

“Jacqueline Marie-Claire Duval de la Forge-à-Bellesfées!”

The cry reverberated throughout Château Bellesfées’ music conservatory concert hall, resonating under the acoustic dome and across the marble floor. Sunlight streamed through six balcony windows and glittered off the facets of a crystal gasolier. Seven clockwork androides ranged around an Érard fortepiano, each seated on an armless Louis XVI chair holding a tuned instrument at the ready. The eighth figure, half-poised with a clarinet, reeked of burning solder and spirit fuel. Having no ears, they did not hear the housekeeper Marthe bellowing their creator’s name.

Jacqueline Duval had ears, but she rarely paid attention to anything around her while she worked, and the clarinetist was far from complete. Outside, the harvest in the vineyards to the east had begun in earnest, the fragrance of the Bellesfées varietal grape filling the air with its honey-citrus tang. Finches came to the balcony rails and twittered like rusty wheels to one another. The breezes from the Loire would have tempted any village boy to abandon all chores for an hour of swimming or fishing. Jacqueline was impervious to all. Only the late August heat was enough to make her pause to mop the sweat dripping from her nose and chin onto her soldering. Even that much respite took too long as confused emptiness threatened to fold around her once more.

Marthe’s voice broke through at last. “One hundred chairs?”

With a long-suffering sigh, Jacqueline set down her spool of brass, rested the soldering iron on a block of wood beside her, then closed the blow lamp. As she removed her specialized safety spectacles—“goggliers” she called them because they made her look goggle-eyed—Marthe stormed into the concert hall.

“One hundred chairs? Now you expect a hundred guests? Why wasn’t I told?”

Ignoring the housekeeper’s fit of pique, Jacqueline finished assessing the clockwork clarinetist she’d been working on the past two hours. This final piece was proving tedious with all its refinements. She did not have time for Marthe’s little snit.

“Am I to cook for a *hundred* guests? And how do we house them?” Marthe’s ruddy, heart-shaped face grew redder as she planted her fists on her hips, her right hand closing on a towel she often used to swat anyone incurring her wrath.

“It’s fifty guests, dear Marthe, including the children,” Jacqueline assured her, wiping her brow with a heavily insulated glove. “Fifty chairs here.” She gestured to the capacious hall. “Another fifty out on the east lawn.”

“And if it rains?”

“The chairs will be under pavilions.”

Marthe threw her hands in the air. “Why do they have to be on the lawn? Trudging mud and grass up into the château? Falling drunk into the pond? You

have not thought this through, ma fille.”

Jacqueline stood to confront her stalwart housekeeper. “Marthe,” she said, “I’m almost twenty-three years old. I’ve been running affairs at Bellesfées for seven years. In that time, I’ve sold hundreds of designs, brought thousands of francs into our household, and dealt with a twin who turns into a wolf, corpses rising from the dead, and all the ghosts of the Paris Catacombs. I really don’t want to wrestle with you too. Please?”

Not willing to back down, the housekeeper wrung her towel. “I like to know your plans, since they usually go somewhere you hadn’t planned. Like to be prepared for these things. You haven’t been yourself lately.”

Marthe wasn’t wrong. Jacqueline generally lacked the social graces to entertain company, much less fifty notable personages from Paris and the Touraine. Marthe had questioned every decision along the way since the manic moment Jacqueline decided her twin Angélique and her new husband Gryffin Llewellyn *must* be received at Bellesfées with a celebration befitting the restored (*finally!*) prodigal sister. It was as fine an excuse as any to focus on work instead of on her own absent lover.

Conceding Marthe’s point, Jacqueline returned to her forte, the clockwork musician. As she picked up the iron rod, she dismissed Marthe with stern instructions. “Now, the delivery men get well paid *after* they unload those chairs. I don’t want Luc or Jean-Paul bothered with the task. They already have enough to do. Fifty up here, fifty downstairs stored in the ballroom, for now. And no one must disturb me again until I finish this clarinetist.”

“No one?” said an unexpected and welcome voice—deep, resonant, and thrilling.

Jacqueline’s heart leapt. Heedless of her soot-covered work gloves and apron, she flew into Alain de Guise’s arms as he entered behind Marthe.

“De Guise! You’re home early!”

“Making more work for me,” Marthe grumbled on her way out the door.

Giggles burbled up in Jacqueline as de Guise whirled her about.

“I am indeed home. And how fetching you look in that merry bonnet, chérie.” Snatching her leather welding cap from her head, de Guise dropped it to the floor and kissed her, combing his fingers through her honey-blonde hair, as sweaty and tangled as it was. “And why must I say it again: *Alain*.”

“Mmm. *Alain*,” she repeated with a saucy grin, never removing her lips from his.

He kissed her again more intimately, eliciting a moan of delight.

“And,” he added, “unless you’re planning to brand me, please put down the iron.”

She complied, laughing, leaving her gloves as well. “I didn’t expect you

until tomorrow.” Wrapping her arms around his neck, she cried, “Oh, you’ve made my day complete. I’ve been so lonely.”

