

REDEMPTION

VÉRONIQUE LAUNIER



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Guillaume

Humanity wandered by, the way it always had. Tourists, intent on taking in Montreal's architecture, sometimes gawked at us and took pictures, but no one else really noticed us. From my vantage point, they all were little more than ants, scurrying about their meaningless lives amongst the hustle and bustle of the city. Ants I grew bored of watching.

They used to interest me, those humans below. I'd not always been apathetic to them. The snippets of conversations I caught as they passed used to pique my curiosity. I wondered about their lives. I even enjoyed piecing together the historical events shaping the landscape below us.

But when decades passed and all I could do was watch, I cared less and less. The little ants all grew old and died, and were replaced with more ants. A boring, never-ending circle.

This world was a dull place when you didn't have a stake in it.

Below, footsteps echoed on the cement. A girl in a dark coat took the stairs up toward the old stone church, toward our home. She paused and looked back, and as she did, the streetlight illuminated the copper tones of her hair. I ached to crane my neck to see what she was looking at since it wasn't immediately evident. A late night visit to our church, which was no longer a church, wasn't a common occurrence; still some were curious enough about the museum's plans for the old once-majestic stone church. But, these visits were not so rare as to elicit much of my interest.

Most people didn't even notice our home. Not since 1926 when construction on the castlelike apartment building next door was completed. So, who could blame me for perking up a slight bit when I could finally see what she had been

looking at?

Three men, sturdy as stone, approached her slowly from the other side of the street. There was something abnormal about their essence. Something unfamiliar to me and I thought I'd seen it all by now.

"I haven't felt essence like this in centuries." Garnier's voice intruded my thoughts. It unbalanced me momentarily. My companions and I hadn't bothered to communicate in at least twenty years. There was just nothing to say anymore. Nothing I wanted to say.

"What is that?"

"What is happening?"

My other two companions, the rest of my *family*, faced the opposite direction and as such, had no line of sight to the drama unfolding at the front of the church.

Danger surrounded the attackers. It crawled on them with small lightning bolts that electrified the air. It surrounded them and was manifested by them, but it wasn't part of them.

A long time ago, I may have wished I could do something to stop the imminent violence; I may have tried, in vain, to scream out for someone to help her. An even longer time ago, I would have put a stop to it myself. Now, I only wondered if they were going to kill her or rape her and then wondered if it made a difference.

If they killed her, it would cause more of a commotion. There were chances we could listen to more interesting conversations, but who was I kidding? The girl's murder investigation wouldn't be worth much note. It wouldn't evoke any compassion or pity from me. It couldn't draw emotions from stone.

And I didn't plan to feel again. One doesn't plan for the impossible. I'd been empty for so long, a shell of myself left behind to do nothing but observe.

No, there was more chance that whatever acts the men below had planned for the poor girl would serve better to awaken my curiosity. Not because I craved violence or obscenities, not in the least, but because it would be different. Different was the only thing I craved.

She tugged at the doors. Of course, the doors wouldn't budge. Churches may sometimes be open late, but this wasn't a church anymore. Bought out by the

museum across the street a few years back, it now stood lonely and vacant, waiting for its next purpose.

She peered back over her shoulder, and I realized, then, that I couldn't feel her essence. Somehow she kept it hidden within her.

“Shit!” she said.

They had closed much of the distance between them and her. Still, they didn't hurry. I focused on their faces, expecting to witness some form of emotion. But there was none. Blank faces, blank eyes. They were human, I could tell, but different. Maybe it was just the weird way essence flowed around them. Could they be essentialists? Did they control essence? I struggled against my stone restraints. I wanted to lean in and better watch the scene before me. I needed to get down and join the action. And though the others hadn't said another word, I knew they were also following intently; Garnier, like me, the other two, by tracking the attacker's essence.

The girl bolted back toward the street but they cornered her before she had the chance to escape. Though they still gave the impression of calm, their gaits picked up as they approached her. They backed her around the side of the church where Vincent would now be able to get a view. Away from Garnier's sight. The small yard was only a few feet wide and littered with dead leaves and urban trash. The streetlights did a poor job illuminating the scene and the weak light strained even my superior eyes.

The girl tripped and fell. I held my breath.

One of the men laughed and the rest joined in like a pack of demented hyenas. They were close to her. Close enough that the smell should be overwhelming her. She was surrounded.

They stood over her and I wished I could see them better. I needed to witness the scene below me, but it was too hard to make out with the night shadows dancing in harsh strokes around them. My mind absorbed every detail, so I could pore over this scenario again and again when I was back to my boredom.

She trembled and attempted to push herself away from the ground. Her seemingly frail arms were in fact rather muscular and it appeared she would manage to get up. I felt a small perverse pleasure when she wasn't fast enough, and a well-placed boot to the upper back knocked her down again. I could

imagine the smell of decayed leaves invading her nostrils. The taste of grass and dirt in her mouth. She struggled against him but made no headway.

Suddenly, I heard a distant sound like drumming. My heart hammered to its tribal beat. She chanted. Under her breath at first, and then louder and louder. It seemed like gibberish, but then I recognized the language. It was the language I learned with *her*—with *Marguerite*. The Mohawk language, Kanien'kéha. At the thought of Marguerite, I momentarily forgot everything else and the stone around my heart threatened to crackle, but it wouldn't. It never did.

The drumming became louder and louder. My chest, still pounding along with it, seemed as if it would rip open.

"Who is doing that? Can any of you see anyone playing drums?" Antoine sounded in my head.

"The sound is familiar ... " When Vincent spoke again it hit me that he sounded so young. Like a child. Were we about to start over?

I thought of my three companions each watching from their corner. Each stuck in this state because of me, and for the first time, I felt just the tingling of a desire that maybe we could start over someday. I thought of the lives we had already lived. Vincent's family. Garnier's pilgrimage and Antoine ... well, Antoine just looked out for us. His life has always been for us.

The ground shook, and brought me back to the present. The girl's attackers looked between each other. I felt something. A small thread at first, but I recognized the clear feeling immediately. It wasn't enough yet, but it looked like I would get my wish. I was no longer cheering for the attackers. The girl had to live; she was involved somehow.

"Our essence is ... returning." I could hear the awe in Antoine's voice.

A deep rumble began at the ground where she stood and crawled up the church's old stones right up to our tower until it consumed me. Some of the stones on the church came loose and fell around her feet. I let out a breath of relief when she remained unscathed.

