxin chemically seared every centimeter of a soldier's respiratory system.

The random bursts of chaos became more pronounced as they neared the winding trench. Soldiers yelled for more ammunition. Shouts of *hold your ground!* rang through the air when a mortar detonated yards in front of the firing line. "*Medic!*" came another cry. Madeline was already halfway to the soldier when something grabbed her foot and sent her crashing to the muddy

ground. She wiped the grime from her face and turned to see a pile of uniforms laying in a shallow puddle. Bright red light from an ascending flare filled the trench. Maddy's eyes widened as the uniform heap transformed into the remains of multiple soldiers; appendages twisted in unnatural angles, with one body missing half his skull. Then something from behind her clutched her shoulder.

"Maddy!" Renard yelled. "Are you alright?"

She leaped to her feet and steeled her nerve. "Of course. Let's find that wounded soldier."

He was young, as many conscripts were, and like many, he had a face so pale it seemed to blend in with the ghostly fog that settled on the battlefield. His eyes, dulled by fright and exhaustion, stared up at Madeline as she knelt beside him, her electric torch hovering over his dirt-soaked uniform. His boots and legs were surprisingly unscathed, but Madeline's light revealed a shoulder caked with crimson mud and a face blighted with shrapnel. She set her med kit beside him and pulled out a pair of scissors. "I need to remove some of your clothing before I begin."

The soldier slowly turned his head towards her voice, not knowing if he should be relieved or praying. He became even more perplexed when he found the voice belonged to a young girl dressed in battle garments.

"W-who are you?"

Madeline snipped away at his muddied top, revealing the purpled skin of bruised ribs and bright reds of a broken arm. The wounds were deep - much deeper than she expected. She flashed him a stern look. "I'm here to help. Now hush up or I'll leave you here to die with the others."

The soldier remained still, the confused look in his eyes replaced with concern. He could feel the cold metal of the scissors as they cut away his clothes, revealing more of his wounds. Madeline worked quickly, her movements precise and efficient. Clean. Suture. Bandage. When she was done, she gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder and said, "You can wake up now. You are going to live." But having passed out, he gave no response. Madeline scoffed. "*Papa!*" she yelled. "*un peu d'aide s'il vous plait!*"

Renard finished assisting another soldier while at the same time ensuring no one noticed the young clandestine medic. "What is it petite?"

"Oblique displaced fracture to the right humerus, at least two vertebrosteral rib fractures, and superficial lacerations to the face. He'll survive, but only if we get him to the commander's dugout."

Another mortar exploded yards away, sending chunks of wood and dirt into the air. The soldier looked at the life-sized doll whom he now saw was a human girl. "What do you mean 'superficial?' My fiancée's not gonna like my face like this! Besides that though... what the hell is a little girl doing here?"

Madeline scoffed. "Listen here tête de noeud. I can make sure you see your fiancée again or I can leave you here in the mud. Which will it be?"

A moment later, Renard placed the young soldier on the spare bed in the commander's dugout. He turned to Madeline who stood by silently in the corner lest the officer return to his quarters. "Come Madeline, there are more wounded."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX etc etc etc glove

-3-

Radiant Being

Madeline drew a slow, measured breath and opened her eyes.

As comfortable as her bed was, she always woke up right before her father called for breakfast.

Cinq.

Quatre.

Trois.

Deux.

Un.

“Maddy! C'est l'heure du petit déjeuner!” her father announced from the kitchen.

Always.

His daughter pulled the covers over her head and wrapped herself like a cocoon. She wanted to hold onto the fleeting memories of a vivid dream. In it, she had been a brave knight coiled in decisive battle against an ancient dragon. The beast was a cruel angel's thesis - a twisted creation of dark obsidian

crowned with the white feathers of a celestial being. Hellfire erupted from its cavernous maw whenever Madeline fell within its sight, giving the dank corridors of its lair an unnerving glow. Yet despite all fear, Madeline had mustered the courage to take a step forward into terror. And with the skill of a legendary warrior, she finally rendered the being in two.

A jumble of fear, courage, and excitement all tugged at her mind. Heat from the dragon's putrid breath manifested on her bed as sweat. Her hand was clutched tight in a fist, still grasping that ethereal sword. She remained as still as possible, worried that the slightest move would jostle the victory from her memory.

"Madeline, you don't want to be late again!" her father warned, knocking on the door. "*Honte sur moi*. This is why I do not like taking you on night missions."

Today's breakfast consisted of a boiled egg with salt, a tartine with peach jam as brilliant as the morning sun, and chamomile tea sourced from the cathedral's garden she received as a Christmas gift. Washing down the combination of sweet and salty with the earthy drink roused Madeline from the last vestiges of sleep and a forgotten dream. She hugged her father and steeled her nerves before stepping into the frosty morning. Today's trip to Saint Thomas would be with the Scouts, driven by one of their mothers.

Sunshine waged a winning war against the Spring cold, and Madeline stretched her arms to soak in the warming light. Vague images of an oily dragon flashed through her mind, bringing about a confused look followed by a dismissive shrug. After several minutes of German lessons and shivering, a horse drawn carriage pulled beside her where she climbed into the back. Several girls in Scout uniforms chattered and snickered and denied rumors as it pulled off.

Madeline kept to herself.

“Have you reconsidered joining the Scouts yet, young Maddy?” the driver asked. Far from grey-haired but also far from charming, she had grown weary of Madeline over the months, ever since the little brat expressed disinterest in joining the group. Now the two went through the same song and dance every other week: her trying to get Madeline to join, and Madeline dodging or outright ignoring the exasperated woman’s petitions. What was worse is that she insisted on calling her “Maddy.”

Only her father and her best friend were allowed to call her that.

“Those young ladies sitting beside you are doing their part in the war effort, deary. Sewing, gardening, cleaning... surely things even you are interested in.”

Madeline focused on the *clack clack clack* of horse hooves over the cobblestone road. The driver was so small minded for being an adult. She had no idea what Madeline was capable of; what Madeline had done to help the war effort. An impish grin crossed her lips. “Since I am volunteering at a church, I thought it proper to wait for God to give me a calling,” Madeline replied. Several Scouts giggled and the driver’s face turned red as wine. She looked as if she wanted to slap the girl, but instead mumbled something just as foul under her breath.

Madeline knew her path. She had a higher calling than mending uniforms and growing vegetables. She wanted to save lives. She knew she couldn’t fight alongside soldiers, but she knew damn well she could help save them.

Miss Rappeneau!

The dragon's ritual of tormenting Madeline had begun early today.

Sister Caressa stood at the entrance of her lair; beady eyes fixed on her victim. The other girls scurried past with a "Good morning, Mother Superior," hoping not to be drawn into Maddy's orbit of misery. The head matron loomed over the 13-year-old like an ancient cliff threatening to collapse from eons of existence. Her dark robe was a midnight river that cascaded down her shoulders and splashed into an inky puddle on the cathedral steps. Madeline ignored the silence as the nun examined her with imperious eyes, shaking her head at the faded blue dress and brown corduroy pants the young girl had hastily thrown on that morning.

"I see your father still dresses you like a blind seamstress," Caressa mocked. Her voice was cold and sharp, and cut through the winter air like a knife. "I do pray you acquire a proper sense of fashion before you are old enough to marry."

Madeline's eyes challenged the nun's. "I dressed myself, Sister Caressa. And I pray to one day take up the habit as you have." She flashed an equally deceptive smile for good measure.

"Hmph..." the befuddled abbess mumbled. "In any case, I have a critical task of you today. We are running low on supplies earlier than expected. I need you to fetch a few things from the Regimental field hospital across the bridge." She handed Madeline a list that included items such as bandages, antiseptic solutions, a new surgical knife, and a vial of morphine.

Madeline fought back a smirk. "I'll get it done, Sister Caressa" she replied, turning back toward the street.

"And just where do you think you're going, young lady?" the head matron interjected. "I won't take the chance of sending you alone just because of who your father was. Take one of the other girls with you and stay together at all times. Who knows if a German soldier may try to snatch you away - I would never see you again." An ambiguous grin crossed the nun's lips.

The garden behind the large church had seen better days. Winter's icy embrace had stripped the small plot of land bare, leaving the thick hedges that surrounded it standing like green sentinels. The greenhouse adjacent, however, had been spared such cruel fate.

Madeline opened the door and closed her eyes. Warm air brushed past her skin, carrying with it the wild aromas of chamomile and parsley, basil and oregano; complimented by strong notes of mint and lavender. When she opened her eyes, pots of strawberries and bushes of lemons lined the glass walls, their vibrant hues standing out amongst the thriving greenery.

"Maddy, you came to help!"

Amelie, the lone Scout in the greenhouse, welcomed her with a smile as warm as the air. She was surrounded by the fragrant herbs and ripe fruits she lovingly nurtured over the long winter months.

Madeline returned the gesture. "Amelie, I need you to run an errand with me. Sister Caressa said I had to bring you."

Amelie's brown eyes sank with a frown. "But I only just started... our lemons are ready to be picked. I can practically hear them begging to be harvested before they become dinner for these annoying aphids." She gestured at a group of tiny pests diligently eating away at her hard work.

Madeline took the dirty trowel from the Scout's hand and tossed it on a nearby workbench. "The other girls will handle it for you. Come on- we'll buy some *clafoutis* while we're out," she added.

Amelie dusted her hands on her apron then threw it on the table. "Why are you being so slow then? Come on!" she exclaimed, grabbing Madeline as she rushed for the door.

Even in the sun, winter's chill nipped at Madeline's nose like a hungry dog. She walked through the street behind Amelie who bounced gleefully ahead of her. "*Miam miam!*" Amelie said, pointing at a butcher measuring his pigs for the day's pork sale. "They look so fat and juicy!" Madeline smiled at her friend's enthusiasm while the thought of freshly cooked bacon fought against the odor of the animal's pen. Strasbourg's riverfront bustled with life despite the war that raged on. They passed a line of women clutching baskets for their daily rations at the bakery. Fragrant aromas of fresh baked breads wafted from its chimney, turning their mood into a fervor. Nevertheless, they stood their ground, knowing their patience was worth the irksome wait. The only woman who broke ranks was a frustrated mother; her small son having waddled away somehow bereft of all clothing.

Compared to Madeline's more reasonable stride, Amelie was a radiant being of energy. The morning Sun prompted her to shed her fraying sweater from her Scouts uniform, allowing her almond skin to soak in the Spring light like a growing plant. Luminous brown eyes belied a cruel upbringing, and large, dark curls danced on her head with every step. Exactly one year and one day younger, Madeline felt compelled to be a mentor to her, knowing it had to be hell living in the cathedral with Sister Caressa. Amelie seemed to respect this unspoken dynamic yet challenged it at every opportunity. Her sharp wit and undeniable charm had led the two through more mischief and misadventures than Madeline cared to admit.

They continued down the street and noticed children erupting with laughter and cheers around a parked carriage. A wood-carved ballerina floated across a small stage with life-like movements, the hidden puppeteer manipulating his creation with astonishing skill. Her hand-crafted dress of flowers billowed with every leap, twirl, and pose. Amelie stopped, entranced, but

Madeline pulled her away before she could ask to stay for just a little longer.

Further into their trek, they passed a small cafe where a soldier whittled away at a stick. One of his pantlegs had been removed and sewn shut. A hand wrapped in bandages grasped his knife, and one eye was covered with gauze. He nodded as the two walked by in silence. Eventually, Barrage Vauban bridge came into view. Its oak and stone structure loomed over the River Ill like a floating castle. Nostalgia sparked behind Madeline's eyes as she recalled the days she and her father spent fishing here. Too young to understand the dark shadow that threatened the world, it was a refuge of peaceful memories.

Nearing the bridge, they felt a rumble that shook the earth beneath them. A battalion's synchronized march echoed across the water, filling the span from end to end with a perfect grid of uniforms and rifles. Civilians scattered to either side to make way for the soldiers returning from the frontlines. Parched and unshaved, their faces still retained a sense of honor. Boys in their Scout uniforms marched in place on the sidewalk, mimicking the men they naively hoped to join. Mothers pulled their babies close to their chests while other women waved and cheered the men on, some covertly tucking a handkerchief sealed with a kiss into soldiers' collars.

Madeline's eyes swept across the ranks. Anyone would have said the men moved like strong-chined heroes, but Madeline knew better. They were in the same trance-like state she had seen in the trenches. Ever since she rescued her father all those months ago, she felt that war changed Soldiers in some deep, inexplicable way. It wasn't a true fear of death or defeat in them, but something else... as if war itself were some dark entity that burrowed into their minds and sapped them of their humanity, leaving them mere golems of battle. She watched Amelie cheer for the soldiers, and an unsettling thought entered her head. *When was the last time I felt that kind of enthusiasm for something? Has war changed me too?*

A metallic groan from behind the formation pushed the thought from her mind. One of the infamous Renault tanks trundled behind the unit, its tall, iron-wrought legs raising the six-ton machine above the soldier's heads. Better than treads or wheels, the spidery appendages gave the tank a nimbleness that belied its size and allowed it to ford rivers and trenches with relative ease. The joints of this particular machine screeched in protest with every step, apparently damaged during a recent mission. Pungent clouds of smoke roiled into the air as it passed. The smell was worse than even Sister Caressa's cavalcade of peculiar odors.

Sister Caressa. Madeline thought. *Damn.* "Come on Amelie, let's get going."

