

THE SPICE TRADER'S DAUGHTER

Award Winning Author

FRAN ORENSTEIN

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THE SPICE TRADER'S DAUGHTER

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Written by Fran Orenstein.

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Chapter 1

Nantes, France 1685

The wooden door to the spice shop shook under the fierce pounding of a fist and a deep voice from outside shouting, “The king’s men are coming.”

Then he was gone, his voice fading with the clatter of his clogs as he raced to the next door where the pounding began again; then on to the next and the next, until he reached the end of the street and disappeared into the shadows.

Jules Dubois herded his three sons into the small back room of the shop. Jars and jugs of spices stood like soldiers at attention along the shelves lining the walls from floor to ceiling. Each was carefully labeled, dated and fitted with its own pewter scoop. Jules, a spice trader of fine repute, was scrupulous about keeping the expensive and much sought-after spices clean and fresh; not a speck of dust was visible to the naked eye.

Jules looked at his sons and sighed. Their paths would take a sharp turn in the next few minutes, with the route as yet undetermined and he would not be there to see them to their final destination. The two younger boys, nine and thirteen, cowered in the corner, trying valiantly to be brave, but failing miserably. Tears rolled down Luc’s face and Paul’s body shook with fear.

Breathing deeply to calm his voice so they would not panic, he grasped the eldest, Jean-Claude, by the shoulders. “You must take responsibility for your brothers, Jean-Claude, and get them safely out of Nantes to Prussia. Your beloved mama’s brother, Charles, will be waiting and take you into his home.”

Jules opened his mouth to protest, but his father shook his head. “You are past sixteen, my son, and they are so young. Therefore, I am entrusting their lives into your care.”

“Papa, please...”

Jules shook the boy. “Do not speak, just listen. Lead your brothers quietly through the woods. until you reach the docks. The Dutch East Indies ship, *Marianna*, is sailing at dawn for Königsberg. You must board tonight. Captain Van Sickles is expecting you, but do not delay for he will leave on the tide.”

He thrust a leather pouch into Jean-Claude’s hand. “This is a map of Königsberg and the route to your uncle’s house, your papers, a letter of introduction to the Dutch East India Company and the captain of the ship and enough money for your passage.”

The boy managed two words: “But, Papa.”

His father continued as though Jean-Claude had not interrupted. “There is also a letter for your Uncle Charles and money to purchase a partnership with him in his spice business and pay for your lodgings in his household.”

This time Jean-Claude did not allow his father to stop him. “You must come with us, Papa, please.”

Jules shook his head. “My decision to remain here in France until Charles could build the business in Prussia was a foolish mistake. Now I must live with that decision, but you and your brothers must survive and I will hold you back. With my bad leg, I cannot move as fast as you young ones. I will try to follow as soon as possible, my son. We shall meet again, I promise.”

The young man backed away, panic in his voice. “I will not leave you, Papa.”

“I am sorry, Jean-Claude, but you have no choice. I have packed clothing and packets of our most valuable spices for Uncle Charles in these saddle bags, one bag for each of you.” He whispered, “There is a sack of coins and your mother’s jewelry in your bag and also a letter for your uncle, so guard it well.”

They heard shouting and screaming echoing in the distance. Jules grimaced and quickly hung a leather bag over each boy’s shoulder. Then Jules did something he had never done before—he hugged his youngest and kissed him on both cheeks. He wiped away Luc’s tears and whispered, “You must be brave and very grown up, Luc. No more tears.”

Then he grasped Paul and held him close. “You, my son, the quiet poet, you are so sensitive and gentle. Be of brave heart and never lose your love of words.”

“Papa, I shall miss you so much.” Paul looked up at his father, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Jules brushed them away and kissed each cheek.

The shouting and screams grew louder. They could hear the pounding of boots on the cobblestones. Jules Dubois pushed his sons through the curtain and out the rear door of the shop. “Go, now. Quick. Stay in the shadows and make for the woods until you reach the wharf. Captain Van Sickles is waiting for you. Jean-Claude, keep those papers safe.” He patted the bulge inside the young man’s blouse under his leather jerkin then kissed him on both cheeks. Jean-Claude’s throat filled until he could barely swallow and he lowered his head so his father would not see the tears welling in his eyes.