Rock crumbled, and we crumbled—or at least our gargoyle forms did. The barrier that had kept us this way for the past seventy years disintegrated. The sweet tingling of our life energy, our essence, flooded back to us—no longer just a thread, this was a river. It felt clearer, fresher than I remembered. Like a rush of

clarity.

Power discharged through the air all around us, crackling like an electrical storm. I couldn't remember ever having seen essence this wild. From a distance, it looked like lightning, but up close, it was obvious there was something more.

The miscreants that started this weren't going to stick around to find out what it was. Their own essence bounced off of them and joined the spectacle manifesting itself over the girl. Somewhere between the rumbling ground, falling stones, and freak lightning, they lost their nerve and ran off in different directions.

The girl cringed as she picked herself off the ground. Then she turned on the spot and looked around. Stones were not the only things to have fallen from above; several dead pigeons lay all around the scattered debris. Had they been taken out by the crumbling stones or the wild essence lightning? They seemed strangely undamaged. A chill overtook my body.

I watched the girl run off.

The essence had returned within me and permeated the air all around us. I couldn't wait any longer. Scared of missing the opportunity, I grabbed hold of the pool of clarity deep within me. I pulled it out and let it flow through my limbs. First, I worked on it slowly, deliberately, but instinct soon took over and the crisp tingling sensation soon became soft and warm. Pliable, like flesh. Part of my as-of-yet unchanged stone skin crackled as I flexed my arms. I rubbed my hands along them, feeling more and more as the change took shape. First into a flesh version of the stone beast whose form I had been in for the last decades, and then as limbs elongated and my body's memory took over, I changed into my true form. The one I had been born in, the one that still felt most natural even if it took more energy, more essence to maintain.

My skin was raw against the night breeze.

Under the cover of shadow, I used protruding stones and small holes where I could lodge my fingers or toes and climbed down the tower and along the body of the church until I reached the frozen ground. The cold December air made my naked body vulnerable. I needed to cover myself somehow. A small sound behind me brought Garnier to my attention. He was right behind me sporting his famous crooked grin.

“What are you two doing? This is not our world anymore,” Antoine hissed.

“So? We will simply make it ours.” Garnier reminded me of a tightly wound spring, just released.

All around were things I could touch. I stroked the church’s stone wall. Its grainy surface scraped against my fingers.

I motioned to Garnier to follow me to the spot where the airtight box had been hidden—courtesy of Alice who had done her best to look after us after we became trapped in stone. We pushed past a few bare bushes to a spot where large flat stones covered the ground.

I remembered watching Alice struggle with the stones. It had been midsummer and she’d had the cover of night as well as that of the leafy bushes, as she toiled for hours to preserve our belongings. We had never seen her again, and Vincent had suffered her absence in silence.

The moon highlighted the curves of Garnier’s wiry build as he helped me move those same rocks—unchanged by the passage of time.

The box, which looked like a small casket, did show signs of wear, but was otherwise intact. We broke the thick leather straps that kept it sealed and opened the box.

I dived in, found my clothing, and held it for a moment, briefly distracted by the feel of it under my fingers. The fiber brushed against my skin as I quickly slid it on, not bothering to properly fasten my suspenders. I didn’t have time to spare.

I didn’t pause. While I walked away, I grabbed a stale cigarette out of my pocket and lit a match to it—the paper was smooth under my fingers. My hurried strides, rigid at first, became looser with every step.

“Where are you going?” Vincent asked.

Vincent and Antoine still remained unchanged, and I was tempted to yell at them to seize the opportunity while they could. But I didn’t have time and they could take care of themselves.

“I must find her.”

“Who?” all three of them said at once. Their tones varied from pity, to concern, to alarm.

“The one who woke us,” I said as I turned the street corner in a half jog. If

they wished to continue the conversation, they'd have to follow me. I couldn't lose her.

"*But why?*" Vincent's voice was deceptively innocent. None of us were innocent, we'd all seen too much.

"*Are you not curious?*"

"*Curious? What is there to be curious about?*"

"*The girl, of course.*"

"*No, the girl seems inconsequential,*" Garnier said.

I couldn't afford to lose sight of her. She had piqued my curiosity, not the dull voyeuristic curiosity from the past seventy years—I was actually *intrigued*. It was not a strong emotion, but I didn't *want* a strong emotion, I'd had enough of those, yet this ... curiosity ... filled the void.

She was well ahead of me but with my eyesight, this wasn't a problem—not until she turned onto another street. I scanned the area until I saw the street sign: Peel Street. I looked around me to make sure the street was clear of people before I started sprinting.

Whenever I saw or heard someone, I kept to the shadows, sometimes even cutting through alleyways. I finally reached Peel only to see her enter a glass building. We'd seen these new buildings come to life while we were watching from above, yet we couldn't understand the glass-and-steel monstrosities that slowly dominated our stone panorama. Eventually, we came to accept them as part of our cityscape. And though the people inhabiting these buildings couldn't hold my interest, the structures themselves did. They were more akin to us, standing still while lives would come and go.

I touched the building. It seemed cold with its steel and glass. Yet, who was I—a creature who lived as stone for over half a century—to judge it as cold? I shook my head. I didn't have time for distraction.

I entered the building and followed the throng of people who lined up to get through a gate. They exchanged currencies for what appeared to be transit tickets. I shuffled through my pockets. I doubted they would accept the light-peach bus ticket I found in there. I jumped over the gate without drawing any

attention and made my way through the crowds, looking for the girl.

If I'd been stronger, I could have shapeshifted into my other form. It would have allowed me to track her, but her scent was unknown to me. It wasn't the best form to use in an underground transit system anyway.

An underground train system, to be specific. I stared, wide-eyed. We'd thought we were seeing everything from our perspective but it now appeared that we'd missed an entire other side to our beloved city. I crossed the platform and took in the concrete architecture as I went. I was inclined to abandon my search in favor of these sights. What interest could this insignificant creature hold when I could take in these new structures, these new companions that would remain part of my life for so much longer than the people? But it will still be there when she's gone. I had to find her while I could.

From a pass overlooking the boarding platforms, I saw her below.

Aude

On the metro station bench, I lean against an advertisement for a new miniseries on Canal Vie. I take deep breaths trying to calm the shaking in my limbs. The circle tile pattern on the floor claims my full attention until I hear the whooshing sound of the subway speeding through the tunnel. I jump up before the blue train screeches to a stop. The doors can't open fast enough. I push my way through the crowds and find an empty bench, where I plop down, taking up both the too-hard black and white speckled seats.