Like Saint Thomas, the city's museum had been transformed into a makeshift hospital. The majestic building, once a monument to culture and history, now served as a battlefield for life and death. Cots and operating tables replaced relics and historic paintings. Moans and cries, clattering metal trays, and hurried footsteps replaced quiet introspection and discovery. The city had offered it for the war effort in hopes of preserving the lifeline of its economy. Many of the museum's artifacts and oddities had been whisked away to the countryside, far from the looming shadow of German artillery. Only a few items remained, hidden away in the basement like buried treasure.

Near the marble columns of the building, a bloody foyer of torn stretchers, dirty helmets, and emptied medical kits lined the entrance. Madeline froze.

No...please, not now she whispered to herself, heartbeat thumping like a war drum.

Air in, air out. She imagined her lungs inflating like a German zeppelin as the hairs on her skin prickled.

Something far from me, something close to me.

Something far... something far... my father.

He's dying.

No. He's fine. He'll make it.

You should have let him die.

No! I did the right thing.

It's your fault he's suffering.

Madeline's vision blurred as she took a step back from the hospital.

Breathe.

That breath came, but the parched canyon to her lungs caused her to cough, eliciting one of the worst parts about her condition.

Her father told her it was called hyperventilation. A symptom of panophobia or anxiety, he suggested it came about from her short yet traumatic experience in the trenches. Classically trained in physical medicine, he didn't know for certain, but surmised that if a soldier could have shell shock from the horrors of war, then surely so could a little girl.

Her chest heaved like a pump at a well as she bent over, wondering if it was sweat or tears that were falling to the ground beneath her.

Breathe. You can do this.

It's (not) your fault.

A hand grasped her wrist, and another held her cheek. “Maddy! Breathe. You can do this.” Amelie encouraged. A concerned face came into focus. Madeline closed her eyes and demanded her body to give back control. Eventually, her breathing returned to normal, and Amelie gave her hand a soft squeeze. “That’s it. Everything’s okay. I’m here with you.”

Maddy **exhaled**.

Her friend’s compassionate smile beamed through teary eyes. “Thank you, Amelie,” said Madeline, noticing she wasn’t the only one seeing through blurred vision. “Sorry about that.” The younger one fished a handkerchief from her pocket and offered it. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. I can go inside by myself if you’d like.”

Madeline stood upright and wiped her face. Her skin felt clammy, and her throat was drier than an undertaker’s laugh. “No, I’m okay. Let’s go.”

They entered the makeshift hospital where the poignant smells of antiseptic and bile collided in the air. Madeline wrinkled her nose and pulled the crumpled list from her pocket. “It says to ask for a Dr. Berger or a Miss Dupont.” She wondered where to start their search among the expanse of beds and hard-working nurses. But Amelie was a step ahead.

“Or we could just ask someone,” she said, approaching a nurse tending to a wounded soldier. “Excuse me, ma’am?” she asked politely. The woman turned, revealing an apron covered with fresh blood and nauseating detritus. Her expression shifted from exhausted to confused. “And just what are you two young ladies doing here? I don’t recall having a Scout troop today...”

Amelie flashed her indomitable smile. "No ma'am, we're here from Saint Thomas for medical supplies." Madeline stepped forward with the list of items. "Sister Caressa said to ask for one of these two people," she added.

The nurse gave a surprised chuckle, her brow furrowed in disbelief. "Mother Superior Caressa is still there?" she asked, waving away the list with wet hands. "I thought *la putain* would be dead by now. Oh well." She shrugged. "You can find Charlette -uh, Miss Dupont- in the nurse's office on the second floor." She gestured towards the far side of the museum. "Just head down that way and take the stairs at the end." With that, she returned to her task of stitching up a soldier's intestinal wound.

The two moved gingerly through the cavernous building. Madeline kept her head down, blocking out the cries of pain and anguish that haunted every other bed. Missing limbs, burned faces, and screams she didn't know a human could make hastened her step. She had seen all of it before, in the trenches. But without adrenaline and a mission to keep her focused... a sour taste formed in her mouth. She swallowed hard to keep down the bile that rose from her knotted stomach. Then a familiar sensation gripped her chest: her heart pounded faster and faster, as if trying to escape.

No. Please, not again.

She clenched her teeth and whispered through them. 'I said NO.'

A soldier laying in a nearby bed looked up, holding a photo in trembling hands. "Nurse? Is that you?" he asked, wiping his

eyes and stashing the heirloom. Madeline said nothing but caught a glimpse of the picture. It was of a girl, probably her age, wearing a beautiful dress. She held a small puppy in her arms and an innocent smile on her face. The man called out again. "So can I be discharged yet, nurse?"

Madeline remained quiet, only reaching her hand over his pillow. She felt the warmth of his forehead under her palm, and the cold metal of the bracer against her arm. A faint blue glow seeped from beneath her shirt sleeve that traced intricate lines into the hardened steel. She had used it several times now, this glove, yet still wondered how it worked. With a metallic chorus, the bracer crawled over her hand like a spider, transforming into an imposing medieval gauntlet. Azure light raced down its elaborate filigree like miniature rivers. She tensed her arm under the weight of the mystical armor and felt the jubilant warmth that accompanied its use. The ethereal light that coursed through it pulsed faster and faster until... nothing. Then the gauntlet retracted as quickly as it appeared, and she quietly caught up to Amelie ascending the staircase.

Seconds later a rapturous cry rang out through the hospital. "I can see again! I can see again!"

The nurses' office was in fact a breakroom for the exhausted women who held France together as its men left to defend it. Maddy and Amelie pushed open the rusty door and were greeted by a chorus of snores and heavy heads from half a dozen ladies. One nurse had curled up on a bed in the corner like a cat, and two others sat at its side leaning on each other for support. A few clutched mugs of coffee like an owl with its prey, and one lay sprawled across the floor near a silver flask.

Madeline softly cleared her throat. "Excuse us, but where can we find Miss Dupont?"

Amelie gestured toward the inebriated nurse and whispered "I hope it's not her." Maddy slapped her friend's hand in rebuke as one of the women approached. "I'm Miss Dupont. And who do I have the pleasure of speaking with?" Even in a nurse's uniform, Dupont carried herself as if she already knew the answer to every question she asked. Her eyes were kind yet sharp, and her demeanor was a breath of fresh air in the stale room. Her smile alone made Madeline realize she had been hunching her shoulders ever since they entered the building.

Amelie spoke up. "My name is Amelie Monet. Do you have any more of that stuff?" she asked, pointing to the empty flask on the scuffed floor. Maddeline smacked her hand again. "Forgive me, Mother Superior" the younger girl teased.

"I'm Madeline, and we're here to retrieve supplies for Sister Caressa at Saint Thomas."

Miss Dupont smirked. "Mother Superior Caressa? I always knew that woman was an immortal bi- uh, anyways..."

Madeline grinned, feigning maturity. Longtime friend to the opposite end of the spectrum, Amelie burst into laughter, which garnered another slap on the back of the hand. The nurse squeezed by the two and stepped into the hall. "I have your items already packed for you. Unfortunately, a couple of the gals thought the boxes belonged to the museum and put them downstairs." She glanced at one of her fellow nurses in the room, then back to the young ladies. "they'll be in two boxes marked *St Thomas* in the basement."

"Oh. *Downstairs* downstairs," Maddeline replied. "Okay. Thank you, Miss Dupont."

The nurse smiled. "You two be careful out there. And tell Mother Superior I said hello."

Maddy peered into the basement of the museum. Her mind conjured images of dark, forgotten corners and cobwebs, but her expectations were dashed when she stepped into a surprisingly comfortable room. There was proper lighting, ventilation, and even a rotary phone that sat on a desk near the stairs. A plethora of curiously shaped objects dotted the floor; some covered by sheets, and others nested in large wooden crates. Two cardboard boxes marked with the cathedral's name sat squarely in the center of it all.

But the girls decided to explore this miniature museum. Sheets were lifted and boxes were opened as they enjoyed an up-close look at their country's vibrant history.

And that's when Madeline found it.

"Amelie, come quick!" Maddy exclaimed after pulling a heavy sheet from what she thought was a statue. The curly haired bubble of energy rounded the corner wearing a helmet from *la Révolution*. "Yeah?"

Maddy stared at the figure before her, ignoring her friend's antics. It was a mannequin, and if the small plaque under it was correct, it held the armor of Jeanne d'Arc.

Forest of Shelves

Jeanne d’Arc

-La Pucelle d’Orléans-

Heavenly trumpets couldn’t have sounded her name better. “Jeanne d’Arc” was cast in gold lettering, etched in the large block of swirling marble that supported the armored mannequin. Her nickname *-La Pucelle d’Orléans-* was inscribed below, along with a short history of the armor. It was used by the maiden until she received a new set from King Charles VII before her decisive victory at Orléans during The Hundred Years’ War.

Madeline examined the armor closely, admiring every detail. Amelie scanned the plaque and gasped.

“*C’est pas vrai! La Pucelle’s* armor... here?” Madeline watched her friend’s eyes grow rounder than an artillery shell.

“I know. This can’t be, but...” Maddy tugged at her right arm sleeve to reveal her bracer and held it to the chest plate. “Look. A perfect match.” They studied the craftsmanship. Both armors shared the same light metallic sheen and simple yet bold design. Amelie squeezed her eyes tighter as if trying to peer through time itself to reveal the truth.

"I mean, anyone could have made this, right? Like, a fake? It kind of feels like it is."

Madeline covered her bracer. "Yeah, but why would there be a fake here? And look... they have every piece..."

"...except for the bracers." Amelie finished. "Hm. I thought you had only one of them?"

Maddy nodded. "That's right. Just the right one."

"So where's the other? And can it do the same thing yours can? Can this entire suit do what you can? What if it can do more? What if it can make you fly!"

Madeline chuckled. "I'll ask the nurse if they have an alienist here for bedlamits like you, goofball." Her focus returned to her arm. "Papa says people would tear the country apart for my bracer if they knew what it could do. Imagine what would they do for an entire--"

Footsteps echoed down the stairway and Miss Dupont appeared at the entrance. "Are you two okay? Did they not put the boxes down here?" The young friends spun around, Amelie still wearing the antique helmet. "Ah, I see you took a little tour of the collection!" The nurse said with a smile. "Have you found anything particularly fascinating?"

Amelie replied, "We were just admiring *la Pucelle's* armor, Miss. It's beautiful."

"Along with another relic from our illustrious past, I see" Charlette commented, pointing to the 120-year-old helmet squeezed over an explosion of curls.

Amelie promptly removed it, embarrassment hidden by a smile. "Sorry. I just wanted to try it on for a bit."

Miss Dupont chuckled. "Well, just be careful down here. Many of these items are quite fragile and one of a kind." She

approached the mannequin. “Such as Jeanne’s armor here.” She felt the cool metal of the breastplate with the back of her hand, reflecting on how a woman ten years junior had become an immortalized hero. “I’ll let you two in on a secret. The museum has this particular artifact for a special reason. The building’s original owner, and first curator, was a descendant of relatives of Jeanne’s family. It is why he decided to build a museum here in the first place.” She turned to Madeline. “And you might be surprised to learn that Jeanne d’Arc came to these very grounds all those centuries ago. She even prayed at one of the local churches.”

“Saint Thomas,” Madeline and Amelie said in unison. Miss Dupont’s eyes lit. “That’s right! Who knows what else she may have done or secrets she may have hidden here. It’s so exciting!”

Madeline’s expression turned blank. She retrieved one of the medical supply boxes and headed for the stairs. “I’m sorry Miss Dupont, but Sister Caressa will give us hell if we don’t get back soon.” She cradled the box in her arms. “Come on Amelie. You remember what she did the last time we goofed off.”

Amelie tensed. “Actually, I don’t remember because I blocked that memory.” She turned toward the nurse. “Are you a fan of history, Miss Dupont?”

“Just the fun bits.”

Amelie lifted the second box into her arms. “...*La Pucelle* didn’t have a fun bit in the end” she said solemnly.

“Alas, that she did not,” Dupont replied. “You two behave now, and I hope to see you here again someday.”

“Maddy Maddy Maddy! We have to go back someday!”

Amelie was back to her usual energetic self, five steps ahead of her friend, cumbersome box and all.

Madeline, always in thought, maintained a more calculated pace. "We need to be mature about this, Amelie. There's a lot I need to think about."

Her friend spun around, almost falling to the ground along with her box. "Be mature? We're kids. We don't have to be mature!" she said with a leap.

"WILL YOU JUST CALM DOWN FOR A MINUTE?" Madeline snapped; face twisted in agitation.

Amelie froze.

So did Maddy. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I just... there's more responsibility to this bracer than you think."

Amelie felt the conflicting shifts in Madeline's emotions, and produced her heart-warming smile. "I understand. And you know I'll be by your side anytime you need help." She continued her trek. "Especially since I'm the one always getting us out of trouble."

Madeline smirked. "Because you're the one always getting us *into* trouble."

"Have I not talked to you about slothfulness?"

Sister Caressa paced back and forth on the crumbling church steps as she lectured the two. "Each time you are late, a soldier loses his life" she repeated her favorite mantra. "What would have happened if we needed those supplies sooner? Do you girls not care about our soldiers? Our country? Our Lord?" She signed the cross, then let out an exasperated sigh. "At least you

brought what was supposed to be brought. And safely at that. You two may join the other in the greenhouse.”

Amelie’s eyes lit up.

“...After you’ve finished stowing these supplies and washing the dirty laundry.”

Amelie’s eyes sank.