De Guise surveyed the clockwork musicians and scratched his blond head. “So lonely you’ve made yourself some new friends? What are you creating here?”

Dancing away, Jacqueline circled each figure to show them off. “Ah, I’m so close to finishing. I call it a panharmonium—sort of a panharmonicon, orchestrion, and componium in one. I’m holding a reception for Angélique and Llewellyn when they return from Wales, and I’m hoping for a grand recital.”

She plucked the strings of the violin, violoncello, and bass, tapped the pistons of the trumpet, horn, and euphonium, and twiddled the keys of the flute. “I made a few night runs to Paris in my steam coach to get the clockwork instrument wheels stamped and drilled. Sax gave me the brass—” Here she slid back a panel of the back wall to reveal a rack of organ pipes. “And I was lucky to run into the Kaufman boys to help me put a few things together. And if you look over here—”

De Guise captured her as she flitted past him. She caught her breath, then laughed at herself. “I know, I know. Lost in my plans again. But I want it to be wonderful for her.”

He searched her eyes, mischief twinkling in his. “All this for a sister who provoked so much aggravation these many years?” he teased. “Did Prince Abadi ever get his ruby back?”

Her face grew even hotter. “But that was... She... I wanted...”

“You are extraordinary in your grace, my love. You give me hope, for in my line of work, I may need such grace.”

She wiped her brow on her sleeve and propped her hands on her hips. “Where *have* you been these past weeks? I have missed you!”

“Then I must atone.” He caught her back to kiss her again—warm, deep, soft, sending a wave of heat through her.

Jacqueline sighed in delight and pressed her face to his chest, glad of his height, which made even her feel petite. Beyond the dust of the road on his worsted wool jacket, she breathed in his own spicy scent and the almond fragrance of Savon de Marseille. She nuzzled him but stopped when she barked her nose on the hard metal of the Colt Paterson revolver hidden in his inside pocket, a harsh reminder of his calling as an agent of the *Sûreté Nationale* tasked with protecting Louis-Philippe, the “King of the French,” as he called himself.

She smoothed his lapels. “I prayed you faced no grave peril.”

De Guise winked and held a finger to his lips.

“Of course. King’s business.” Releasing him, Jacqueline twisted her hair into a topknot and put her cap back on. “Well, I hope it was somewhere exotic.”

“Hmm. Is Normandy exotic?”

“Mers-les-Bains? You look bronzed. And we all know it’s the King’s

preferred summer retreat, at Château d'Eu.” She waved her hand when he tried to protest. “Never mind, your secret is safe with me.”

De Guise wrapped his arms around her, and they swayed back and forth to a music only they could hear. She molded her body to his, allowing arousal to fill her.

“Oh, I've missed this,” she murmured with a sigh of delight. “When you left, I wandered these halls and the parc absolutely lost. As if a piece of me had been cut away. I forgot everything but you. Days together, nights in each other's arms, it all felt so natural. I didn't realize how much you changed me. Or maybe I changed myself for you?”

De Guise pressed kisses just below her ear. “No, do not change for my sake, unless by change you mean grow (*kiss*), learn (*kiss*), become what you will (*kiss, kiss, kiss*). I love you, and my love will grow with you.”

Jacqueline slid her hand below his back playfully. “Come grow with me now,” she teased.

“Ho, là, là!” De Guise laughed in surprise. “I take it back. I must have changed something.” He pulled her closer. “My oh-so-proper, shy, modest mistress of the forge, what are you suggesting?”

“Something utterly improper,” she replied. “And I may be a master of the forge, but I would rather not be called your mistress.” She caressed him. “Say, rather, ‘lover.’”

“Ah, chérie, in front of an audience?”

He caught her hands and kissed them, but the smile on his pretty bow lips belied the tension in his arms and the edge of his voice. She reluctantly stepped back with a moue.

“No, I suppose I'll have to wait to enjoy your favors.”

De Guise caressed her cheek, his soft brown eyes pleading forgiveness. “In truth,” he said, “I've come to beg a favor from you. I wish to invite a friend to stay here, at Bellesfées. Just a few days.”

She knew better than to ask for details. He wouldn't have asked if it weren't desperately needed for national security.

“My bed is yours, Alain. My body is yours,” she said softly. “So, of course, my home is likewise yours.”

“I promise you,” he said with a growl, “he does not get to enjoy the first two.” He kissed her deeply again, and he chuckled when she responded.

A shriek from outdoors distracted them, along with metallic banging and the cackling of terrified chickens. Jacqueline and de Guise hastened to the balcony to discover the source of the alarm. A large mechanical man, an animated suit of bronze with a helmet like a diver's casque puffing little clouds of steam, strode determinedly up the macadamized drive to the château. A small boy dangled from

the autonomaton's grip, yelling and beating its riveted torso, but the metal man lumbered on unperturbed.

"Oh, dear." Jacqueline quickly untied her work apron. "I told Monsieur Claque I wanted no visitors, but I didn't tell him how to handle them."