I wearily watch people board and exit the train. Once I've had enough of that, I take my notebook out of my purse, glad the men didn't think of taking it when they ran off. It's marked with "Odd" in thick black strokes. That's me; I'm Odd. The name suits me.

All right, so my name is actually Aude, pronounced ode, like a verse or sonnet, which I guess is fine too, in a it's-so-weird-it's-cool kind of way.

I flip through my notebook nervously, but can't concentrate on it. Questions push themselves to the forefront of my thoughts, where I can't ignore them so easily. Who were these men? What did they want from me? What happened out there? The more distance I put between myself and that church, the less real the incident seems. Could this have even happened to me? I feel my arms where I am certain bruises are starting to form. Those are certainly real enough. The drumming I can dismiss. Maybe some hippie event happening within my hearing range. But the chanting? The strange voices in my head? Did that even happen, or are my thoughts too jumbled up that I'm imagining things? Is this post-traumatic stress? Mom would know, but then I would have to tell her I was in danger, and I'm not sure I'm ready to do that. I have to tell someone though.

I take out my cell phone and quickly check the display. Neither Lucy nor Patrick has responded to any of my texts yet. If they hadn't stood me up, *again*, I wouldn't be walking the streets of Montreal by myself. I know it's not their fault I was attacked. I know my anger is misdirected but I hold on to it anyway. I need to be angry with them right now, because otherwise, I have to think too much about what happened, and I don't want to do that. I don't want to be scared.

“Excusez moi, est-ce que je peux m'asseoir ici?”

I stare up at him, with wide eyes. I know his voice. I heard it in my head; it had been talking about me after I was attacked. Except, it couldn't really have happened and I'm going crazy. It's normal after dealing with the stress of having been attacked. I'm making up things, and now I'm associating a stranger's voice to these things. It's good Mom leaves all those psychology books lying around, so I can figure this out on my own. Maybe I don't have to talk to anyone about this.

And I have to admit his voice intrigues me, even if he *is* speaking French.

“Oh, sorry,” I answer him in English. Like most Montrealers, I *can* speak French but I don't see why I should be the one to make the effort to speak a language other than the one of my choice. I move for him though.

Sitting this close to someone in the metro you can always smell them, and this is often not a good thing—like right now. His voice may be strange and intriguing, but the rest of him is just strange and unappealing. He smells of dust, cigarettes, and Vaseline, which is not a nice combination. I spare him a look from the corner of my eye but can't tell much about him. His dark hair is slicked back (with Vaseline?) and he's wearing a white T-shirt tucked into dress pants with suspenders. He has a cigarette behind his ear. There's nothing about what I see that would normally elicit any sort of interest on my part, but I'm still compelled to take a closer look. I resist.

Guillaume

I tried to make eye contact with the girl, but she never looked at me. I could force her to talk, yet I didn't know what power she held.

And her plight may not have mattered to me, but I wasn't an especially violent monster.

She was an attractive human. I took the opportunity to memorize her features. Her hair passed her shoulders. A strand of it swept over almond-shaped eyes outlined with black make-up. It was a look that would have been unheard of in my time, but I had observed enough to know that it had been considered fashionable for quite some time now. Her skin was a light bronze color and her lips were full and shiny. The book she carried was marked with the word *Odd*. It seemed fitting. I stored the information in my mind in case the details proved to be useful to track her later.

I took in her scent for the same reason. She smelled sweet, like sugary vanilla. Beneath her hygiene products, I detected the faint musky smell of sweat. The scent of which made my pulse race, and I memorized it as well. She wore a burgundy velvet hooded cloak, black wool skirt, thick knee-high socks, and high combat boots. So many different textures. The part of me that had been stone for decades longed to touch them with my human hands, but it would be inappropriate, so I resisted. She dressed differently from many of her kind, but this wouldn't help me track her.

Did she look at me from the corner of her eye? I wondered how I appeared to her, but it didn't matter.

"Excuse me." She stood and waited to get past me. I moved my legs out of her way.

I assumed this would have been her stop, but she didn't exit the train. She stood holding on to the metal pole and our eyes met. Something passed between us at that moment, but I couldn't say what. I hadn't been flesh in too long. I couldn't remember what every little feeling running through me meant. It fed my curiosity though. It confirmed that I needed to know more.

"How did you make the drumming sounds?" I cut straight to the chase. She'd be exiting soon, and I didn't have much time.

"Excuse me?" Her eyes widened in fright. How interesting. I hadn't meant to scare her.

"The drumming by the church. Your chanting was beautiful by the way, but I don't understand how you caused the drumming."

She took a few steps back. "I don't ... "

The doors opened and she was gone. I stood up as the chimes went off to indicate the doors closing. I managed to exit the train in time. She was at the top of the stairs. I followed her, keeping out of sight.

We emerged on Ste-Catherine. The street was one I'd been to in the past but was now only vaguely familiar. Everything seemed more colorful. I was used to the bright lights and loud music. I'd been looking at a similar scene further down on Crescent every night for decades.

She turned around and scanned the sidewalk. Did she see me? Could she tell I was following her? I hid in the shadows, moving quicker than she should be able to see, and she continued on her way.

Her street was similar to most residential neighborhoods in this part of Montreal. It hadn't changed much in decades. It was lined with duplexes, triplexes, and other "plexes." The buildings huddled together as if to keep warm from the cruelty of winter. Their facades were of stone or brick, their second-floor balconies all sporting staircases that led to the sidewalk. Yet despite all of their similarities, they each had their own distinct personality.

She stood at the foot of her staircase, as if she was frightened by something, and then ran up and disappeared into the entrance of a third-floor apartment. I memorized its location and looked around for a vantage point. The triplex across the street was stone and quite ornate. This would be a good spot.

But I couldn't watch now, not after having just been freed.

As I go to sprint up the stairs, a rattling in the garbage cans next to me catches my attention. I assume it's a cat or a raccoon and try to shoo it away. But the creature jumps toward me instead. The huge raccoon has only three twisted legs. And I don't know how I know this, but it's obvious that it's not a result of an injury, but of a mutation. Part of me feels bad for the thing, but it's seriously creeping me out. It focuses its eyes on me and moves closer. Its movements are deliberate, almost intelligent.