The two spent well past noon washing and hanging dozens of blankets, sheets, aprons, and rags. Buckets of hot water, bars of harsh soap, and cries of boredom filled the kitchen where they worked. They scrubbed and cleaned until their fingers were wrinkly and numb. Small windows of rest came by way of hanging the laundry outside in the bright clear sun.

But at long last, their task was completed, and they dragged themselves back to the kitchen. Amelie collapsed on a wooden table and Madeline against a stone wall. Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes. "I really do hate it here" she muttered in a flat tone.

Amelie nodded. "I don't even want to go to the garden anymore... at least not right now." At the cathedral, gardening was her religion, and the greenhouse was her sanctuary. Amelie loved growing plants; the wild variety of colors, the freedom of being outdoors, and the feeling of nurturing something important. Sometimes she felt she could even understand plants’ needs as if they were her own. But she was too exhausted for any of that right now.

Their stomachs rumbled in unison, a reminder that it had been hours since their last meal. A weak laugh floated between the two. “Let’s find out if the others have eaten already” Madeline

suggested. "They may have even dug into some of the fruits from the greenhouse."

Amelie leapt to her feet. "Not without me they haven't!"

Today's lunch, as usual, consisted of vegetable soup and wine. The two sat alone at one of the long wooden tables of the dining hall. The cavernous space was void of the Scouts who had finished their lunches over an hour ago. Madeline enjoyed the warm broth and fresh herbs that gave her soup an earthy flavor. *Thankfully, not everything is horrible at this cathedral.* After a few spoonfuls, she leaned toward Amelie and whispered. "I've been thinking about that armor we saw. I want to go back and study it some more."

Amelie drained the last of her soup and let out a burp. "Well, if you're going to get caught doing something stupid, I need to be there with you." She grinned sheepishly and wiped her mouth. "Anything specific you want to look for? Do you think *La Pucelle* hid something in the museum like she did with your bracer?"

Madeline thought for a moment, recalling how she discovered the mystical piece of steel now resting on her arm. "No, I don't think she did. Remember, the museum wasn't erected until well after she died."

Amelie nodded. "Yeah, you're right." She took a sip from her cup, swirling the watered-down wine in contemplation. "Oh-wait! Didn't Miss Dupont mention the first curator was a relative of Jeanne's?"

"Descendant of relatives," Madeline corrected.

“Semantics. Whatever. If he was given her armor, imagine what else he could have received but just never told anyone.”

Madeline drew circles in her soup with the tarnished spoon. “...you might be onto something there, Miss Monet. If she hid my bracer in this God-forsaken cathedral, I’d imagine the other one can’t be too far from here.” She finished the last of her bowl. “I guess that settles it. We need to find that bracer.”

Her friend smirked. “Well yeah, we already came to that conclusion. The problem is *how* will we find it? Sneak back into the hospital like a couple of German spies?”

Madeline replied only with a mischievous wink.

The next several days were filled with scouring the cathedral library for information on Jeanne d’Arc and her time in Strasbourg. To complicate things, it had to be done while evading the watchful eye of Sister Caressa. Luckily, she didn’t seem to visit the book repository often. Day after day they uncovered more about their city and even more about the legendary hero. Biographies. Maps. Poems. Stacks of books towered over their desks like trees. Accounts of the Hundred Years’ War and documents about Jeanne d’Arc’s life and fateful death permeated their every thought. Madeline even began studying about armor and weapon smithing.

“Look at this” she said one day, holding up a book with a painting of Jeanne posed dramatically on a hill. A game of chess seemed to play behind her eyes as she scanned the battlefield before her, a virgin blade in one hand and a massive banner that waved in unseen wind in the other. “This is the armor we saw at the museum. It says Jeanne wore it before she fought at Orléans. And it was specially crafted for her by a master armorer in the city of Tours.”

"Incroyable," Amelie replied, admiring the elaborate artistry of the drawing. "She looks amazing in it. They should have called her *Jeanne le Lion*."

Madeline smirked. "Sure, but when was the last time you heard a girl with a nickname that strong?"

"That settles it--- your new nickname is *Madelion*" Amelie declared. Without pausing for rebuttal, she continued. "You said the blacksmith was in Tours... that's way too far for us to travel. But I found something too." She pointed to a passage in the book in front of her. "When La Pucelle visited Strasbourg in 1429, she stayed with her financier. Some guy named Jaques Boucher."

"And?"

"And, that means if we can find his house, we might find her other bracer."

Madeline considered the idea. "Alright, that makes sense, but it's been hundreds of years since then. How do we know his house is even still standing?"

Amelie cracked her infinite smile. "This cathedral is just as old, and you found that thing, didn't you?" she said, pointing to the bracer hiding on her friend's arm.

"Touché."

The sound of worn shoes echoed down the stairs to the library.

"Vespers.

Vespers.

Vespers."

Sister Caressa's voice bellowed off the oak latticed ceilings.

Madeline and Amelie looked at each other in shock. They had lost track of time. They were so engrossed in their research that they completely forgot about evening prayers. They slammed their books close, and Madeline pulled her friend behind a dusty bookshelf.

Sister Caressa emerged from the doorway like a specter. Her habit was dark as the abyss and seemed to swallow light from every candle in the library. Madeline wondered if the nun had a body at all; being just a head carried by that ominous cloak. The head matron drifted towards a young Scout engrossed in a novel.

"Books are meant to enlighten your soul, not fill your mind with pointless fantasies," she decreed. The woman snatched up the book and threw it aside. "Now go join the others in the chapel for prayer."

The Scout nodded meekly with a "Yes, Mother Superior" and scurried away, eyes cast to the ground. Madeline clutched Amelie's hand tighter. Among the musky forest of shelves, Amelie was pressed close enough to smell the lavender oil Maddy used in her hair. With each breath they took, the head matron took a step. She paused at the opposite end of their hiding place. The girls stopped breathing.

"Let this be a warning to anyone else who may be here," she said. "If you escape my punishment today, God will not spare you His tomorrow."

With that ominous proclamation, she turned and left the room.

The two waited until her heavy footsteps no longer echoed through the halls. They peeked from around the bookshelf and let out a relieved breath. Exchanging smiles, Amelie's gentle brown eyes reflected in Maddy's. Madeline's heart began to race.

"That was close," Amelie whispered.

“Real close...” her friend replied softly, heart still pounding. Amelie licked her dried lips and pulled away.

They quietly reshelved their books and hurried to the chapel.

-5-

Almost Like it Didn't Happen

It took several days of poring over old maps and documents to locate Jaques Boucher's house. It took several more to devise a plan to infiltrate it without arousing suspicion.

“How did we end up here?” Amelie wondered aloud as she swept the dusty abbey floor with a worn-out broom. “We were supposed to be sneaking into a hospital, not a 400-year-old house that's burned down twice.”

Madeline grinned. Determination begets adventure.” She moved her own broom over the wooden planks, stirring up a haze of stale dust. “Things won't always go as planned, but that's how adventures are. Trust me, and we'll have that bracer in our hands before you know it.”

“If it even exists” Amelie replied.

“...aye, if it even exists,” Maddy echoed with a sigh. Their days had grown dull after the close call in the library, with Mother Superior seemingly having a keen eye on the two ever since. An agreement was struck between the friends to limit their research sessions in hopes of avoiding the head matron's wrath. “But tonight's the night” Madeline continued with renewed zeal. “We have everything we need.” She glanced at her friend. “You have the map?”

Amelie nodded. "Drawn and memorized. You have the money?"

Maddy frowned. "Money?" Amelie chuckled. "Yeah. The money we're going to need to bribe the police when they catch us sneaking into that place."

[small montage of basic events here? Maybe where's Renard?]

Madeline and Amelie waited until nightfall before approaching the house of Jaques Boucher. Their research showed it was a replica of the original that had burned down centuries ago, but they knew it could still contain the lower chamber where Jeanne d'Arc may have hidden some of her belongings. Saint Thomas' library was a godsend for information.

They wore dark clothes. They crept along the cobblestone roads while avoiding streetlamps and random citizens. Their only tools were a lantern and crowbar, temporarily on loan from the cathedral's storage room with the broken lock. "You have no idea how exciting this is!" Amelie whispered behind an enormous grin. "Have you heard about Mata Hari? I bet she did sneaky stuff like this."

Madeline glanced back with a frown; her mind focused on the matter at hand. "You do know they caught and executed her, right?"

Amelie frowned. "You're really no fun." As she caught up to Maddy, the sudden fragrance of lavender lulled her into a relaxing calm.

"I'm no fun because I'm trying to be serious. Remember how I told you this bracer is no laughing matter?" Madeline led the way over Barrage Vauban bridge. "That night when I first used it to heal papa, he told me to never use it again. He didn't think it was right or natural for a person to cheat fate, no matter how

cruel it may be.” A chilly breeze from the river seemed to understate the revelation. “And that was just for his leg. He forbade me from even thinking about his Trench Fever.”

Amelie listened somberly, her typical unbridled energy reined in. “I see. So even if your father becomes ill to the point of... what will you do then?” she asked with care.

They passed the museum-turned-hospital, the genesis of their quest, and Madeline stared at the ground. Her pace was that of a wounded animal’s. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Amelie’s chest burned with guilt. She couldn’t bear to see her friend like this, and it was her fault. She stopped Madeline with both hands on her shoulders. “I forbid you from being this sad ever again.” With that, she gave her a kiss. Quick and deliberate, it was almost like it didn’t happen. “Now let’s see some of that *Madelion*, okay?”

Maddy stared back, half shocked, half confused. “Um...I, uh... thank you, Amelie” she responded. “Now let’s go get that damn bracer.”

They found the lower chamber -a cellar, in actuality- at the back of the house where Jeanne supposedly hid her belongings. Tortured by history, the doors looked like a portal to the underworld. Madeline yanked at the lock that bound them, but it held fast. She glanced at Amelie and nodded. Amelie placed the stolen crowbar under the lock and positioned the bar as a lever. Applying all her weight, the lock snapped **like a twig**.

“Quickly now.” Madeline opened the doors and disappeared into the darkness.

The stagnate air felt like trying to breath quicksand. Generations of dust shifted around the cellar, clouding the girls’

sight. The lantern was lit, and the room began to take shape. Barrels, crates, sacks, and chests cluttered every corner. Some had labels, and some had mice. All of them had a foul stench.

"Where do we start?" Amelie asked.

"One of the books said Jeanne may have left a few personal effects in a secret compartment in a barrel. And she marked that barrel with a cross made of nails."

"A 400-year-old barrel with a cross on it," Amelie said. "Got it."

They searched every container in the dim room. A few were empty, while others weighed more than the two girls combined. They found crosses made of wood or tin, but none made of nails. And after a half hour of searching, they found nothing.

"Well, it has been 400 years" Amelie said with a shrug.

"I know. I was just hoping though..." Madeline replied, crestfallen. "Barrel... barrel... barrel..." she began to pace.

Amelie gave a quizzical stare. "Are you okay?"

Madeline continued her march around the cellar. "What kinds of things do you suppose were in those barrels?"

"You mean the ones from 400 years ago that we thought would still have things in them?"

"Yes," Madeline rolled her eyes. "Those barrels."

"The usual stuff, I assume" Amelie replied. "Meats, cheese, butter, and wine of course."

"Hmm." Madeline's pace continued. "Wine keeps for decades, longer even, given the right circumstances."

Amelie frowned. "But who would have a casket of wine from hundreds of years ago?"

Maddy nodded. "I'm not sure. That stuff would be too old to drink. Ah- but you know what? Father Bernard would certainly know something about it."

"Father Bernard? Why would he know anything about wine?" Amelie asked.

"How is it that you live in that cathedral, yet I know more about it than you?" Madeline teased.

"Because Mother Superior makes you scrub it from top to bottom every day" her friend shot back.

"Touché, *punaise*. Father Bernard has twice mentioned he used to oversee the winery ran by monks in another church."

Renewed confidence spread across Maddy's face like **INSERT CLEVER ANALOGY HERE**. "I'd bet he'd be able to tell us where wine from Boucher's house would have gone, maybe even which winery it came from, and if it still exists."

Amelie smiled. "I knew there was a reason I liked you so much."

The Spring weather matched Madeline's mood; bright, warm, and full of possibilities. She had met with Amelie that morning to discuss their next step in obtaining the second bracer. As they approached the gothic monolith that was Saint Thomas Cathedral, Sister Caressa stood at the entrance. "Good morning, young ladies" she said, her black cloak flailing like tentacles in the windless morning. "Good morning, Mother Superior" replied Amelie. "Good morning, Sister Caressa" Madeline added.

The nun gave an ambiguous nod. "For the next few weeks, you will be working with Miss Dupont at the regimental hospital."

"Which one of us?" the two asked in unison.

"Both of you" she answered. Madeline noticed the woman's eyes flicker for a second. "And I would like to remind you two that while I do encourage sororal bonds, you should refrain from any obscene contact with each other, whether you are a novitiate or a simple volunteer." She turned on her heel and disappeared into the cathedral.

“What was that about?” asked Amelie. Madeline looked down between them and cursed under her breath. They had been holding hands the entire time.

“Well, that was both ironic and arbitrary” Madeline declared as the two made their way to the museum-hospital.

Amelie shrugged, eyes cast to the ground. “I guess.”

“Right when we needed to talk to Father Bernard, too. Caressa needs to take a long walk down No Man’s Land.”

Amelie’s cadence slowed. “Maddy?”

“Yes?”

“...Do you think Mother Superior is mad at us? Do you think we’re in trouble?”

“For...?”

“For... you know... being friendly.”

Confused, Madeline glanced at her friend’s expression.