As the cries continued, the two hastened through the château halls to the entryway, where Monsieur Claque deposited the boy and bowed. With a *poot* of steam out the top of his head, he lumbered off again.

Marthe came in from the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron. "Guy? What are you doing here?"

She picked up the red-faced lad and held him close against her fluffy bosom, where he once more fought to free himself with indignation. "My nephew," Marthe explained to Jacqueline as she set him down.

Guy's freckled face reddened as he huffed and brushed himself off, pouting angrily. "This place is crazy," he declared. "Maman didn't tell me you worked with monsters."

"I'm so sorry he frightened you, Guy." Jacqueline stooped and took his hands. "How can I help you?"

In her sweaty work clothes, Jacqueline must not have appeared to be the mistress of the château, for Guy directed his tale to Marthe, in his eyes the greater authority. "It's Anne. She's real sick, Tatie Marthe. Maman couldn't wake her up all morning. Then when she woke up, she couldn't get out of bed."

Marthe's face knit into a worried frown. She looked at Jacqueline, who nodded.

"Go on," she told Marthe. "Take what you need for them."

"But your guests—" Marthe protested, thrusting her snub nose at de Guise.

"We'll manage," de Guise broke in. "I can fend for us for a few days."

The housekeeper eyed him balefully. Jacqueline chuckled. No one interfered with Marthe's kitchen!

"Go, Marthe. Send for me if you need anything more." Jacqueline tousled Guy's head. "And I will tell Monsieur Claque that you are one of our honored visitors. He won't frighten you again."

Guy's pout finally eased to a grin. "I wasn't scared. Didn't you see me punch him?" He trotted off after Marthe.

Jacqueline stood and took de Guise's hand. "Marthe said 'guests.' So, your friend is already here with you?"

De Guise cleared his throat. "Ah. Yes. I wanted to ease into an introduction, give you time to finish your work and change for dinner, but I suppose you could meet him now."

"Absolutely not!"

She indicated her attire: a much-abused work chemise, the sleeves rolled up

in the August heat exposing her scarred, muscular arms, dirty leather trousers with burn holes and globs of solder spotting here and there, and leather sabots.

“I’m soaked in sweat, I smell like a horse, and I look even worse.”

His eyes danced as he tweaked her nose. “I think you look adorable.” He wiggled the modified spectacles around her neck. “Particularly with your special goggliers.” He took her hand to kiss her wrist. “Ah, I’ve missed the scent of you.”

“Pouah!” She shoved him away from her, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “How would your king like you quoting Napoléon? *‘Home in three days. Don’t bathe.’* Beurk!” Laughing, she stopped him from pulling her into an embrace. “No. You entertain your friend until supper, while I finish the clarinetist. You can introduce him to the water closet and the clockwork porters lest they frighten him the way they did you the first time you visited here.”

De Guise winced at the reminder of how he had wrestled with the automated luggage cart that had taken his boots and refused to relinquish them unpolished.

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Hours later, Jacqueline got to her feet and stretched, pressing her fists into the small of her back, groaning away the stiffness. The last joint of the clockwork clarinet still smoked, and her own joints burned with the strain of her hours’ work.

“Perfect,” she declared. She took a final look at the completed panharmonium, then gasped in surprise at the darkened concert hall. Beyond the open balcony doors, the early evening sky had paled, and the sun blazed along the treetops.

“Zut!”

Goggliers, gloves, apron, sabots, and tools clattered into the automated porter. It scuttled to the lift beside the staircase, and Jacqueline sent it to the floor below. Racing barefoot out of the music conservatory wing, she took a back stairway to her chambers for a quick wash with rosewater, Napoléon notwithstanding. Muffled voices drifting up from the salon reminded her she needed to dress for company with no one to help her tie a corset or coif her hair. De Guise, naturally, would not mind her casual day dress and unbound locks, but that wouldn’t do for a guest at dinner. By the time she had stuffed herself into an appropriate gown, her hair’s natural tendency to curl gave her a wild Crémone appearance.

“A lady’s maid,” she grumbled. “One of these days I’ll remember to build one.”

Jacqueline grabbed a satin ribbon, tied it halfway along the length of her hair, and rolled it up to the back of her head, creating a shower of untamed corkscrew curls. A modest tucker, a shawl to cover her brawny arms, and gloves for her scarred and callused hands finally made her look like la Belle Dame de Bellesfées, as the villagers called her.

De Guise met her at the bottom of the stairs. “Have you sufficiently whetted your appetite?”

“I’m sorry, I was so focused, and then—”

Jacqueline stopped with a hiccup at the sight of the tall, portly, older gentleman behind de Guise, recognizing the pear-shaped face and aquiline nose immediately, the face imprinted on the coinage of France: Louis-Philippe, King of the French. She caught her breath, but before she could speak, de Guise put his finger to her lips.

“Madame Duval, may I present my dear friend Mister Smith of Philadelphia and Boston in the United States of America.”