I back away one slow step at a time and run up to my apartment, slamming the door shut behind me. I lean against the closed door and let myself slide down to the entryway's old tile floor. I breathe heavily a few times and try to regain my composure. Something wells up in my throat and my eyes water. I take several more breaths until I am sure I'm not going to break down and cry.

That's not me. I'm not the crying type; I'm stronger than that. But I'm freaked out. I don't even know what is real and what isn't. Did that man on the subway really ask me about the drumming and chanting? Of course he didn't. This must be another symptom of post-traumatic stress. I'm filling out details to complete my fantasy. Actually, didn't I read that from a chapter on schizophrenia? But I'm not that crazy, am I?

Whispers come from Mom's bedroom. She isn't expecting me back until much later and it seems she planned to take advantage of her time alone. It's better that way, I can't be tempted to go to her for comfort.

These situations don't happen often, but I know Mom's rules. I straighten myself up, brush debris off my skirt, and take off my boots. I go straight to my bedroom, barring the door behind me.

My friends have had to beg and plead with their parents to get a lock for their bedrooms and for most of them it's unsuccessful. But not me. My mom is crazy, and she insists that I not only have a lock on my bedroom door, but that I use it whenever she has a friend over.

My mom gets lonely. I get it, and I get why it's always someone different, but sometimes I think she might as well accept money for what she does. I don't mind locking my door though—it's not like I want to run into one of them.

I boot up my laptop, open my iTunes playlist, hit shuffle, and turn up the volume. This shouldn't be necessary since Mom is discreet. But her friends aren't always. I shudder at the memories.

I check my texts again but still nothing. I'm still pissed at them. I'm still pissed at myself. I'm not scared, I remind myself, I'm just really, really angry. That's the only reason tears threaten to overcome me. They stood me up, and it's not the first time. I mean, I go all the way to Crescent to hang out with them and they can't be bothered. I may as well have stayed here. It's safe here.

I live right off of Ste-Catherine, which, in my opinion, is one of Montreal's cooler streets. The nearby metro stations are über-convenient for going out. There are loads of restaurants and shops right up the street from me; many of which don colorful rainbows in their window displays and advertisements. I love the atmosphere. Some say it's weird that Mom and I live in the Gay Village, but it suits Mom's distrust of straight men.

I dial Patrick's cell and Lucy answers.

"I thought we had a standing date on Saturdays. Why did you guys bail?" I'm on the offensive. It isn't fair, but I can't help but feel that if she and Trick had been there tonight, I wouldn't have had to deal with what happened. I wouldn't be sitting in my room by myself shaking in anger. I wouldn't have to admit that I'm becoming a prime case for Mom's profession. Actually, who am I kidding, I'm too extreme of a case for her. If I was her patient, she'd refer me to a shrink so I could get drugged up.

"Sorry, but we wanted to hang out, just the two of us," she says. What she means is that they didn't want me around. They're a couple now and everything's changed. We used to be inseparable, the three of us. We teamed up after attending music camp together and never bothered with making other

friends from that point on.

When Trick said he wanted to form a band, it seemed like the natural progression to our friendship. I never had a doubt we would make it big. Well, not until Trick and Lucy decided to jeopardize everything because they can't keep their hands off of each other.

"I totally get it, another make-out-a-thon." I've witnessed enough of their sessions to know it happens everywhere. The bus, restaurants, and even band practices have been defiled by their lip-locking. I can't go anywhere anymore without having to see them messing around.

"We're just hanging out, Odd."

"And making out," I say.

"Maybe ... so what?"

"I can't believe you couldn't even call or text to let me know. Whatever. It doesn't matter," I say. But it does matter. I'm freaked out. I need to gain control over my fear.

And then I know exactly how to do just that. "Anyway, can I talk to Trick now or is he too busy with you?"

"Why?"

"An idea for the drums." Maybe I'm not going crazy; maybe I was just hit with creative genius. Don't I read these types of stories all the time?

"Oh. Band stuff." Lucy's dismissive tone dampers my suddenly inspired mood.

I huff. "Yeah, band stuff. Or are you guys too obsessed with yourselves to care about Lucid Pill?"

"It's not that and you know it. Besides, look who's talking. It seems like the band is all you care about."

Maybe she's right, but I don't have anything else in my life. And isn't the band a worthy cause? Ever since I was eleven years old, I invested everything in Lucid Pill. I invested everything in my friendship with Lucy and Trick.

"All you care about is sucking face with Trick."

"That's harsh, Odd."

"Maybe, but it's true."

"You're just jealous."

“Of you and Trick? Yeah right. I just—” But I don’t know how to finish this sentence. I don’t want things to change. I can’t control this and it could ruin everything. How can’t she see that?

“Well, if you’re done with your whining ... ”

“You know what? Never mind. Let’s just drop it.” I sigh. This conversation isn’t going to way I wanted it to. But what did I expect? I can’t very well tell them I need them. I can’t tell them I’m going crazy and my mom is having one of her escapades and I have no one to turn to. I bite my lip to keep it from quivering. I’m fine.

“Sure, whateve—”

I want to scream at Lucy to notice something is wrong. She should ask me so I have to tell her. But she says nothing more and just hangs up the phone. My shoulders slump as I put my phone down on the night table beside me. With my eyes closed, I take a deep breath. I wanted to tell them about the episode at the church but instead I just got angry. It’s all so weird and I don’t know how to bring it up, it’s one thing to admit to myself I’m crazy, but another thing entirely to admit it to others.

My body is exhausted, but I’m too wired, too freaked out to relax. I go online and check out YouTube videos of Native drumming, seeking the right sound. I can use this for the band. I can take control of this situation and let it inspire me.

The pounding at the door disturbs me from my research on Iroquois water drums. I’m getting closer to an answer and I’m obsessing, I know, but it’s better than anything else I could be thinking about tonight.

I stare at the door and sigh. I’m not in the mood for this conversation. I never am, but especially not tonight.

“Odd, it’s me!” Mom sounds agitated. Nothing new there.

I know what’s coming next. I let out another exaggerated sigh and consider ignoring her. There is no avoiding it though. I’ll have to let her in eventually. I drag myself up and to the door and unlock it. Mom drops herself down on my bed with a sigh. Her eyes are shiny as if she’s barely holding in the tears. It’s a scene I’ve been in often before. I place my arm around her shoulder, and hold

her close to me. Taking this role isn't as easy as usual, not when all I need tonight is for her to comfort me—not the other way around.