Jean-Claude herded his terrified brothers across the field to the woods and turned once to look back. Smoke rose from the roof of a building in the distance. His father raised his hand and limped back into the store.

“Farewell, Papa,” Jean-Claude whispered, knowing in his heart that he might never see his father again. He turned and pushed his brothers ahead of him into the shelter of the trees, trying to block the loud smashing of wood and glass behind him and the shouting of the soldiers.

The three brothers moved as quickly as they could north through the dense forest, making as little noise as possible. Jean-Claude led the way and Paul held Luc’s hand, sometimes pulling him along. Suddenly, Luc tripped over a root and fell. He sat on the ground, rubbing his knee, and refused to move. Paul pulled at him, but the boy tensed his body until it was rock solid.

Jean-Claude turned back and knelt before him. “Luc, you must get up. Luc.”

The boy seemed not to hear him, but stared straight ahead, tears coursing down his face.

“I’m sorry, little brother.” Jean-Claude smacked Luc across the cheek and hauled him to his feet. “Now take Paul’s hand and walk.”

The child rubbed his cheek and sniffed, but he stood and clasped his brother’s hand; Jean-Claude slung Luc’s saddlebag across his own shoulder and beckoned them to follow. Eventually, they emerged at the edge of the wharf and Jean-Claude pulled the packet of papers from inside his shirt. He slipped the saddlebags from his shoulder and handed every-

thing to Paul.

“Keep these safe,” he ordered. “Stay down behind these pilings while I check for soldiers. If anything happens to me, do not show yourselves, but

find the ship, *Marianna*. Do you understand?” Seeing their nods, he stepped out onto the wharf. He turned back to look at his brothers. “Remember, keep still and do not follow me.”

Flames and dark smoke rose into the air above the town and drifted upward in funnels of gray-black clouds. Jean-Claude smelled the fiery smoke and he knew that this moment would return over and over again with the scent of burning wood. He tried not to listen to the distant screams or think about his father’s fate. Seeing no one, he pulled his brothers from their hiding place and retrieved the packets from Paul, tucking them once more into his shirt and slinging the bags over his shoulder. Then Jean-Claude urged the boys even faster toward the single ship gently rocking alongside the pier. Other ships were anchored out in the harbor, but only the *Marianna* remained at port.

When they reached the ship, Jean-Claude looked up at the man leaning against the railing, staring into the distance at the smoke. “Captain Van Sickles?” Jean-Claude called.

The man turned his head and peered down at the boys. “Ah, at last, Jean-Claude. I was about to raise anchor, but I promised your father I would wait until the moon rose in the night sky and here you are. Hurry, now.”

When the boys reached the deck, Captain Van Sickles asked, “But where is your father?”

Jean-Claude shook his head. “He would not come with us, sir. He said his bad leg would hold us up.”

The captain nodded. “Perhaps he will still arrive. I will leave two crewmen with a boat here at the pier in the event he appears.”

Jean-Claude nodded in gratitude. “You are very kind, Captain, and I thank you.”

“Be strong, young man. Your father is very resourceful. If he can get here, he will.” Then he turned and shouted to one of the officers, “Mr. Maarten, they are here, finally. Have someone take them below and put them in a cabin, then prepare to anchor offshore until the tide turns. Oh, and leave two seamen and a boat here in the event Monsieur

Dubois appears, but tell them to make haste for the ship if they are put upon by the King's men."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Mr. Maarten said. "You, there, take these passengers below to cabin two." Then he began barking orders at the crew.

Jean-Claude looked around the tiny cabin. He gave his brothers the lower bunk and threw the saddlebags on the upper, covering them with the blanket. Not much of a hiding place, but he didn't intend to leave them there permanently. He felt inside his shirt for the leather pouch and remembered his father's final words: "Keep it safe." He waited until his brothers fell asleep—Paul's arm around Luc, who had cried himself to sleep.

The boy had never known their sweet, gentle mother who died giving birth to him, and now he would not have a father. Jean-Claude recalled the delicate, beautiful mother who had loved him for only seven short years; her blonde curls cascading down her back and her blue eyes twinkling even when she was annoyed with him for some infraction.

He felt her presence with every scent of roses or dried rose petals like those she always wore in a sachet fastened at her waist. His mouth watered at the memory of his mother's wonderful soup and the fresh-baked bread, cooling on the rack.