It reminded her of a puppy’s after knocking down an expensive vase.

“Amelie Monet, you are my dearest friend. And friends do things that friends do, whether it be holding hands” she grabbed Amelie’s, feeling a brilliant energy flowing from it, “or whether it be something else” she said with a wink. “Don’t ever let her, or anyone else, tell you otherwise.”

When they arrived at the museum-turned-hospital, Miss Dupont beckoned to them from the entrance. “Welcome back, Miss Madeline and Miss Amelie. Are we well today?” she asked with a sincere smile. The two greeted her in kind. “It was a bit of a

hassle, but I'm glad I was able to convince Mother Superior to let me steal you away for a while."

Madeline furrowed her brow. "You asked for us?"

"And here I thought we were being punished for snooping around." Amelie added.

Miss Dupont laughed. "Oh no no my curious little cuties." She turned and headed inside, gesturing for them to follow. "We've been in need of some help lately, and I thought you two could use a break from that stuffy old abbey." They entered the building and were once again greeted by the dueling odors of antiseptic and human entrails.

The nurse led them to the basement scattered with museum pieces. The fixtures were all still there, covered in ghostly sheets or sealed in large boxes. "It seems this museum has been chosen as a temporary schoolhouse." She moved to the center of the room and spread her arms. "I need two strong and intelligent volunteers to help organize all these wonderful artifacts so we have enough space for up to twenty eager students."

Amelie shot her hand into the air. "I'm an intelligent and strong volunteer!"

Miss Dupont smiled. "Excellent. And you?" she asked Madeline.

"Sure."

"Very good. I knew I could count on you two." She headed for the staircase and adjusted her nurse's cap. "Can I also count on you to have it done by the end of the day?" "*Uoi, chef!*" was Amelie's response with a salute. Dupont smiled and disappeared up the stairs.

As soon as she was out of sight, Amelie turned to Madeline. "I want to wear it."

"Huh?"

"I want to wear it. Now." Amelie stated.

"You can't be thinking what I think you're thinking" Maddy asked. "We are not going to..." then she paused. The idea did sound enthralling...

Maddy's expression was all the approval Amelie needed. "Yes yes yes!" she exclaimed, making her way to the historic armor.

"Just be careful with it!" Madeline warned.

Amelie scoffed. "What do you mean 'be careful with it?' It's a suit of armor. It's built so you *don't* have to be careful with it!"

Maddy **glared** at her friend. "Stop making sense!"

Daily Journal

Monday, March 18, 1918

Today marked the start of my little experiment as a volunteer teacher. A decidedly hesitant crew of

kids, nine in all, have been placed under my tutelage for the foreseeable future. I can't help but wonder if I'm doing them a service, or just adding to the mess this war has made of everything.

The classroom -if you can call it that- is in the basement of the museum-cum-hospital. The polar concepts of excitement from the class below and dread from the hospital above is not lost on me. I don't have much equipment in regards to a proper schoolteacher, so improvisation has already become my specialty. The children all have pencil and paper, and I have a chalkboard and chalk, but everything else must be sourced from upstairs. The transition from smiling, young faces to the grim, dying soldiers and back again each time I needed something was gut-wrenching. Somehow, though, the students managed to keep my mind from breaking.

A few of the old relics and paintings are still in there, pushed to the corners of the basement along with a student I placed in time-out for a while. One would think a museum would make for an excellent place to educate young minds, but such is not the case here. A man woke up this morning only to learn that his leg -and manhood- had been

removed by doctors. As his screams carried through the building, I quickly led the class in a spirited round of songs that lasted longer than they should have.

Admittedly, a twinge of guilt nags at me as I try to shield these kids from the horrors of war. I know I can't keep the truth from them forever, but maybe, just maybe, I can let them be kids for just a little bit longer.

And speaking of kids, I must remember to thank young Madeline and Amelie. They were the ones who cleaned the basement for me all those days ago. From time to time they have been allowed to volunteer at the museum with me, surely a welcome reprieve from that stuffy St Thomas and even stuffier Mother Superior. I thank God for having met them; the endearing spirit those two possess will surely help me keep my sanity.

As the day drew to a close, I watched the children leave, their voices trailing behind them as they ascended the stairs back into the cruel world. I recall looking around afterwards, and the basement felt emptier than I had expected.

I'm not sure what I've gotten myself into, but with any luck, I just may be able to protect them from the chaos beyond these walls.

Charlette Dupont

-6-

Dashing Rogue

Miss Dupont always released the girls early each day, providing them with ample time for research. Madeline and Amelie would briskly return to Saint Thomas and head straight for the library each afternoon, continuing their research on Jeanne d'Arc and the whereabouts of her armor. One foggy morning, the nurse sent them away as soon as they arrived. She stood in front of the historic museum, a smile on her face and gas mask in her hands. The hospital was filled with gas attack survivors, and she deemed it unwise for young girls to be present at the time. After bidding them farewell until the following week, Dupont secured the mask over her face, took a solemn breath, and entered the hospital.

Energy radiated from the garden behind Église Saint Thomas. Scouts and nuns and even the Mother Superior worked together to replant herbs and vegetables in its fertile soil. A gentle spring breeze carried the earthy aroma through the typically stuffy cathedral. Everyone had a tool in their hand and seeds in their pockets.

With two exceptions.

Maddeline and Amelie made a direct heading to the library. The forest of leatherbound books wasn't as vibrant as the rich tones of color outside, but Amelie didn't mind. Normally, she was front and center during planting season. But researching Jeanne d'Arc alongside Maddy proved to be just as invigorating. Diving into tome after tome was no longer just a quest for information, but a bonding experience for the two. And while Madeline's future seemed as unpredictable as a bumble bee, Amelie knew exactly where hers pointed.

"Orléans?" Amelie exclaimed. "There's no way we can go that far undetected. Or go that far *at all*."

After hitting a dead end with the Boucher house, Madline deduced there had been a misinterpretation of the maps. "*Your* misinterpretation" Amelie had teased. True indeed, Jeanne

d’Arc had stayed with a Monsieur Boucher. But his house was not in Strasbourg as they previously thought, but in Orléans, home to her greatest victory during the Hundred Years’ War.

Amelie continued. “You’re talking about a 600-kilometer trip straight across France, Maddy. We’d be caught even before we stepped on the train.”

Madeline’s beamed. “Don’t worry about it. Lapine will help us.”

Amelie stared at her friend with curious eyes. “Lapine? What do you mean?”

“Come home with me today and I’ll show you.”

The Sun had fallen, and the temperature fell with it. Amelie pulled her sweater tight as she followed Maddy to the back of her house. There, a worn tarp covered a small hill of irregular angles.

Madeline yanked the musty sheet with a flourish. “Behold... Lapine!”

Amelie’s eyes widened at the sight of the sleek green motorcycle. “*Incroyable!*”

She circled the machine, admiring every detail. The chrome exhaust reflected the fading light like a firecracker over a peaceful lake. The sidecar looked both robust and comfortable, ready to take anything the road threw at it. And the large engine radiated power and speed even while standing still. “Where did you get it?” she asked.

“The Germans” Maddy said nonchalantly.

“The *WHAT?* How?”

Madeline waved the question off. “That’s a story for another day.” She covered the bike again with one swift motion. “What matters is that Lapine is our ticket out of here. It’ll get us to Orléans in no time.”

Amelie’s jaw muscles tensed. She trusted Maddy more than anyone else in the world, but this was a risky plan, even for them. “Maddy, are you sure about this? I mean we could get into serious trouble if we’re caught using this thing.”

“I am *Madelion*, hear me roar!” Maddy slapped her friend on the back reassuringly, the same nervousness on her friend’s face hiding behind her eyes.

Night had fallen, and the moon was bright. The last few days had been filled with collecting small but necessary items they would need on their crusade. The trip to Orléans would take six hours by Madeline’s arithmetic, and they would ride by night. Time was their enemy, so the moon would be their ally.

Of course, that meant Madeline had to sneak from her father’s house, and Amelie from Saint Thomas. Then they’d have to evade civilians, town patrols, and anyone else who might catch two teenagers driving cross country on a stolen motorcycle.

And then they’d have to do it again coming back.

Madeline lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling like a soldier waiting for the attack whistle. Each second stretched to eternity, but maturity had taught her that patience was tantamount to success. Only after she was certain the world around her was asleep did she slide out of bed to toss on her trusty poncho.

Next came her carrier bag that contained provisions for the journey: coffee, emergency medical supplies, an electric torch, and a knife. The door to her room creaked like a nun's nails against chalkboard as she peeked from behind it. Another eternity passed as she waited to see if her father had woken. Once confident that her escape route was safe, she slipped into the darkness and out the back door.

Amelie faced a more delicate challenge. As an orphan living in Saint Thomas, she shared a dormitory with a dozen other girls, any of whom could wake up and foil her adventure before it even began. Nevertheless, she had gone to bed in a long-sleeved shirt and a pair of old pants she used for gardening. She peeked from beneath the covers to ensure the coast was clear. After her patience ran out, she slid out of bed then arranged a few pillows in the general shape of a body under the blanket. Once confident her ruse would last until morning, she grabbed the map copied from the library and tip-toed out of the bedroom.

Madeline inhaled the crisp night air and felt a surge of resolve. She had thought of this moment every waking second for days, and now it was finally happening. She uncovered Lapine and pushed it inch by inch past the front of the house. If she started the engine too close to her father's bedroom, her quest would have ended there. She felt guilty keeping the expedition from him, but deep down felt it was something she needed to do with or without his approval. After positioning the bike on the empty dirt road, she hopped on. Another deep breath. The second she turned the ignition, there would be no coming back without Jeanne's second bracer. Madeline patted the motorbike like a childhood pet. "Okay Lapine, make me proud." With that, she

started the engine, twisted the throttle, and vanished into the night.

Amelie cursed under her breath. Maddy would be here any minute. She had to get out of the cathedral before anyone noticed her absence, at least until morning. Then she'd need a damn good excuse if she didn't want to get kicked out. *I'll pull that weed when I get to it*, she thought to herself.

The grand foyer of the church was too visible, so one of the rear exits would have to do. Amelie slipped through the dimly lit corridors, careful to avoid incriminating candle lights and tell-tell floorboards. The abbey's stone hallways were hauntingly silent at night, but she knew better. Eyes and ears were everywhere, waiting to catch troublemakers like her. And the worst of them was Mother Superior. Even the kindly Father Bernard had felt her wraith before. She pressed herself against a cold wall and peeked around the corner. A shadowy figure walked towards her with a lantern in hand. Amelie gasped and jerked her head back. Who was it? A nun? Another Scout? Mother Superior? She held her breath as a bead of sweat grew with each step the figure took. Step by step, the flame of the lantern grew.

Lapine's fierce growl echoed through the city streets. Madeline hunched over the handlebars as it sped toward the cathedral. "Why can't you be quieter, Lapine?" There was no doubt her father was awake by now, awaiting whatever absurd explanation she would give for stealing their bike in the dead of night. *I'll pull that weed when I get to it*, she thought to herself. Pulling the poncho's hood over her matte hair, she made the final turn toward Saint Thomas.

Tall for her age, and skinny for it too, stood another Scout. The 12-year-old confronted Amelie. “Ah-ha... I knew it was you!” she accused.

“Claire!” Amelie whispered loudly. “What are you doing here?”

Claire’s brow lifted. “I could ask the same of you! In fact, I *am* asking the same of you. What are you doing here?” She held the lamp up to the interloper’s face, but Amelie quickly swatted it back down. “Put that thing away, dammit!”

Claire gasped. “That filthy mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble someday... again” she chided. Amelie would have argued all night with her, but tonight was not one of those nights. “Listen Claire, I need to go. Can you cover for me in the morning?”

The perplexed girl scoffed. “What? And risk getting myself in trouble? I think not!” She lifted the lamp to their faces again. “Besides, you never answered my question. What are you doing here?”

A mechanical rumble rose from the cathedral entrance. “What’s that?” Claire demanded, swinging her attention to the large oak doors at the opposite end of the hall. “Are you trying to run away?”

Amelie had had enough. “Please, just don’t tell anyone. I promise I’ll tell you everything when we get back!” With that, she sprinted for the entrance.

“We? Who’s ‘we?’”

Amelie wriggled through the narrowest gap she could make between the heavy medieval doors. She emerged into the moonlit courtyard and grinned at the sight before her. There was Madeline, cloaked like a dashing rogue sitting on a motorcycle here to whisk her away forever. All of Amelie's worries melted away as she ran to the bike and hopped into the unexpectedly cozy sidecar.

"Ready for an adventure?" Madeline asked with a devilish grin.

Always with you, Amelie thought. "Liberté, égalité, fraternité, ou la mort!" she declared. With that historic battle cry, Madeline revved the engine and the two sped off into the night.

(Dupont journal #2 goes here)

The wind whipped over Madeline's poncho and through Amelie's curls as they sped through the outskirts of town. After a brief stop to confirm the route and double-check their provisions, they continued onward to Orléans. The open country road would get them there by three in the morning. Excitement and coffee would keep them awake, but Amelie rested in the sidecar, wrapped in the cozy blanket Madeline had stowed in advance.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive?" Amelie shouted over the howl of the wind.

"I'm fine" Maddy answered. "I'm really getting the hang of this. Like I said, Lapine won't let us down."

Amelie smiled at the motorbike's name. "So, why did you name it Rabbit?"

Maddy patted the side of the fuel tank affectionately. "Isn't it obvious? It is small, quick, and nimble!"