“Do you want to talk about it, Mom?” Because I have something I really would like to talk about, and if only someone could ask me if I wanted to talk, maybe I could let it all out. But no one has asked me.

“I sometimes wonder if I'm doing it all wrong, Odd.”

“Why would you think that, Mom?” Of course, I know why. The guy that just visited got under her skin. But I ask the question anyways because it's a sort of ritual that we go through.

“Oh Odd, tonight is one of those nights where I feel ... ”

“Empty?”

She looks at me, and we both understand that right now, she is the child and I am the parent. She isn't a bad mother. Normally, she's actually pretty awesome. Anybody who has ever met her tells me how lucky I am to have such a cool mom. And it's true, I am lucky in some aspects. But she's broken, and on nights like this one, I'm the only thing she has keeping her together. I understood that a long time ago. I'm for her what the band is for me. She needs me.

“What happened, Mom?” Again, a question to which I know the answer. She can handle the guys that treat her like crap and the clingy ones whose hearts she breaks, but every now and then, she meets one of the good guys—one she could be happy with if she let herself. And then she treats him the same way as any other man who makes a brief appearance in her life. But they upset her.

“He said some things ... ”

“You don't have to talk about it, Mom.”

Really, she doesn't have to talk about it and it will spare me the drama. More importantly, I can be spared the heartbreak that I'll feel for her.

“He told me he could take the hurt away. He said I was a beautiful person inside as well as out and that he wanted to make me happy, that I deserved to be happy. But I am happy already, aren't I? And what does he know about what I deserve?”

I look at her long and hard. Sometimes I don't understand what is happening in her head. Is she happy? I never really stopped to wonder about that. She's just Mom. Red hair, wide eyes, easy smile. It's easy to pretend she's happy. But what

is it really like to be her? What is it like to have lived what she has? To be fifty years old and to have nothing. To have no one but a sixteen-year-old daughter who will one day leave her to live a life of her own. I sigh.

“I have to agree with him, Mom. You do deserve to be happy. But you don’t need this guy to tell you that.” I say it because this is what she wants to hear, but I wonder. Maybe she does need somebody. Isn’t that why Lucy and Trick got together and decided to screw around with all of our hopes and dreams? Because they needed someone?

“No, I don’t need a man to tell me anything,” she agrees.

I nod to her thoughtfully. She’s easier convinced than I am. I try to imagine Mom settling down and growing old with someone, but I can’t. This isn’t who she is. And it isn’t who I am. Mom and I, we are fine the way we are. We are stronger than that.

I give her a hug and I linger there for longer than I normally would. Her arms around me comfort me, but I feel the tight control I have over my emotions loosen, so I pull away from her and she smiles at me. It’s a sad smile, but I know it won’t be sad for very long. She’s good at picking herself up now. She no longer mopes for days over these types of things.

“How did I raise such a smart, levelheaded girl?”

On her bad days, I wonder that myself, but Mom isn’t usually such a mess. If I’m smart and levelheaded, it’s because that’s the way she is. She’s been through more than I ever could imagine. I don’t answer her question, I just smile at her and she beams back, and this time she looks happy.

“How was your evening? You’re back early,” she says.

I want to tell her, I need to tell her, but I lie to her; my mother who is always honest with me no matter what. “It was boring. Lucy and Trick weren’t out, preferring an at home make-out session instead.”

Mom rolls her eyes. She feels the same way as I do about their relationship.

“I don’t know. I didn’t feel like hanging out with anyone else.” I’m pleased with how much of what I say is true.

“I hope they come to their senses soon. So what did I just disturb?”

“I’m looking into a new idea for percussion. I heard some drums tonight, and it inspired me. I’ll just need to get Trick on board.”

Mom leans back against some of the pillows on my bed and I watch her transform into another one of her personalities. This isn't messed-up-broken Mom, this is business Mom. This is my band manager. Some would also refer to her as cool Mom.

"That sounds great, Odd." She waits for me to say more, and I oblige.

"I heard these beautiful and haunting Native drums downtown. I researched into it and think they're Iroquois water drums. I want to add some to the background of "Serpents in the Sky." Maybe some chanting—" I stop short and frown.

"It sounds really cool Odd, what's wrong?"

"I don't know about the chanting ... " It was just my imagination, I know, but suddenly I'm not so sure if I should dwell so much on my dementia. Even if it was just temporary.

"Well, what about the drums then? You think Trick will like the idea?"

"I don't think Trick will care one way or another as long as I do the work." I've seen how their interest in Lucid Pill is fading. "As long as he doesn't have to put in any effort, I don't see how he could object."

Mom laughs.

"What?" My mouth twitches and I feel like laughing too. I have no idea what she finds funny, but I realize I'm on the verge of hysteria. I need to stay focused on the drums.

"I recognize that look on your face. You're going to obsess about these drums until everyone has no choice but to follow along with your idea. I know how you get."

"I'm not obsessing. I just think it's a good idea. There is a First Nations reserve just on the other side of the St. Lawrence and it's Iroquois. Did you know that?"

Mom nods.

"Well, it makes it relevant. It will add to the local flavor of our music. It will bring in diversity."

"You should bring in your French roots too, Aude." Mom pronounces my name properly to emphasize her point.

I shrug. "Maybe, but French is kind of overdone. Not original."

“Well, you’re the music genius. I’m just trying to keep up with you.” She laughs. “Your music makes me happy, especially since I can’t even carry a tune.”

I laugh at her. A music genius. Wow. She’s full of it. But I wonder where I get my talent from. Is it all me, or is my father musical? I don’t wonder about him very often, just at times like this when I feel I’m missing answers.

Mom sits up but doesn’t look at me. She appears thoughtful as she stares out my small, frost-covered window. I wonder if she’s thinking about the same thing I am, and then hope she isn’t. As curious as I am, I’ve gone through too much tonight to add this conversation to the list.

“I think you should do the chanting, Aude. In Mohawk and in French.”

Mohawk, or Kanien’kéha, as they call it, is the language of the Iroquois nation I was just talking about. I know this because I’ve been researching, but I’m surprised that it seems such common knowledge to Mom.

“I don’t know if the chanting will work,” I insist. I can’t explain my train of thought. It’s no longer about being strong, I can’t tell her about the attacks because I just can’t face the worry it will bring her.

Mom notices that I am lost in thought and stands up. “I’ll leave you to it. I think I’m going to call it a night.”

“Yeah, me too. Night, Mom.”

“Night, Odd.” She leaves my bedroom, closing the door behind her.