The boy inside him remembered those bright eyes dimming in grief over the two lost baby girls who died in infancy and her joy when learning she was with child again. "I hope it is another girl and she is healthy," she'd whispered to her husband, not knowing Jean-Claude was listening. "But a healthy boy would be just as welcome." That healthy boy did arrive a few months later, but his dear mother never knew him, for the angels claimed her soul a few minutes after Luc was born.

Jean-Claude sighed as he considered the responsibility he now carried as father and mother to his younger brothers, barely out of childhood himself.

"Damn you to hell, King Louis, for destroying our lives and sending us into exile for our beliefs. I curse you for all eternity," Jean-Claude swore under his breath, clenching his hands into painful fists.

"They call you the Sun King, but you should be called the King of Darkness for the misery and torment you have brought to the Huguenots because we are Protestants. I shall never forget."

He breathed deeply and unclenched his fists. Checking once more that the boys were asleep, he slipped out of the cabin and climbed up to the deck. Mr. Maarten stood watch, and Jean-Claude went to stand beside him.

The officer stared across the water at the fire and smoke. "This is a sad night of death and destruction."

Jean-Claude did not answer, but watched the tiny outline of the boat bobbing in the water by the pier. He knew his father would not appear for he would stand and fight to the end with his compatriots. Clenching his fists again, Jean-Claude dug his fingernails into the palms of his hands to imprison the sobs that pounded against his chest, pleading to be set free like a caged bird beating its wings against the bars.

Mr. Maarten laid a rough, calloused hand on his shoulder, but to Jean-Claude it was a lifeline because he felt a sudden peace move in where only anger had lived. He had bitten his lip to hold back the bitter words threatening to fly from his mouth, but now he released his breath in a huff and the weight of despair lifted, for childhood was not so far behind him that the strong hand of a man on his shoulder could not still impart a sense of safety.

“All is as it is meant to be, son, and you will survive this, too. Remember you are never alone,” the officer said.

They stood together on the deck, watching the pier until the moon drifted lower in the sky and a faint light glowed on the horizon. Jean-Claude watched the boat pull away from the dock and when it drew close, he saw only the two sailors. His father had not appeared.

“It is time, Mr. Maarten,” Captain Van Sickles’s voice sounded behind them.

The first officer strode across the deck and began shouting orders to the crew.

Jean-Claude felt the captain’s presence beside him. “I am sorry, son. We cannot wait any longer for we must sail with the tide.”

Jean-Claude simply nodded. He didn’t trust his voice, then he turned and went below to the cabin.

The captain watched him go and shook his head. “So much grief for these children and the loss of a kind and peaceful man like Jules Dubois because of a foolish, selfish king’s tragic decision,” he muttered. He stared at the smoke still rising in the dawn sky for a minute, pondering the stupidity of kings then went about the business of setting sail.

Chapter 2

Jean-Claude lay on his bunk for hours, unable to clear his mind of despair and grief. Finally, tired of waiting for the sleep that eluded him, he rolled off the edge of the bunk to the floor. He looked at his sleeping brothers through bleary, blood-shot eyes, the weight of responsibility heavy upon his back. Somewhere deep inside, a hard ball of anger tunneled into his brain, where it would remain until his death, emerging only once to change decidedly a life not yet born.

Sighing, Jean-Claude shook his brothers awake. “It is time to rise and get something to eat.”

Paul rubbed his eyes and looked around, bewildered. Then he remembered and gripped Jean-Claude’s arm.

“Papa, is he here?”

Jean-Claude shook his head, for words were unnecessary. Even young Luc understood and did not ask any questions.

He poured water from a pitcher into the bowl and while the boys washed, Jean-Claude removed the purse of coins from his saddlebag and looked around for a place to hide it because he could not leave it exposed in the cabin. There was a space between the lower bunk and the wall just wide enough to hold the purse. He shoved it carefully down into the crevice and bunched the edge of the blanket into the space above it. Jean-Claude stood back and looked at the lower bunk; it appeared natural, as though someone had pushed aside the cover to get out of bed and then had not remade it. It would do.

When the boys had washed, Jean-Claude led them up on deck. They stood at the rail and looked toward the land, but they saw only forests and fields in the far distance. The wharf at Nantes had been left behind, far to the south and, with it, the only lives they had ever known.

“What will happen to us?” Luc asked in a small voice.