Oh. That is obvious, Amelie thought to herself. Then a pang of jealousy hit her chest.

I wish... "Do you... would you like to give me a nickname?" she asked. Each word seemed to get caught in her throat, whether from the wind or embarrassment she wasn't sure.

Madeline arched an eyebrow but kept her focus on the road. "A nickname?" She grinned. "That's adorable. But no, I don't have one for you."

An awkward silence fell between the two.

"Would you like one?"

After a few hours, they stopped for a break. The trip had been peppered with awkward moments punctuated by Lapine's constant growl. Madeline stretched her arms skyward with a groan while Amelie sat in the sidecar and pretended to go over the map. Secretly, she just wanted to avoid her friend, the odd question from hours ago still lingering in her head.

Qu'est ce que c'est stupide de ma part... she thought to herself. Maddy probably thinks I'm just a daft little girl now. Leave it to me to muck everything up in the middle of nowhere.

She buried her face in the map, holding back tears of resentment. *What is wrong with me? Where are all these emotions coming from? Why do my thoughts get scrambled like this around her? Dieu, tu me testes?*

She glanced at Madeline, who had stepped away to admire the star-filled horizon. Amelie wondered what -if anything- was going on in her head. Did she hate her for making such an odd request? Did she have these same provoking feelings? Did she even care at all? She wanted to say something, anything, but couldn't find the words. She felt like a coward, hiding behind a piece of paper like this. She wished she could go back in time and erase that stupid question from her mouth.

A tap on her shoulder rescued Amelie from her thoughts. As much as she wanted, she was not alone in the dark countryside. Madeline flashed a warm grin brighter than the rusty lantern at her feet. "Finally decided to get some sleep I see." Amelie glared at her in anger, an inadvertent reflex caused by the storm that brewed in her soul. But to Madeline, it was just the response of a tired passenger. "Or maybe some coffee?" She reached beside Amelie to retrieve her carrier pack and caught the familiar scent of lavender. "That's a wonderful aroma. It's my favorite. When I can get it, anyway." She opened the canteen and took an invigorating sip, then offered it to her friend. "Want some?"

Amelie sat in silence.

Madeline tilted her head in concern. "Are you okay? Is Lapine making you nauseous? I can drive slower if-" "It's nothing" Amelie interjected. "Thank you for the coffee, but I don't want any."

They had only been friends for less than a year, but Madeline knew when something was amiss. Amelie's silent emotions were louder than a trench whistle. She capped the canteen and tucked it in her bag. "Okay Amelie. We need to talk." She returned to Lapine and settled on the brown leather seat. "What's on your mind? I'm a bit scared too if that's what's worrying you."

Amelie kept her eyes on the map freshly stained with small lakes. "Do you promise you won't get mad?" she asked in a small voice.

"The only thing that would make me mad is if you're about to tell me you want to go back to Saint Thomas" Madeline joked.

Maddy's genuine kindness made Amelie's heartache even worse. She both loved and hated her for being so sweet. "Maddy..." she began. "I don't want to lose you. Ever." Two new rivers flowed down the map. Madeline sat motionless, stunned by how much pain her friend was in. She had never seen this side of Amelie, and it hurt her to the core. She hopped from the bike and walked to the sidecar where her friend was curled up like a ball. "Move over." She said.

Amelie wiped her face, puffy red eyes met compassionate clear ones. "Huh?"

"Move over" Maddy repeated, already climbing in. They shuffled about until they shared the single-seat cart. Madeline wrapped her arm around Amelie and pulled her close, enjoying the lavender scent that played through her curls. Then it all made sense.

Oh.

Madeline closed her eyes and chose her words carefully.

“Amelie. You and I will always be friends. You don’t have to worry about hiding anything from me, whether it be a stolen chocolate bar or new feelings. But for now, we need to find this bracer before we get ourselves into serious trouble, or worse.” She pecked Amelie on her hair and stayed in the sidecar until she fell asleep.

“Merde merde merde... putain de merde!”

Madeline woke with a start, the bright sun beaming in her eyes. Amelie lifted her head, rubbing the sleep from hers. “What’s wrong Maddy?” she asked groggily. “Oh *merde!*” she exclaimed when she realized their mistake. “Did we sleep through the night?”

Madeline clambered out of the sidecar and fell to the ground with a thud. One of her legs had gone numb while she was asleep. “*Nom de Dieu!*” she exclaimed. She picked herself up and hobbled onto Lapine. Her leg felt like a tank walked over it as she kicked the clutch and brought the engine to life. “How much time did we lose?”

Still half asleep, Amelie fumbled for her pocket watch. “It’s 7:17 right now. Should we keep going, or should we head back?”

Madeline revved the engine and twisted the throttle. “Madelion, roar!” she proclaimed, and the two sped off toward Orléans.

Renard had dealt with his daughter’s adventurous spirit on multiple occasions, but it was getting old at the age of 13. He

knocked again on the Mother Superior's chamber door, hoping the nun he met in front of the cathedral had given him the correct room.

"Yes yes, who is it?" Caressa asked sharply. Renard cleared his throat. "I'm Renard Rappeneau. My daughter Madeline volunteers here." He leaned an ear against the door after waiting for a response. "I was hoping you could tell me if she was on any special du-"

The door flew open, and the head matron appeared before him as if she had been standing there the whole time. She stared at him with beady eyes, her tall frame commanding his eyes upward. "Yes, I know who your daughter is, monsieur Rappeneau. What I do not know, however, is where she is at this time." She peered into the stone hallway, forcing Renard to step back. "Miss Madeline and two other girls missed morning prayers today. Their breakfasts were enjoyed thoroughly though." Renard noticed extra bowls sitting on the woman's desk behind her. "Go check the riverbank park. That is where many of the more wayward souls run off to these days. Them and their moral anarchy." With that, she slammed the door shut.

Renard shook his head and turned, but the door opened once more. "Oh, and monsieur Rappeneau," she added. "Please see to it that you dress your daughter in more appropriate garments. She is not in the Army like you were and does not need to look like it."

The door slammed again.

In a way, the abrasive nunt was right. Renard found a group of children in the park near the river, all huddled around a small stage. Eager whispers swirled through the crowd as they waited for the show to begin. A trumpet fanfare bade silence and red curtains parted to reveal a puppet slumped in a chair. Renard

was too far away to notice any strings, but the elaborate craftsmanship of the doll could be seen by a blind man. It rose to its feet when music began to play, its elegant dress like a pinwheel in the wind. It was a princess of some kind, and if not for the wooden texture and mechanical joints, Renard would have mistaken it for a living being, shrunk to toy size.

Like an orchid caught in the breeze, she leapt and twirled and spun across the stage. Another figure appeared opposite her, a strapping young soldier, complete with pointed helmet and an even pointier bayonet. The young crowd cheered but Renard grew unsettled. No number of strings or hidden mechanics could allow these puppets to perform the way they did. The soldier lifted the princess into the air, spun, and sat her down. The princess performed a flawless pirouette, her toes *en pointe* and arms bowed gracefully over her head. The soldier kneeled on one knee at the side of the stage. He removed his helmet in admiration of the ballerina's beauty. But she spurned his feelings, gliding on her toes away from him. The music turned ominous when the soldier stood and charged with his rifle. The expertly crafted weapon speared the princess through the stomach, a dramatic flourish of music accenting the act of rage.

Several children in the crowd screamed. The Soldier held his place until his victim collapsed to the stage floor. The curtains fell, and the show was over.

"*C'est quoi ce bordel*" Renard said to himself. The lifelike movements of the puppets were unsettling enough, but the sudden change in narrative added a bitter twist to the show. He moved through the crowd of weeping children, some covering their tears and others jumping in excitement at the miniature-sized carnage. Renard kept an eye out for his daughter but had a new interest in whoever the puppeteer behind the stage was.

He was tall, almost too tall, and wore an even taller hat. His green vest clashed with his purple shirt that clashed with his

plaid pants. His hair and moustache were blacker than black and flared dramatically like a conductor waving a baton.

“If your child is crying, then you need to tell it to stop. If it isn’t, then good.”

Renard froze, confused by what the strange man just said. “Actually, I was fascinated by your work during the show. I wanted to see if I could get a closer look at your puppets.”

(NOTE: he has a cane leaning beside the equipment)

Description of puppeteer (UPDATE: it's WAR)

He has other bracer(?), uses it to bring puppets to life. Wants Maddy's since his only works on dead people or inanimate objects(?)

-8-

As the sun maintained its climb into the heavens, Madeline cursed under her breath.

Lapine was out of fuel.

Her trusty motorbike had carried the two across the bleak French countryside, dodging Army convoys and bomb craters. But now their journey was about to stall, literally, in the middle of nowhere. Lapine sputtered as Madeline shook Amelie awake

in the sidecar. “Amelie, we have a problem.” The young orphan blinked and stretched, emerging like a butterfly from the blanket cocoon that kept her warm on the chilly morning. “What is it?” she asked, rubbing weary eyes.

“We need to find some petrol, and fast. Lapine can’t go on much longer.” Amelie scanned but saw nothing other than rolling hills of dead crops on either side of the road. She wondered who owned this land, and whether they were still around or had fled from the war. If there were fields, there had to be a farm. And if there was a farm, there might be a tractor. And if there was a tractor.... “There has to be someone around here,” she said, searching her map. “Orléans isn’t far, but let’s keep an eye out before--”

And that’s when Lapine gave up. Madeline coasted to the roadside and shut the ignition.

The two stepped from the bike. “Mon Dieu, does my butt hurt!” Amelie said, shoving the torrent of things she wanted to discuss with Maddy to the back of her mind. “How are you holding up?”

Madeline stretched her fingertips to the sky, countering the hours of hunching over the twice-stolen motorcycle. “I’m fine, but I could go for a little fuel myself.” She brushed a strand of hair from her face and pointed to the sidecar. “Mind passing the coffee?”

Amelie produced the canteen and watched her friend take a revitalizing swig. She watched for several seconds until she realized she had been watching for several seconds, and quickly turned her gaze. “We should get going. There’s gotta be a farm somewhere near here” she said. Madeline finished the coffee with a contented sigh and handed it back. Amelie began to screw the cap back on but thought for a second and took a swig herself.

After a quarter mile of pushing the light-yet-awkward motorcycle down the side of the road, Madeline and Amelie finally approached a farmhouse. “You were right, Amie. I knew it was a good idea to bring you” Madeline said with a wink. A momentary grin flashed across Amelie’s face. “Let’s just hope they have some fuel for us though” she replied.

“Look!” Maddy exclaimed. She pointed toward the far side of the wooden barn where two military vehicles were parked. “Looks like the farmer has some company” she said. “Bad company,” Amelie added. “So do you still want to check it out? I’m ready if you are.” She pulled a small blade from her waist and spun it around her fingers with practiced precision.

“I thought Sister Caressa took your knife?” Maddy asked.

“She did” Amelie replied. “So I took it back.”

The two parked Lapine behind the remains of a broken-down shed. On closer inspection of the farmhouse, they saw a French flag hanging from the door. “What is going on here?” Madeline asked, peering from behind concealment. Amelie surveyed the house from the other side of the shed. Military vehicles, the flag, and, if she heard correctly, several rough sounding voices meant one thing.

“Maddy, I think the Army is using the farm as an outpost.”

Madeline nodded. “Looks about right. Means we’ll have to be even more careful than originally planned.”

“You were planning on being careful?” Amelie jested.

They knew they couldn't risk being caught by the soldiers, friendly or not. They could be accused of being spies or saboteurs or worse. That meant they would have to sneak their way into the barn. Maddy prayed there definitely would be fuel in there.

"Let's be careful" she whispered. "There might be soldiers patrolling the area. We need to avoid them at all costs."

Amelie agreed. "Let's split up and look for a fuel can or a fuel pump. If you find one, signal me with a bird call, and I'll do the same. Otherwise, let's meet back at Lapine in ten minutes."

Maddy nodded. "Oh, and no stabbing. These are the good guys."

A playful grin crossed Amelie's lips. "I promise nothing." With that, she crouched and made her way to the rear of the barn.

Amelie decided to check the back of the farmhouse. She tiptoed across the yard, keeping an eye out for any movement or sound. She reached the back door and tried to open it. Locked. A window near the door gave her hope. Peeking in, she saw a dimly lit room full of furniture but no soldiers. She decided to move on and look elsewhere.

She jumped off the barrel and walked towards the barn, which was about 20 meters away from the farmhouse. She hoped to find some petrol there, or at least some hay to hide in if things got bad. She opened the barn door and stepped inside. She smelled the musty odor of animals and straw. She heard some rustling and squeaking noises. She saw some chickens, pigs, and rats scurrying around. She didn't see any soldiers or any fuel cans.

She walked further into the barn, looking for anything that might contain petrol. She saw some tools, some buckets, some sacks, some ropes, but nothing that looked like fuel. She was about to give up and leave when she spotted something shiny

in the corner of the barn. She walked towards it and saw a metal can with a red label that said “Essence”. She recognized it as a petrol can

She grabbed the can and lifted it up. It was heavy and full of petrol. She smiled and made a bird call to signal Maddy that she had found what they were looking for.

She waited for Maddy’s reply, but she didn’t hear anything. She wondered if Maddy had heard her or if she had found another can somewhere else.

She decided to wait for another minute before heading back to Lapine with the can.

She didn’t notice the soldier who had followed her into the barn until he grabbed her from behind and put a hand over her mouth.