I get ready for bed and lie there for a while replaying the incident over and over again. Each time remembering things a little differently. Surely, birds didn’t fall to their death all around me. The men’s attack should have shaken me the most, but my hallucinations have shaken me way worse. And then there was the guy on the metro ...

Guillaume

It was late by the time I walked home from the Odd girl's house. The people who'd lingered until the bars' and nightclubs' closing times streamed into the streets. The city called to me. We needed to be reacquainted. Ste-Catherine looked almost alien in parts, yet comfortingly familiar in others, and I tried to reconcile what I saw to what I knew. In some areas, I had to rely on street signs to orient myself, yet other places had not changed in a century.

Our old home was right next to the tower where we went dormant. The caricatured gargoyle statues on the facade made me snicker as I walked by. I remembered how they ended up there.

I found Vincent in the back of the apartment building. He sat on the ground, his back against the stone wall, concealed by the shadows of balconies above.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"Antoine is trying to sort out our living arrangements. He insists we have to remain at Le Chateau—you know the creature of habit he is. I think he would have been happy to remain watching ..."

"And you? How do you feel about this?"

He shrugged, and then let his small shoulders back against the cold wall. An old cloak covered him and yet he still looked cold. *"I don't know. I've lived my life already; I'm tired. Antoine and I, we're not like you and Garnier. When the essence comes back, you two just spring up and take things up where you left off. I can't do that. I don't know why I would want to do that. What is the point of just a little more borrowed time? We have nothing left. Not even a purpose."*

Listening to Vincent's words, it was much easier to imagine him the way I had last seen him, as a mature man who had long passed his prime of life, instead of

the eleven-year-old boy who sat in front of me. I leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette. *“She’s the key, you know. She is our purpose. We need to find out how she woke us, and then maybe we can sustain ourselves without an essentialist. We could have freedom.”*

“Freedom to do what?” he asked aloud.

“To live.”

Vincent shook his head sadly. “What do you think we’ve been doing, Guillaume?”

Maybe Vincent had been living the past centuries, but I hadn’t, not really. There was a time with Marguerite that felt like life. At the thought of her, I noticed Garnier’s absence. “Where is he?”

“Garnier? He’s visiting her. Marguerite.”

So I had been right. Guilt settled into the pit of my stomach. After watching for seventy years, the first thing Garnier did was visit her. I should have done that, but I couldn’t. I didn’t know how to face her. To face what I had done to her. Vincent studied me, waiting for my reaction. I gave him none.

“So what now?” I asked.

“We wait for Antoine, I guess.”

Waiting. Hadn’t we done enough waiting already? I slunk down next to Vincent and puffed on my cigarette. “It’s strange, you know?”

“I know.” Vincent sighed.

“I mean all of it. Not just our sudden fill of essence, but everything else.”

“Feeling the air on our skin ... ”

“Yes, exactly. And you ... ”

The eleven-year-old boy next to me was the form I had known Vincent for most of our time together, but when I’d last seen him, he’d been older. He’d been a parental figure to us somehow, had taken over Antoine’s role in taking care of us.

He shrugged again.

There were no more words to say. So we sat, not in silence like we had for the past decades. This time, we listened to the sound of our breath.

We must have fallen asleep back there, hidden from the street, because it was already late in the morning by the time Antoine returned.

Sometime during the night, Garnier had returned and now sat next to us. Antoine ran a hand through his dirty hair. “The money we had in the account for building-maintenance fees ran out quickly when the charges more than quadrupled. So, they took our apartment and sold it. Now, I can contact a lawyer in order to try and get some of the money back. But it doesn’t solve the problem; we need somewhere to live.” He took a breath. “One of the penthouses is empty. It’s for sale and the seller is looking to move fast on it.”

“So let’s just buy it,” Garnier said.

“We can look into dipping into our long-term investments, or at worst, I’m sure our more liquid assets are still hidden where we’ve left them. But our biggest obstacle is paperwork. It will take at least a few days to sort everything out before we can even begin the paperwork required to purchase the penthouse.”

The more Antoine talked about accounts, investments, mortgages, etcetera, the more tense I became. Yes, we needed somewhere to live, but it wasn’t our priority.

“Where did you say that penthouse was?” I asked.

Antoine pointed to the corner nearest us.

“Perfect,” I replied.

I scanned the area to make sure no one could see me, and climbed up the side. I found all the familiar footholds and crannies. My balance was better than any human’s, but without using more essence than I had at the moment, I couldn’t ascend the building much faster than a seasoned mountain climber. I could have taken the fire escape up, but it was noisy and there were more chances I’d be seen.

“*What are you doing?*” Antoine asked.

“*Well, while you guys worry about interest rates and mortgage and all the pointless, useless stuff, I’m going to break in and rest.*” Yes, we needed somewhere to live, but it couldn’t be our priority. Preserving our essence should come first, and the energy we used keeping ourselves warm in the winter cold was draining it.

“*We don’t have an essentialist, our essence is not unlimited.*” They shouldn’t have needed the reminder.

“If you had let me finish, I was going to suggest we stay in a hotel,” said Antoine.

“Suit yourself, but I’m just breaking in. I need to be ready to find the girl again. I’m not letting this opportunity pass us.”

I hopped through the open window and took in my surroundings. The sparse furnishings were obviously more for show than living.

Garnier jumped in behind me and I was surprised how quickly Antoine and Vincent followed.

Antoine surveyed his surroundings. “I could use your help getting everything sorted out.”

“The father figure thing is getting really old,” I said.

“Like eight hundred years old,” Garnier joked behind me.

“Just because you look old enough to be our father, doesn’t mean you can order us around,” I said.

“Well as long as you continue acting like a kid—“ Antoine started.

“Enough, both of you,” said Vincent. “We just need to all pitch in and make this place livable. You want to be free, Guillaume? Well, responsibility is part of freedom.”

“This isn’t really my thing.” I pulled out another stale cigarette.

Antoine took it away.

“It’s now acceptable to forbid you from smoking indoors.”

“Why do I care what’s acceptable, or not, by society?” I reached for another cigarette.

“Don’t.”

“Or what?” This was no longer only about the cigarette, decades of tension wrapped up in our words.

“After watching for this long, we’re all weak. But my human shape is bigger than yours, and I am pretty sure I would be able to win the fight.” His jaw clenched.

I shrugged and walked out to go smoke on the roof.