Jean-Claude said, “We shall sail on this ship until we reach Königsberg, Prussia. There we will live with Uncle Charles and Aunt Gabrielle and help in his spice shop.”

“Are they expecting us?” Paul asked.

“Papa sent a letter explaining the worsening situation in France, so Uncle Charles would know that we might arrive on his doorstep without any warning,” Jean-Claude explained.

Luc looked up at Jean-Claude. “Will they want us to live with them?”

“Of course, Luc. They have no children of their own and besides, Uncle Charles needs someone to take over the spice shop one day.”

“I am scared, Jean-Claude. What if they don’t like us?”

Luc’s voice shook.

“You worry too much, little brother. Papa says they are wonderful people, kind and generous like our Mama, who was Uncle Charles’ sister. Now do you feel better, Luc?”

The boy nodded and moved closer to Paul, who looked over his head at Jean-Claude. They exchanged knowing glances and Paul put his arm around Luc. Both older brothers harbored the same fears, but contained them. An unknown future loomed on the horizon like dark thunderclouds forming in a perfect blue sky.

“Good morning, boys.” Captain Van Sickles leaned against the rail. “We arrive in Le Havre De Grasse late tomorrow. There we shall take on another Huguenot family also fleeing the persecution of your King Louis.”

Jean-Claude looked up at the captain. “He is no longer our king, Captain. He has forfeited that right to claim us as French citizens. From this time forward, we are Prussian, and loyal only to the King of Prussia.”

Captain Van Sickles nodded. “Indeed, King Louis has done that, son. It is a shame you are not sailing to the Netherlands. We Dutch welcome Huguenots into our society.”

“Thank you, Captain, but my Uncle, Charles Marnay, our mother’s brother, has no children and we will live with him and his wife, Gabrielle, in Königsberg. Uncle Charles is also a spice trader, like Papa...” Jean-Claude stopped, unable to continue at the mention of his father.

The captain said nothing, but squeezed Jean-Claude’s shoulder in understanding. A few minutes later he spoke. “I invite you all to join me for breakfast.”

Paul and Luc looked at Jean-Claude and he realized his brothers must be very hungry. Pushing aside his grief, he smiled. “Thank you, Captain. We are honored to join you.”

They went below to a small dining room that opened to the galley and the captain’s quarters. Mr. Maarten and another officer stood as they entered. The captain indicated three chairs and when he was seated, everyone followed suit. “This is my second officer, Mr. Dugas, a French member of my crew.”

“*Mon plaisir ... my pleasure,*” the Frenchman said

The boys looked up with interest and Paul said, “Captain. Sir, I did not know you had a French crewmember. I thought you were all Dutch.”

“Why not tell them your story, Mr. Dugas, while we await service?” Captain Van Sickles suggested.

Mr. Dugas inclined his head. “I, too, am a Huguenot. I lived with my family in the south of France, where we had been fishermen for five generations. When King Louis XIV repealed the Edict of Nantes written by his grandfather that gave us religious freedom, he took away our fishing rights and our means of livelihood. Most of the families left in their boats, sailing north to the Netherlands and Prussia.

“Those who stayed behind awoke one morning to find that the king’s soldiers had burned their boats. They could no longer sail away and they either starved or fled overland to Prussia, an arduous journey. I was one of the lucky ones who had left early with my

family and sailed to the Netherlands. There, I signed on with Captain Van Sickles as second mate on the Marianna.”

“And an excellent second officer he is; right, Mr. Maarten?”

“Yes, indeed, sir. Mr. Dugas is a first-rate second officer,” Mr. Maarten stated.

“Because Mr. Dugas speaks fluent French and we do not, perhaps he can explain the ship and the voyage when he is off-duty,” Captain Van Sickles suggested.

Jean-Claude nodded. “We would be very grateful, Captain. You are so kind to help us. Perhaps, after breakfast, we can discuss business?”

The captain smiled. “Ah, an astute young man; I expect that he will do very well in as a spice trader, do you not agree, gentlemen?”

The two officers nodded and Mr. Maarten smiled at Jean-Claude. “You have a keen mind, son. I hope we will meet again one day under better circumstances.”

Jean-Claude looked up at Mr. Maarten’s kind face and in his heart, he sensed that one day they would meet again under very different and better circumstances.

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