He whispered in her ear: “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

END TO CHAPTER 8 GOES HERE

Undiscovered Letter

After following a winding road flanked by barren wheatfields and wilted vineyards, Lapine crested a hill that offered a soaring view of Orléans. “We’ve made it!” Madeline declared, eyes gleaming with anticipation. A surge of pride coursed through her body and down her fingertips that translated into a spirited twist of the throttle. The two adventurers were closer than ever to their goal.

Amelie stretched her arms with a yawn. “Finally” she said, roused from her nap. She dug for the map at her feet, and, for a second, felt a pang of loneliness in the sidecar. She reviewed the map, ignoring the dried tear stains. “Okay. We’ll need to find our way to pretty much the exact center of the city. That’s where Boucher’s house is. Or was.”

She had spent the morning wrestling with her feelings, wondering if she had made a mistake by confessing them. But she knew Maddy was as wild and free as her dear Lapine and would probably be that way for the rest of her life. As much as it pained her, Amelie buried her thoughts and focused on their mission.

“Heart of the city. Got it” Madeline said with a yawn. “*Zut*. We really screwed up by falling asleep like that.” She glanced at her friend. “How are you feeling?”

The smile accompanying Maddy’s question gave Amelie a tinge of energy. “I am doing well, mademoiselle Rappeneau. Thank you for asking” she replied with aristocratic flair. The two shared a laugh. “If you’re going to be wearing La Pucelle’s armor, I’m going to need to start speaking to you like a true Lady at Arms” Amelie teased.

Madeline’s shoulders fell and her grip on the throttle relaxed. “Amelie,” she said, eyes locking with her friend’s, “I’m not searching for the second gauntlet so that I can have it. I am searching for the second gauntlet so that *you* can have it.”

Lapine maintained a dilatory pace through the streets of Orléans. Two young women on a motorcycle already drew enough attention. A municipal police sergeant could arrest and jail them at any time. Madeline donned her cloak and hood while Amelie wrapped herself in the warm blanket that smelled of lavender.

They wound through cobblestone roads, passing shops and terraced houses with small balconies and shuttered windows. Churches large and small dotted the city like lighthouses, beacons to the lost and refuge to the weary. Amelie scribbled notes about the landscape on the back of her map. After a while, she spoke up.

“Turn left when you see a bakery with a red roof.”

Sure enough, they eventually spotted a small building covered with dull red shingles. Madeline frowned. “Well... it’s got a red roof, but the sign says it’s a bookstore, not a bakery.”

Amelie checked her notes. “The books said it was bakery, but things could have changed over the years.”

Maddy nodded and turned past the shop. Not far beyond was a building they had seen again and again during countless hours of pouring over books in the library: Jeanne d’Arc’s wartime residence. “That’s it!” they exclaimed in unison.

The house was a splendid example of medieval architecture. Four floors latticed with maple-colored timber contrasted starkly against the white plaster facade. Beneath each window hung wooden troughs overflowing with colorful flowers, adding a touch of charm to the historic building. It was still one of the finest houses in all of Orléans; a reflection of Jacques Boucher’s wealth and status as the duke’s treasurer. Madeline slowed the bike to a crawl and the glint off a small plaque caught her eye.

Maison de Jeanne d’Arc

We did it...

She turned to Amelie, whose eyes had become honey-colored pools of water. "Okay Amelie, let's keep it together." Her passenger wiped her face and nodded. "Right. We need to find a place to park and... Maddy?" she interrupted herself.

"Yes?"

Amelie patted the sidecar. "Is Lapine a boy or a girl?"

Madeline froze for a second, then chuckled. "You know, I never really thought about it. How about a girl, so it won't feel left out?"

Amelie smiled. "That's a good idea. Let's find a nice place for her to stay while we go snoop around La Pucelle's place."

There were no guards or fences, but the Boucher House was locked tighter than the Bastille. "Three doors and not a single one is open." Amelie groaned. "This museum is supposed to be open to the public. We're the public, so open up!"

Madeline watched her angry friend yell at the clouds. Then she lowered her head, conflicted. Normally she wouldn't think twice about sneaking into restricted places, but this was Jeanne d'Arc's wartime residence. She felt it should be honored as such, museum or not.

But at the same time...

"Amelie" she said. "Let's see if we can find a way in without being too overt."

"You mean like this?" Amelie replied, halfway through a lock-picked window. Madeline snapped her head left and right on the lookout for possible bystanders. "I said *DON'T* be too overt!"

Like a house abandoned in the war, Boucher's was laden with dust and mystery. Even in the morning light, darkness painted the walls pitch black. The thin sliver of sunshine that leaked from the open window revealed an ocean of suspended particles; infinitesimal specks of skin and dirt and horse manure stirring about like sea life. Madeline crashed to the floor after an attempt to enter the house stealthily. Amelie spun around.

"Don't be so overt!" she mocked.

"Oh hush you." Maddy picked herself up and reached for her lantern. A dirt-caked Orilux electric torch, the flask-shaped device provided the interlopers with ample light while they searched for clues.

Amelie sneezed as she made her way to the next room.

"Oh, so you're perfectly fine with all that pollen around Saint Thomas's garden but can't handle a wee bit of dust from an old house?" Madeline teased. Unseen, Amelie responded. "I'm just going to ignore that... but come here. I need your help with something." Maddy found her in the kitchen, where everything smelled as old as the house itself. Amelie gestured at the floor. There, in plain sight, was a large cellar door.

It took both of them to lift the wooden hatch. After waiting for the dust to settle, Madeline focused her light on the stairway that led into even more darkness. "Now *this* looks like the proper place for secrets" Amelie said. Her friend smiled and made her way down.

Madeline swept the lantern's beam across the cellar. Stale air bit at her nose while the light carved out shapes from the darkness. A small table, a few barrels, and irregular, lumpy sacks appeared and disappeared as if conjured by magic.

"Barrels!" Maddy shouted. She focused the light on several wooden casks hidden in the corner.

"Now to see if any of them have a cross on it" Amelie replied, making her way over. Madeline positioned her Orilux on the table and the two got to work moving, turning, and searching each of the containers. After several minutes and an accidentally-spilled barrel of wheat germ, their search was in vain. Maddy sat on the table, hope and pessimism fighting for dominance across her face. Amelie sat beside her.

"Another failure" the older one said.

Amelie gave a reassuring pat on the back. "Chin up, old girl. We've only checked two rooms so far. Who knows what we might still find in this place."

A weak growl echoed across the cellar, and Madeline patted her stomach. "Ugh. We need to find some food here too. Got any money?"

Amelie stared at her friend, enjoying the play of shadows on Maddy's face as she fidgeted with the electric torch. "Naw. Mother Caressa cut my stipend from no francs down to *absolutely* no francs" she joked. "I did bring a loaf of bread from the cathedral though. It's back with Lapine. Go grab some and then we can continue our search." Maddy hopped off the table with a smile. "Don't ever let it be said that I can't trust you, Amelie." She gave the gardener's hand a tender squeeze, then made her way back outside.

Left alone in the cellar, Amelie's smile faded. Her chest burned with confusion as the turmoil in her soul burst like a damn.

Orléans' streets were devoid of the ubiquitous vendors and buggies that once crowded its brick-laden roads. Children no longer played in front of their houses, and only a handful of men -too old to be conscripted- manned the few shops that remained open. The weather was bright today, but Madeline felt the war's invisible overcast that blanketed the city.

Lapine sat partially concealed behind a tree, itself partially concealed behind an abandoned building not far from the museum. Madeline dug through the sidecar in a search for bread. She happened upon Amelie's map, dotted with odd lakes here and there. After a quizzical stare, she placed it aside and found half a baguette wrapped in a clean rag. After a few satisfying bites washed down with a swig of coffee, she headed back. As she approached the Boucher house, she spotted a grey-haired man with thin glasses and a cane by the slightly open window. "*Merde!*" Madeline said. "I thought I closed that thing behind me." She continued a leisurely pace, hoping he was just a passer-by curious about the museum. He turned toward her as she neared, so she played the role of Scout. "*Bonjour, monsieur.*" Her copy of Amelie's smile flashed across her face. "Are you interested in La Pucelle's museum?"

The old man looked Madeline up and down. "Hmph" he said, turning back to the window. "I would hope so. I own the place. Who do you think waters all these flowers?" he said, pointing at the array of colors with his cane. His gaze fell back to the girl. "I was just wondering why this window here is open like this." He used his trusty cane once more to push the entryway shut. "You wouldn't know anything about this, would you, young lady?"

No stranger to mischief and the consequences it can lead to, Madeline dropped her act. "Forgive me. I only wanted to take a peek. Jeanne is my hero."

The museum owner nodded slowly. "As she should be. But if I recall, were there not two of you who were curious about her?"

Madeline grimaced. *Désolé Amélie, j'ai essayé.* "That's right. My friend and I came here so we could see her history." She gestured toward the closed window. "Would you mind if I collected her so we don't disturb you?" *Je suis en colère. Encore un échec?* Madeline thought.

The elderly man lifted a brow. "Are you planning on going through the window again, or would you like to try the door this time?"

Amelie jumped at the sound of footsteps above the cellar. She quickly wiped her eyes and dashed up the stairs, only to crash into an elderly man with a cane. "Oh *merde!*" she exclaimed. "*Excusez-moi, monsieur.*"

The museum owner gave the same slow nod. "Non, pardonnez-moi." He stepped back and gestured for her to emerge from the stairs. "Not only are you little girls, but there are two of you. Very interesting." Amelie's face squinched in confusion, then soured at the sight of Maddy. "Don't worry Amelie, he's the owner of this place."

"Oh" the younger one said flatly. The man tapped his cane beside the open cellar door. "Would you two mind closing that for me? I'm no longer as dexterous as I once was." The two friends quietly lowered it. "Besides," the man continued. "You won't be finding what you are looking for in there."

Pierre, owner of the museum, guided the two across the street where he had watched them slip into Boucher's house. He opened the door to his own abode and offered them tea. After politely declining, they sat at a sturdy wooden table. "Built this myself, you know" he mentioned, giving it a good shake. "I should probably work on my lock-making skills though, eh?" he said with a cheeky grin. "Again, we're sorry sir" Madeline replied. "We just wan-" "Yes yes yes, I know" Pierre replied. "Just wanted to see some of Jeanne's history." He took a sip of the tea he had poured for himself. "But we all know that's not the entire truth." Madeline glanced at her friend, only to receive a blank stare in return. The owner sat his cup down. "It seemed as though you two were searching for something. I wonder, what could it have been?" The same look he gave Madeline after he caught her returned.

Maddy's mind raced with a million thoughts. *Do I tell him? But he already knows! Of course he knows, he owns the place! Does he already have the bracer? Does he know about the bracer? What would papa say?*

"We were looking for a lost bracer that belonged to Jeanne" Amelie revealed, pointing to Madeline. "She has the other one."

"Amelie!" her friend mumbled in shock.

"What?" the younger replied. "He already knows anyway." She gave an empty stare that Maddy had never seen from her before. Amelie turned to Pierre. "Would you happen to know where the other one is?" For the first time in a very long time, Madeline looked at her sister-in-arms with agitation.

Pierre raised a brow.

"Ahh, so is that what this is." He took another sip of tea. "*Jeune amour.*"

Amelie froze. "What?"

Madeline jumped. "What?"

Pierre smiled. “What ‘*what?*’ Even I can see it with these 61-year-old eyes,” tapping the side of his spectacles. “But these things take time, so I will not comment on it further. Besides, we are here to talk about *Les Brassards de la Pucelle*, The Maiden’s Bracers.”

Pierre asked to be excused. While they waited, Madeline glared at Amelie. Her friend returned the expression.

“We need to grab the second bracer and just be done with all of this” Amelie stated. Madeline sat back, surprised at her friend’s altered demeanor. “We’re having a long talk after this” she replied. Pierre returned, setting a wooden box on the table. Stained by time, the **arm-sized** box looked as if it had been once buried and twice sunk. A rusted clasp held the lid firm, and over it was *a cross made of nails*.

Madeline gasped.

“Now now, little one” Pierre began. “This is not what you think. But it is a compass to point you in the right direction.” With that, he opened the box, revealing three antiquated sheets of parchment. “A map?” Amelie asked. The old man smiled. Yes... and no.” With great care, he placed the manuscripts flat on the table. Every sweeping loop, line, and swirl was mottled by dirt and history, with pieces torn off as if they had been a child wolf’s plaything. Nevertheless, Madeline knew exactly who wrote it. “Are you telling me this is Jeanne’s handwriting?!” she exclaimed. Pierre gave his measured nod and a smile. “Indeed, it is. And it is by her handwriting that I learned of your quest.”

Madeline gave a bewildered look. “You mean like a prophecy?”

Pierre chuckled and turned to Amelie. “Your friend, she thinks very highly of herself, no?”

Arms folded, Amelie gave a half-grin. "Tell me about it."

"What is wrong with you today?" Madeline demanded from her only friend.

"What's wrong with *me*? What's wrong with you, *putain*!"

Madeline jumped from her seat. "*Putain de bordel de merde*. Okay- you know that talk we were going to have later? It's been rescheduled. Get up."

Amelie pushed her chair back, ready to fight more than talk.

Pierre took a sip of tea. "As much as I would enjoy seeing this lover's quarrel, I think you two have more pressing matters to attend to, no?"

Madeline shot a look to the man. "This is not a lover's quarrel!"

"Isn't a lover's quarrel?" Amelie shouted. "It sure the hell is... you love that bracer more than you love me!"