Guillaume

I lay on my back looking up at the blue sky, while enjoying my cigarette. I noticed the vibrations caused by someone stepping up on the roof and sat up to watch Garnier approach. His steps were slow and steady. His face, inscrutable. I continued to study him, wondering what his reaction would be. He was always unpredictable—I guess we all were—but after visiting Marguerite he would be doubly so. He sat next to me.

“Why are you fighting with Antoine? What is going on?”

“I wouldn’t call it a fight. He decided I shouldn’t smoke inside, and I didn’t agree with said decision.” I spoke aloud. There was no need for the others to take part in this conversation.

“We are all a bit on edge right now.”

“So we are ... ”

“Did you find her?”

“Yes, I followed her home. I need to talk to her, maybe observe her, I don’t know.”

“So why are you here?”

I wondered the same thing. Part of me was ready to go. Ready to find answers. No one else was going to solve the problems caused by our low supply of essence. Maybe this was why I hesitated. No one else was concerned. No one else really cared and I wondered why I should.

“Today is Saturday. She could leave the house at any time, or not at all. I refuse to watch the whole day. I’ll go back Monday morning, since she should have to go to school. It will make it easier to trail her then.”

“Are you sure it was she who woke us?”

“She did the chanting.”

“I guess so.”

“How was your visit?” I brought the subject to Marguerite. After the way things had ended with her, she was never too far from my thoughts.

“Her gravesite hasn’t changed at all, though it seems the whole cemetery is much bigger now. Everything was peaceful.”

“That’s good.”

“I guess ... ”

“She deserves her peace.”

He nodded.

“But I think I made my peace too,” he said.

I appreciated the sentiment, but I couldn’t return it, and my thoughts were already on to something else. “We need to get our strength back, Garnier. I can’t remember feeling this weak since we were made.”

“Why? We no longer have anyone to protect. I understood the necessity when we were protecting her ... but not now. Now it would be selfish. Now is the time for us to be normal.”

“Normal? How long do you think this essence will last us? Months? I think it is most likely weeks. How is experiencing life for a couple of weeks normal?”

“And what if we don’t find the answer and we end up wasting the precious little time we have searching?”

“For once, we have control over our destiny. Why are you such a coward, Garnier? If you weren’t, maybe she’d be alive—” I stopped. It wasn’t Garnier’s fault.

“She’d be over a hundred years old. I highly doubt she’d still be alive,” Garnier said. He was calm but his knuckles turned white as he clenched his fists.

“And if I had my full strength, I’d make you regret—”

“Make me regret what exactly? Do you really think there is anything you can do that would make any difference to the amount of regret I already carry?”

His shoulders slumped.

“I thought this was behind us ... ”

“As did I ... ”

“I guess when you’re feeling truly alive for the first time in near seventy years,

it becomes too easy to remember the past.”

I nodded. I'd done rather well blocking the past. Until now.

Garnier must have sensed my mood. “I guess I need to go down and see what needs to be done.”

I tried to nod but it came out as more of a twitch. He left.

Alone again, I lay back on the roof and tried to keep the memories from flooding back in.

“I don't think he loves me, you know.” The late-afternoon sun reflected on the fiery tones of her hair. The lake behind her sparkled like the mischief in her eyes.

“Of course he loves you,” I said. I was sure he did, and the truth of it killed me.

“Whenever he doesn't think I'm looking, he gets a faraway look in his eyes. He acts cool, but there's something under the surface.” Her eyes no longer shone. She had cast them down as if she looked to her feet for answers.

I dismissed her observations for the nonsense they were. Of course he loved her. What was there not to love? Wasn't it why I was out here with her? It was why I felt so much guilt for the next question before I even asked it. I took a step toward her and her lips pulled up into a small smile.

“Marguerite?”

When she saw how serious I was, her smile wavered and disappeared. Her eyebrows furrowed, but she said nothing. She waited.

“Do you love him?”

She sighed and opened her mouth to answer but the crackling sound of dried leaves called our attention to the small copse of trees to our right. Together, we turned toward the noise.

“There you both are.” Garnier took Marguerite's hand and motioned for us to follow him. “Mary isn't well. Vincent needs us.”

I watched his guarded expression. Did he really love her? I couldn't worry about it now, Mary's life was reaching its twilight and we'd been expecting this moment. We needed to be there to support Vincent.

Vincent had taken care of some errands while I was on the roof. He had bought several bags of miscellaneous items. After watching for a few decades, we normally tried to catch up on anything we may have missed. We had never before watched for more than twenty years. He threw a few bags of clothing at each of us. He must have believed our seventy-year-old clothing just wouldn't cut it anymore. I grabbed mine and walked to my new room.

Suddenly everything that needed to be done seemed overwhelming. Maybe it was easier to do nothing but watch after all. I sat on my bed for several minutes trying to take inventory of what we had to do, and realized that a few hours of sleep leaning against a building was not enough. I should think about getting some rest if I planned to follow the girl again in the morning. We went without sleep when in full strength, but in my current state, I needed it badly. Right on cue my stomach gurgled. I also needed some food.

“Did we buy groceries yet?”

“Of course. We’ve also all eaten already. Which could explain why you’re the only crabby one left,” Antoine answered.

“I’m not crabby.” I was reminded why I hadn't talked to these guys in close to a quarter of a century. They were annoying.

“Just come on out and join us, will you?” Garnier's happy voice sounded forced, even in my head.

But I did join them in the living room.

Their appearances surprised me. They'd taken advantage of the shower and Vincent's purchases. They all looked ...

modern. Similar to any of the other guys you would see walking around down the street, albeit the well-dressed ones.

Antoine pointed to the fridge. *“Help yourself to dinner.”*

I gawked at him before following his suggestion. His appearance was the most changed. Without the Vaseline pushing his hair down the way we had all worn it, his hair was curly, a tamed version of one of the hairstyles I noticed during the Seventies. He wore jeans—they all did—and a dress shirt he kept untucked.

I went to get something to eat. A variety of prepackaged food waited for me in the modern steel refrigerator. I gazed at it with narrowed eyes and rubbed at the rough stubble on my chin.

“What is all of this?”

“I don’t know, but isn’t the packaging enticing? Much of the food is now available prepared in advance, it’s fascinating.” Antoine must have done the grocery shopping.

“So what do I eat?” Couldn’t we keep it uncomplicated for now? Why could he not at least try to leave things the way they used to be?

“Why don’t you grab a sandwich?” I could almost hear Vincent’s sigh.

I had to admit a sandwich was a good idea. After preparing it, I stood at the kitchen counter and devoured it. And then made a second one.

My hunger satiated at last, I walked back to the living room where the boys were reading from a pile of newspapers and magazines.

“So now what?” Vincent directed the question at me.

“I don’t know ... ”

“You are the one who decided to shapeshift when our essence returned. You are the one who is following the girl around. You must have a plan ... a purpose.”

A purpose. We were lost without one. With Marguerite gone, we had no one to protect. With her, her entire lineage had ended ... along with this said purpose.

Garnier’s words brought me to the present. “I have a purpose. I’ll finally live a normal life. The life that was taken away from us all these centuries ago.”

“A normal life?” I asked.

“And what do *you* propose to do?” Vincent asked.

“I need to find out about the girl. How she woke us. What she is to us.”

“And what is that going to prove? It was a fluke,” Garnier said.

“A fluke? How could it be a fluke? She knew a Kanien’kéha incantation that would wake us. She somehow summoned the drums that ... well, I need to learn more.”

Antoine shrugged. “You are free to do what you wish. We are all free now ... But Guillaume, I hope you understand that no matter what you find out, it will not bring *her* back.”

I pretended not to understand. “Bring her back? I’m only trying to figure her out.” I said referring to the girl knowing full well he referred to Marguerite.

“You know what I mean.” Antoine’s voice was patient, maybe even kind.

“I know ... but this is not about Marguerite. Not everything is about her.” Not anymore ... it hadn’t been for a long time.

“You need to move on, Guillaume. We all have, even Garnier. Now it’s your turn.” Vincent said.

I walked out and back to my bedroom. I pushed back the dusty covers and crawled into bed, immediately falling into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I woke up amidst a tangle of sheets. I looked at the clock on my nightstand and noted that though dawn was still far away, I’d slept for over twelve hours. Dust stuck uncomfortably to my sweat, but it was nothing a shower wouldn’t resolve. Overall, I felt much better than the previous day. Sleep had done me some good.

I debated how to spend my day and finally decided to find the girl. I had planned to wait until Monday to avoid as much watching as possible, but my every instinct screamed that this was too urgent. Every day without an answer would bring us closer to watching again. I couldn’t go back.

I made my way to the shower not wanting to waste any time. I had not thought it would feel this good until I was in there, the hot water sluicing down decades of filth. It left me reborn. I dropped to my knees, and scrubbed the grease from my hair. The steamy heat of the water against my skin almost burned and left behind a renewed sensation of life and pain. Like an awakening of my senses and mind. With my eyes closed, I imagined the sins of my past washing down the drain with the murky water. A deep exhalation purged me further of weight from deeds long past.

I left the shower feeling invigorated and regretted that I had not taken it earlier. The pair of jeans and black dress shirt I put on were comfortable. I enjoyed the crisp feel of the clean clothing against my skin. My entire body tingled with sensation. I hadn’t felt this alive in close to seventy years. I rubbed a towel through my brown hair to take out the excess water. My mirror reflection reassured me I would fit into the crowds a lot better today, which was preferable when trailing someone.

I left the apartment the way we came in. I didn’t want to risk using the private elevator from the penthouse. I would take the metro again, but this time I would

actually pay for it. It seemed the most efficient way to travel. I felt a small thrill at the thought of doing things the regular way and understood Garnier's wish for a normal life.

I took the metro to her exit and walked to her street. At the corner of her street, I leaned against a hard, cold metal pole and zoomed in to watch her house. I lit up a cigarette from the new pack I'd bought at the metro station and started fidgeting. I was watching again. It was the last thing I wanted to be doing. It was too early, and I just couldn't stand still.

I wandered a few blocks west, making sure not to stray too far. A large book and music store caught my attention. Media was a great way to be acquainted with details of this era that I may have missed. It was somewhere to look for answers.

Maybe I wouldn't even need to follow the girl. Most answers could be found in books—if one cared to search hard enough. I hesitated. The store would open in a few minutes, but I risked the chance of missing the girl. Even though the others didn't seem overly concerned, I understood that our state was temporary and we needed to solve that problem while we could. I looked between the store and the house and decided to take the chance with the store. I couldn't spend all morning just watching her house.

The size of the store shocked me. It had a basement filled with movies, a main floor with books and music, and a second floor with more merchandise and musical instruments. A one-stop media shop. It would have been helpful, if I knew how to search for what I needed. I turned over several items, not sure exactly what to do with them and finally decided to go look at the books. I spent several hours reading anything that caught my interest. I read fast, unnaturally fast, which I couldn't take complete advantage of while in a crowded store full of people who would notice. I read history books, books on culture, mysticism, religion, current events.

Much of what I read fascinated me, filling in holes I had missed from my perspective of the city, but in the end, I found no new answers to our essence problem. No cleverly disguised bit of information or misunderstood phenomenon. Enough time had passed; I had to go find Odd-girl at her house again. But first, I took a quick detour to look at the musical instruments. Maybe

once things were normal, I would buy a piano for the apartment. It had been a long time since I last played. My time would be my own. Why shouldn't I take it up again?

I walked into the room and stopped in my tracks. There was the girl. She was talking to one of the store's employees. I was out of human hearing range, but that didn't stop me. I focused on the conversations.

"No, as in an actual Iroquois water drums."

"Water drum?"

"Yes, you know, kind of like a normal Native drum, but you can fill it with water and get different sounds?"

The man looked pensive. He stroked his stubbly chin, obviously wanting to please the girl with a favorable answer. She seemed unimpressed.

"I have something that might help you. It is not exactly what you're looking for but ... well, I'll let you be the judge by yourself," he said.

"O-kay ... " She shrugged.

"I'll be right back." He walked out of the room.

I was surprised at how she beelined for the electric guitars—something I had seen my fair share of while looking down on Crescent Street. The one she examined was flashy purple. She picked it up and handled it, dancing subtly to a tune in her head.

I peered around, self-conscious, when I realized that the way I stared at her from the doorway was bound to attract more attention than I wanted, so I walked over to the pianos, never really taking my eyes off her. I fingered the ivory keys of a baby grand while watching the store employee return. The keys were smooth under my fingers and suddenly I yearned to play again in earnest. Not like I had for most of the past centuries, but the way I had for Marguerite, the way I had played on the organ in Notre Dame Cathedral before Odette de Rouen, the first de Rouen I had known, found me.

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