Pierre enjoyed another sip as Amelie froze at what just came out of her mouth. "I mean..."

Madeline's skin prickled as her mind struggled for a retort. But the museum owner interjected. "A thing of beauty, that was. But *petites dames*, let us retain our composure, shall we? Please, return to your seats."

"Jeannette Darc," Pierre began, "her true name at birth, was never taught how to write."

"Because she was a girl" Amelie stated, arms crossed, slouching in her chair. "And you think the same way, don't you" she added scornfully. One of Pierre's eyebrows arched high

over his glasses after the perceptive statement. "What can I say. It is the way of the world" he replied coolly. Maintaining eye contact with the documents, Madeline spoke up. "I thought you said this was written by her?"

Pierre finished his tea, immune to the invisible yet chaotic energies radiating from the two interlopers. "Her ability to do so was guarded from history. But her mother, also thought to have been illiterate, taught her from a young age." He gently pushed one of the pages toward Madeline. "In fact, this very letter details how her father read the Bible to her every day, but her mother taught her to read it every night." Maddy glanced at the undiscovered letter, careful not to make eye contact with the girl across from her. "I wish... I mean, I like that girls can learn things like that from their mother."

Pierre nodded in agreement. "And how is your m-AIE!" he hollered, yelping like a kicked dog. "Did you just kick my shin, little girl?" he asked Amelie, rubbing his leg.

"Leave her mom out of this." Then she stood. "In fact, leave *me* out of this." Reaching the door, she mentioned "I'll be waiting in the motorcycle when you're done here" then disappeared into the streets.

Pierre turned to Madeline. "Do not worry about your companion, little one. She will be fine. I have had my fair share of lov-" "Can we just get to the bracer? I'd rather not hear that phrase again. *Si vous le voulez bien.*"

Only slightly taken aback, Pierre nodded and returned to his original thoughts. "I will say it bluntly then. Jeanne wrote this letter in hopes that one day God would allow someone else to use the gifts He gave her." The bespectacled man leaned in. "So, you've found it? The right arm bracer."

Madeline paused, still unsure how much information to give this man. *Get the second bracer and just be done with all of it.*

Curse you, Amelie.

She slid her right shirtsleeve up to reveal the armor.

“Incroyable!” Pierre quietly exclaimed. “Thank you, God, for allowing me to live to see this day.” He sat back in his chair and wiped his brow. “Besides your friend out there, does anyone else know of it?”

“She’s forcing me to be like this. I can feel it.” Madeline stated.

“Excusez-moi?”

“She’s making me feel this way about her. It’s not right.”

Pierre straightened his back and folded his hands on the table. “And how exactly are you feeling, young one?”

Madeline shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s... it just doesn’t feel right, at least not right now.”

“Ah.”

“She’s a wonderful person. She is, truly. And she always seems to know exactly how I’m feeling or even what I’m going to say at times. It’s incredible.”

Pierre contemplated those words. “She does seem quite perceptive for one so young...” he said, stroking his chin.

“But now’s just not the time! This bracer is too important.”

“I am inclined to agree with that statement, jeune demoiselle. How did you ever come by it in the first place?”

-10-

Église Saint Thomas

Eight Months Ago

“Every time you are late, a soldier loses his life!”

The old nun that greeted Madeline at the front of the looming cathedral spat the quote out like passage from the Bible. “I hope this will not be a common occurrence, Miss Rappeneau. I do not tolerate tardiness.”

“I will bear that in mind, Sister Caressa.”

The nun cleared her throat. “That’s *Mother* Caressa, or Mother Superior, if you prefer.”

“I will bear that in mind as well” Madeline replied.

“I have been told your father was blessed with highly regarded skills as a medical officer in the Army. I hope those traits have passed on to you.” She stepped aside. “Now go find the kitchen. It is where you will keep your personal items while volunteering here.”

Église Saint Thomas

Six Months Ago

“Miss Rappeneau, may I ask why one of the Soldiers today said he saw you in the trenches last night?”

Mother Caressa’s tunic flapped like a mad raven caught in a storm, the inky cloth catching an autumn breeze like black feathers. Madeline suppressed a grin. “There are always stories of angels guiding soldiers through the battlefield, Sister Caressa. Perhaps that is what he saw.”

The abbess glared at the cheeky volunteer, not sure what to be madder about: her brazen lies or her proclivity for disrespect. Her arm shot out, pointing into the church. “Go help the girls finish up the harvest.”

Madeline started for the rear of the cathedral but was stopped.

“*After* you see Father Bernard for confession.”

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned.”

Madeline kneeled in the confessional.

“And how long has it been since your last confession, my child?” a firm yet reassuring voice replied.

“...yesterday, Father Bernard.”

“And why was that again?”

“...Sis... Mother Superior was displeased with my tardiness.”

“And...”

“...and the fight I got into with one of the Scouts.”

Madeline shifted in the booth, never having been comfortable doing this. She understood morality, understood a higher power, but didn't understand why she had to kneel in this goddamn box. “Father, must all secrets be exposed? Is it wrong to keep something hidden from someone?”

On the opposite side of the confessional, Father Bernard's brow furrowed. “Are these secrets hurtful or dangerous in nature?” he prodded.

“No, not at all. This particular secret is helpful, in fact. But its knowledge may become dangerous if it ever got out.”

Father Bernard smiled. “Well, as long as you have a clear conscious about it, there doesn't seem to be any harm in whatever this secret may be.”

Madeline shifted again. “Well...”

The priest sighed. There was something endearing about the constant and unusual confessions from this “unknown” parishioner. “Well...?”

“Maybe I’ve used this secret even though I was told not to, multiple times.”

“You used the secret multiple times, or lied about using it multiple times?”

“...Both...?”

Bernard suppressed a chuckle. “Young one, you must learn to divine what is truly right, and what is truly wrong. Especially when both appear to be the same.”

Madeline reflected on the wise counsel. “Thank you, Father.” She rose, but a quick knock on the divider by the priest gave her pause. “I do believe you still need to confess *today’s* sins.”

The garden at Saint Thomas had been started by the nuns, but was worked by the Scouts. When Madeline finally arrived, all but one had left for lunch. A young orphan turned when she heard the crunch of boots against freshly turned soil. “Madeline!” Amelie exclaimed, dusting her hands. “In trouble with Mother Caressa again?”

Madeline smirked. “It would be too boring here if I wasn’t.”

Amelie shook her head with a chuckle. “And here I thought I was the rowdy one.” Her infectious smile remained. “I’m about to head over to the greenhouse and make sure it’s in order before winter comes. The plants in there didn’t feel right yesterday and I want to take another look.”

Feel right? Madeline thought. *This girl and her link with these plants...*

“I was supposed to help anyway, so sure.”

In contrast to the other girls, Madeline was captivated by Amelie's attunement with nature. Oft times, the young Scout could be found patrolling the garden, meticulously adjusting soil levels around the thriving vegetables at her feet. Other times she would sit alone in the greenhouse, eyes closed, as if listening to a silent orchestra.

The two put up tools, checked for pests and progress, then joined the others in the dining hall.

"Well, I can't really feel them, but I can definitely sense them" Amelie said between spoonfuls of soup. "It surprised me when I learned no one else is like that."

Madeline nodded at the perplexing answer. "I see" she said, not seeing at all. "So... it's like a feeling in the back of your neck? Like a buzzing or something?"

Amelie seemed to deflate as she hung her head. "...the last time I tried to explain it to someone was the last time I had a friend."

Madeline put her spoon down and reached across the table, resting her hand on the younger one's shoulder. "You're the most amazing person in this God-forsaken church, Amilie. I'd never leave you for being your weird self."

A smile unfurled across the gardener's face. "Well then... you know that glowing feeling you get when you see a thriving plant?"

Madeline attempted to suppress a confused look. “Not really...”

Amelie thought for a second. “Okay. How about that bad taste in your mouth you get when you’re near a hurt animal?”

“Uh...”

“That weird icky sense you get when someone tells you a lie?”

“That’s a thing?”

Amelie lowered her head once more. “I knew you’d think I was weird.” She stirred aimless circles in her soup. “You can sit with the other girls if you’d like.”

Madeline didn’t budge. Instead, she leaned over the table and whispered, “I can trust you, right Amelie?” Her friend responded with puppy dog eyes. “Of course you can. Why? Are you finally going to tell me what you’ve been hiding from me all this time?”

Yet another of Amelie’s talents: she seemed to know people’s minds just as well as she knew her plants. Madeline wasn’t quite sure if she liked that quality or not.

They were sitting at one of the further tables, away from the other Scouts and volunteers, but Madeline still checked left and right for eavesdroppers. She then held her right arm over the table and yanked back the sleeve, revealing an ancient piece of armor strapped to her forearm. “*Incroyable!*” Amelie blurted, admiring the finely crafted piece of steel. “Where did you get it from?”

Madeline pulled her sleeve back down. “I got it *here*. I found it *here*, right in Saint Thomas.”

“Who does it belong to?” her friend asked reflexively.

“Thank you for thinking I stole it from someone” Madeline jabbed.

Amelie let out a burp. "Sorry. It's just that you get in more trouble than even I do, so I figured... anyway, you found it? Where?"

"Come with me, I'll show you."

Madeline guided her friend through a maze of cathedral corridors. Past the library, the diocese offices, -quietly- past Sister Caressa's chambers, and down a dark stairwell, the two moved further down Saint Thomas than most had ever been.

"How the hell do you know this place so well?" Amelie asked, legs growing sore. Madeline smirked. "You know how Sister Caressa always makes me clean damn near the entire abbey? Well now I know this place perfectly. Probably better than the old *putain* herself." She walked up to a wall and ran her hand across the rough stonework. "I know every room, every corridor, and..." she found a particular stone and pulled it out as easily as bread from an oven "...every hiding place."

The false stone was as large as a Bible and weighed half as much. "It's so light!" Amelie said after Madeline passed it to her. In its spot was a small cubbyhole, deep enough to stash an arm-length secret. "Wait a minute... how in the world did you discover this?"

Madeline chuckled. "Some time ago when I was sweeping down here, I tried climbing up this wall trying to kill a stupid spider that kept bugging me. When I used this stone for a foothold," she said, pointing to the fake one in her friend's hands, "It fell off."

"Huh." Was all Amelie could respond with. "And this was in there... wait... did you hurt yourself?"

Curiously, Madeline's heartbeat skipped when asked the question. "I, uh, did, actually, yes." A sense of embarrassment washed over her. *C'est quoi cette merde?* "But that's the amazing part: I definitely did something to my shoulder when I fell. But being the idiot I am, I just dusted myself off and looked to see if anything was in there." She rapped her knuckles on the bracer. "Found this, tried it on for fun, and then suddenly... well, a demonstration would work better."

"A demonstration?" Amelie repeated.

"A demonstration. You have a knife?" Madeline asked.

In one smooth motion, Amelie produced a small blade from her pocket. "Never leave the garden without it." Madeline accepted it and without pause, drew the blade across her palm.

"What the living shit!" her friend yelled, grabbing the knife back. "What are you doing? We need to get you to a-" she paused in the middle of her panic, entranced by a blue glow coming from the bracer. The armor seemingly came to life, crawling down Madeline's arm like an arachnid and encasing her hand in an imposing medieval gauntlet. Beautiful filigree and sharp angles adorned the glove, and the blue light pulsed quicker and quicker until... nothing.

"What in the living name of God was that?!" Amelie exclaimed.

"That's not the best part" Madeline replied, sticking her other palm out for her friend to see. "This is."

Where the knife once drew blood, there was none. No blood, no cut, no scar, and from the looks of the snarky grin on Madeline's face, no pain.

"This thing heals people."

Pierre leaned back in his chair, engrossed in the young lady's recount of her serendipitous discovery.

"That was quite the delightful tale" he said, giving his trademark nod. Now let me spin you one of mine."

-11-

Pierre returned with a fresh cup of tea, cradling the stoneware cup with both hands. "I confess, my story is not as colorful as yours, yet it is just as important." Steam billowed into the air like a fragrant cloud as he blew before taking a sip.

"I am Pierre Philipe Arsenault. I have been curator of the Jeanne d'Arc Museum ever since my father handed it down to me, as did his father did before him." He glanced out the window near the door. "I have lived, breathed, and followed everything about Jeanne d'Arc. Unfortunately," he paused, turning to Madeline, "I do not quite have the energy left in this body to trace her path anymore." He took another sip before grinning. "But you, petit lapin, crossed this country on nothing but a whim and a motorcycle."

Madeline examined Pierre's face, searching for the meaning behind his words. He continued. "You and your friend's youth

paired with my knowledge could make for a formidable partnership, no?" Another sip of tea.

Madeline smiled. "And just what kind of knowledge do you have" she asked, pointing to the letters on the table, "besides some pages from an old journal?"

"Ah. So you are interested. And direct. I will tell you now that these 'pages from an old journal' point the way to La Pucelle's second bracer, which points the way to the rest of her armor."

Madeline sat back in her chair and exhaled deeply in a show of boredom. "And what if we already know its location?"

"You mean that fake set purchased by a museum in Strasbourg? Bah! I will tell you now, little one." He leaned in and lowered his voice to a whisper. "The real armor is in Domrémy. Jeanne hid it there before heading to the city of Tours for new armor commissioned by King Charles VII."

Madeline sat in contemplation, mulling over the news that not only was the armor not here in Orléans, but the set they found back home wasn't even real.

Setback after setback.

"I assume she hid the real armor in her childhood home at Domrémy, then?" she asked.

"I knew you were a smart one" Pierre remarked, finishing his tea. "If you and your friend can locate it for me, you may have the bracers, but it would complete my life if I could have the rest for my museum. Our museum" he added, spreading his arms toward France.

A whirlwind of thoughts swirled behind Madeline's eyes, but she only nodded her head in agreement. "That sounds like a fine arrangement, Monsieur Pierre. If you will indulge us with proper provisions, Amelie and I will be glad to include you in our quest."

Amelie... I don't even think she wants to be in the same country as me right now.

The curator chuckled at the young girl's boldness. "It would appear that God has chosen to give me one last joy in my life. Thank you, young Madeline. I will give you what food and tools you will need for your journey."

A pleasant breeze wafted through the city as Madeline found her friend sitting on Lapine. "Want to drive for a bit?"

Amelie's head jerked up as Maddy hopped into the sidecar. "I forgot how cozy it is in here" she joked, hoping any ill feelings had passed with the breeze.

"Get anything good from that man?" Amelie asked dryly. Her friend paused for a second, deciding if she should re-open their quarrel or just get on with the quest.

"He said we need to go to Domrémy, and that the armor we saw at the regimental hospital is a fake."

"Fake." Amelie scoffed. "Nothing's going right with you."

Madeline's eyes widened in shock. *Okay. Quarrel re-opened.* She jumped out of the sidecar and shoved the orphan from the motorbike, sending her crashing to the ground.

"*Que diable!*" Amelie exclaimed, picking herself from the dirt. "What was that for?"

"What is wrong with you Amelie? You've been acting weird this entire time! 'What was that for?' It was for me not doing anything to you!"

Amelie marched around the bike and shoved Madeline back. "Didn't do anything to me? Look at me right now... you're doing this to me. You're making me go mad. And you're making me crisscross hundreds of kilometers during *cette putain de guerre* and you don't even love me!"

Both girls froze at those words, eyes locked like a pair of binoculars over No-Man's Land.

Madeline finally blinked. "But Amelie. I do love you."

Tears streamed down Amelie's cheeks. Madeline embraced her friend as the younger one broke into sobs. "Amelie. We've only known each other for barely a year, but I feel like I've known you my entire life. How could you think I don't love you?"

"I don't know..." Amelie replied sheepishly. "It just didn't seem like it."

Madeline lifted her friend's chin to stare into watery eyes. "You're the closest thing to family I have besides papa. I could never let you go."

Amelie stood as motionless as a December lake. *Family? But that's not what...*

She stood upright and rubbed her eyes, and the ever-compassionate smile broke through the tears. *Well, that type is better than no type at all...*

"Thank you, Maddy. That makes me happy." Amelie hopped on Lapine and turned the ignition. "Now let's go get that damn bracer."

Amelie paused in front of the trench entrance. Madeline hoped down the stairs, splashing through the fog-covered murk.

“Are you sure this-- **blurggh!**

Vomit spewed halfway through her question. Madeline raced back to her friend, the muddy trench sucking at her boots as if she were walking through a puddle of tar. Amelie held Maddy away while she wiped her mouth. “That was unexpected” she said, spitting out the remnants of breakfast. “Are you feeling well? I have some tonics that can help—” Madeline said, reaching for antacid and penicillin in her med pack.

“I don’t like it here, Maddy” Amelie stated, shaking of the feeling of vertigo. Madeline stared at her, conflicted. “This is the only way back.”

Ameleie’s eyes teared and she stepped forward. “I know.”

She continued downward until she met Madeline, hand stretched out reassuringly.

DISCRIPTION DISCRIPTION DISCRIPTION DISCRIPTION

“Huh?” Amelie asked.

Sloshing through the mud, Maddy looked back. “Huh?”

“Oh, nothing. I thought you said something.” They continued their trek as the sun peered through the dense fog.

“What?” Amelie asked aloud.

Maddy stopped. “Are you okay? You’re starting to worry me.”

Amelie stopped to lean against a wall. “No, yeah. I’m okay” she replied. She used a helmet stuck in the wall to prop herself up.

“Nooooooo!” she yelled.

Madeline jumped and turned around, hand over the knife at her side. “Amelie!” she said, stomping back to her friend. “Amelie! What’s wrong?”

The orphan's eyes snapped to Madeline's. Her face was drenched with sweat, and her jaw clinched tight. "Why didn't they stop the retreat?" she looked around, lost.

Freckles dotted her face like stars in the sky, orbiting a pair of golden spheres.

A constellation of freckles dotted her face, orbiting a pair of hazel eyes.

Nickname for Amelie at ~~the end of the book~~ when they find the second gauntlet!

Got it! “Fleur de Nuit.” Night Flower, because “you are like a strong flower, even in the dark(ness of the cathedral).” Or “you are like a lone flower in the darkness.”

Amelie thought for only a second. “Ange lavande” she said with a grin. Madeline’s brow rose. “It’s nice, but, don’t you think it’s a little too... friendly to be used around the cathedral?” Amelie giggled. “I know. That’s why I would only use it around you.” She felt her heart warm a thousand times over. “What you truly should be known as is *Trench Maiden*.” Madeline pondered the name. “You mean like Jeanne?” Amelie’s grin grew to her ears. “Exactly. Except being a maiden of Orléans, you are a maiden of the trenches.”

[Ed. Note: Jeanne began hearing God at age 13, useful knowledge for the story]

200km to Domremy (birthplace)

500km to Beaurevoir (prison) -tower where Jeanne was kept is the only part that still remains, no one has every entered

600km to Orléans (Boucher house, Saint-Croix cathedral) – Jeanne escorted King Charles VII for his coronation there after a victory

700km to Arras (prison) – nothing there

650km Rouen/ Normandy (execution)

400km to Crotoy (prison) – nothing there

Sooo... the two decide to go from Orléans after finding a clue and head to Beaurevoir where Jeanne hide something while imprisoned. 300km

Write a chapter dedicated to Jeanne’s escape (and recapture) in Beaurevoir?

Prequel book about JDA’s life? “The Maiden.”

XX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

XX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The strange figure hinged the grenade launcher at the handle and loaded another explosive. “I have never seen someone so reckless on the battlefield! What is a little girl doing here?”

“Reckless?” Madeline snapped back. “I’m not the one launching grenades all over the place. And what do you mean little girl-you’re not much older than I am!”

I don’t know what I’ll write so I’ll type. I think the two should be looking for a hidden treasure or maybe not treasure but a secret of some sort. Not sure what they knew back in the 1917s, just that life generally sucked, and they had to go to war. Now from a child’ perspective it was probably easier than it is now, or at least a bit less complicated. “Your pa’s gone ff to war little Lesslie. Now go bring the cows back in before this storm hits.” Sort of thing. It would be November and the cows are kind of westernly-looking, and Lesslie would just have to worry about the cows, not having the expanded mentally of a completely

different country thousands of miles away. And no, I do not know how to spell "Lesslie," so maybe that should be her name.

Maddy and Eglise St Thomas

Action scene

Eglise St Thomas

Action scene, meet one of the country soldiers

Eglise St Thomas, comedy

Introduce main villain and (traitor?) 2nd team member

Action scene

EST

Action scene, tanks, 1st big bad confrontation

EST, Sister Caressa knowledge of combat medic activities

Action scene, 3rd member, create team, (Renard gets hurt?)

EST

Main villain wrecks EST, 4th and final team member appears

Action scene/ final confrontation

Madeline had never seen such an ugly yet beautiful machine like this before, and instantly fell in love with it. The Renault F17 tank reminded her of a steam boiler mounted between a pair of large treaded wheels, with a small angular dome on top that housed three heavy guns.

“So this is a tank. *Incroyable.*”

Renard smirked as the girl ran her hand over the muddied tracks and cold steel panels. She inspected the green-and-brown camouflage that wriggled around the war machine like rivers of grass and mud. “This thing is so amazing, yet so ugly. Renard, we must do something about this ugly paint.”

“That ugly paint is what will keep us from being seen by the boshe, mon petit. Now come along. We need to get you into some proper tank gear.”

Maddy hopped off the tank. “The Germans won’t even want to look at us with paint that horrid.”

After fidgeting with her tan jumpsuit, Madeline met her partner back out at the ugly machine. Renard tossed a helmet with a pair of goggles attached. “It will get grimy in there, so keep this on. You understand?”

Maddy smooshed the protection onto her head. “Oui chef.”

The Renault vehicle opened from the front like a barndoor to reveal an interior of vsadbffhg and aeghfdtds. Front and center was the pilot's set; a simple metal chair with pedals and levers used to maneuver the metallic beast. Behind that was a space for the gunner, in this case Maddy, to stand while aiming one of the two available machine guns or canon all grouped in the turret. And in the rear sat the front end of the engine, a massive piece of machinery covered in pipes, knobs, and gauges. As small as it looked from the outside, the tank was smaller from within. The pair climbed into the metal coffin where Maddy gained height on a set of rungs and grabbed the handle to the SA-18 canon. She peered out of the rangefinder and gave France's first spinning turret a whirl. Hidden bearings rolled angrily as the tank's weapon stack spun 180 degrees before the gunner pulled it to a stop. Renard looked up.

“It's not heavy at all Renard!”

He shook his head in aehgerg and cranked the engine. Smoke billowed into the cabin as the engine roared to life

Renard pulled the stolen R71 to a stop and placed his hands on his hips, twisting to stretch after the three-hour motorcycle ride. The 25 kilograms of armor he wore added extra strain on his back during the trip to Verdun, but the sporadic German mortar attacks after he and his partner tactically acquired their new transport demanded he keep it on. He looked at his passenger in the sidecar stuffed with old blankets also unwittingly provided by Kaiser troops. An oversized helmet slumped on a head that

rested against the blankets that provided warmth for the young girl, as winter had refused to loosen its grasp on the foggy Spring morning.

“Maddy. Time to get up.”

The helmet stirred as Madeline woke, unseen eyes scanning the new surroundings. “Are we there?” she asked as the young medic unfurled the cocoon of rough blankets and stepped from the sidecar. A rain poncho kept the ensuing splash from the water puddle off her uniform, but was not long enough to keep her favorite polka dotted socks from getting dirty. The 10-year-old had given up many things in the war; but her favorite socks wouldn’t be one of them.

“I told you that would be a bad idea. You need to listen to me better,” Renard lightly scolded.

Madeline looked up, long dark hair swept over her thin face as she smiled. “They are the reason why we didn’t get caught taking the motorbike last night.” She kneeled and pulled one of them down. “And I have double socks on, so my toes aren’t going to fall off in the trenches.”

The elder medic knew his partner was strong, but the occasional euphemism for things like Trench Foot still found their way into his vocabulary. “Well lucky socks or not, I still think you should reconsider.”

Madeline stuck her tongue out in jest, then reached back into the sidecar and pulled out two pieces of kommissbrot bread, handing one to Renard and stuffing the other in her mouth. “This is Verdum? Where are the trenches? Where are the soldiers?”

“We are still a few miles out little one. You know we must be careful, even on our side of the trench.” Renard lifted the visor

of his helmet and ate a piece of the German ration. He had never been a fan of sourdough, but the tangy bread did his empty stomach a world of good. One of the many, many bad things about not being an official part of the Red Cross was that food was always in short supply. He made sure to give Madeline extra food whenever possible, as she had lived a lifetime's worth of war over the past year. Ironically, she was the reason the Corp flatly rejected his services. They didn't seem to think a 10-year-old girl's place was on the battlefield.

Madeline crammed the rest of the bread into her mouth and took several large swigs from her canteen. She placed the container back onto her waist next to her knife and across from three grenade sticks. She tilted her helmet so she could get a better view of her surroundings, and spied the nearby church steeple that pierced through the weakening fog.

"Do not worry Maddy, there are no snipers her."

The young girl nodded. Those lazy Kraut salaud are probably still asleep anyway."

"Language little one."

The pair hopped back on the German-made motorbike and

XXXX stomped through the mud and scanned the distant horizon. Deep pools of rainwater fought to pull the stained shoes from her feet with each step, resulting in a noisy suction sound as she made her way to the church. It had been abandoned before German forces came and burned to its skeletal remains after they left. All that stood were the charred support beams, warped pews, and the blackened remains of several townspeople. And surprisingly, the chapel's steeple that

reached toward the heavens as if an affront to the brutal soldiers that xxxxxxxx to tear the building down.

“This will do just fine.”

Maddy stepped past the dying embers of the congregation and used her shovel to break down the bell tower’s door, made easier by the recent blaze. A staircase spiraled upward to the mouth a large bell, all kept safe due to the steeple’s stone masonry. Each step creaked under her weight as she made her way into the belfry, admiring the 360 degree view it gave her on the entire village. This would mark the first night where she would have the jump on the enemy rather than the other way around. She dumped her backpack and shovel on the stone floor and walked around the large bronze instrument and admired its design. Half a dozen blacksmiths and artists spent over a month designing and building the behemoth, and their level of expertise appeared in every crevice. Maddy turned her attention to the town that hid under a thin layer of morning fog. Shops and houses of every kind peeked through the haze like islands in a sea of clouds. A flock of birds coasted on unseen currents headed east, away from the fire and fury of battle miles behind them. Strangely enough, she spotted a lone pigeon headed toward the direction the other birds were flying from. But that meant luck was on her side.

It was a homing pigeon. She quickly rummaged through her bag and brought a pair of stolen binoculars to her eyes. The small islands became detailed buildings as

Ryn

Maddy is sent to deliver a package to another church/hospital, crosses paths with Razgriz