

The MOSQUE
Of Notre Dame

Elena Chudinova

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OF
NOTRE DAME
BY
ELENA CHUDINOVA

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INTRODUCTION

TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

I am very happy to introduce my book to American readers. This year *The Mosque of Notre Dame* turned ten years old. So far, it has been published in Russian, Serbian, Polish, Bulgarian, Turkish, and French, and translated into Norwegian. I find it hard to express my appreciation to all the novel's friends and supporters, whose selfless efforts have made it possible for the book to reach countless new readers around the world.

Still, I am sometimes enveloped by a sense of gloom. I am terrified that we are losing precious time. The danger described in *The Mosque of Notre Dame* grows every day.

I began writing this novel after the fall of the Twin Towers in 2001, but before the mass murder of schoolchildren in the Russian city of Beslan by Islamic terrorists in 2004. Do most Americans even know about the horrible tragedy of Beslan—those three days during which all Russians sat, glued to their television screens, praying? Chechen Muslim terrorists had attacked a village school and kidnapped more than 700 children, imprisoning them in a stuffy gymnasium built to accommodate 100 people. Before the suspense and horror ended, 333 people, including rescuers, were murdered. Half of those killed—186 of them—were children as young as 9 years old.

If facts cannot be silenced, they still can be distorted. Do Russians know about the fall of the Twin Towers? Definitely. But how many bizarre Russian versions of this event have I heard over the years, according to which the Towers were toppled by “non-Muslims”? For some reason, someone is very interested in preventing discussion about the threat to our civilization posed by Islamic occupation.

The character of Sophia, the principal heroine of my novel, appeared in my imagination after I read a news story about a twelve-year-old Russian girl, the daughter of a businessman, who was kidnapped by Chechen bandits. The girl was held for more than six months and was tortured and abused. To speed the father's ransom payments, the kidnappers cut off two of her fingers. Eventually, the girl was rescued and the kidnappers arrested.

An American offered to pay for the girl's rehabilitation at a U.S. clinic—since all her family's resources had been spent on her ransom. But the rescued girl was refused entry to the United States by the State Department. Strangest of all, the story of this poor, wounded girl being barred entry by the usually

generous U.S. government went virtually unreported in America's news media.

It is worth noting that, at the time, many people in the West had been making excuses for the Chechen criminals. So perhaps it was inconvenient that, unlike mere words, a maimed child's injuries offer incontrovertible evidence of the depravity of the people the Western press likes to call Muslim "militants."

A thought crossed my mind: If there is no justice in this world, will this girl seek vengeance when she grows up? As it turned out, she chose another, better path. That is why I do not mention her name. But as the story develops in my novel, the heroine chooses vengeance—a lonely, bitter path.

Most of the large-scale events the book describes have not yet taken place in our world. The European Union has not turned into Eurabia — *so far* . For now, vineyards have not been cut down. The great paintings of Western art have not been burned. And the magnificent Cathedral of Notre Dame has not been turned into a mosque. But how the year 2048 will turn out for Europe and the West depends on us.

This book must be read today, because tomorrow may be too late.

Elena Chudinova

Calvados, France - Moscow, Russia

IV August

Anno Domini MMXV

CHAPTER 1

ZEYNAB'S LAST SHOPPING TRIP

Eugène-Olivier walked down the Champs-Élysées as fast as his uncomfortable clothing would allow. He certainly was not running—someone running would only draw attention. But his pace was faster than if he had been running. Besides, few runners could run for six hours without a break. Eighteen-year-old Eugène-Olivier could walk all around Paris this way without stopping. It seemed that he had just passed through the Jardin du Luxembourg when already, the Bridge of Invalids was also behind him and the Champs-Élysées sparkled right and left—from lights in store window displays and through the draped windows of private residences. There were not many residences in the Champs-Élysées; there were many more stores like the one he was now approaching.

* * *

Zeynab set out from her house on foot. She had never heard the word “Impressionism” in her life. Thus the play of gold and blue light that bathed Paris that sunny afternoon in early spring could hardly have inspired her imagination. It was pleasant, but not nearly so pleasant as the fact that her husband did not limit her shopping expenditures. And today there was going to be a fashion show in the women’s department of the big department store on the Champs-Élysées.

It was not quite right, of course, for her to go to the store alone, but even the Religious Guard closed its eyes to the fact that this rule was regularly violated in the richest neighborhoods and in the poorest. With the poor, all the men in the family had to work while the women rushed around from store to store looking for a cheaper piece of mutton.

In the rich neighborhoods, if you couldn’t disregard the rules others were obliged to follow, what would be the pleasure in being a man of influence? Even the Religious Guard understood these fine points. Only ordinary people were not exempt from following the rules.

Of course, it was always best to be prudent. For example, Zeynab went shopping alone—but *Qadi* Malik would later pick her up from the store, so in a sense she was simply going to meet her husband.

Zeynab had only crossed from the Quai d’Orsay over the Emirates Bridge and onto the Champs-Élysées, when she stopped.

Translucent rainbows flashed on the window displays, drawing attention to three-piece suits of soft black wool, light-colored suits of silky linen for seaside vacations, snowy white silk poplin and thin linens, colorful polo shirts, cashmere overcoats, Moroccan leather shoes next to curved ivory shoe horns, tie clips and pins, hand sewn neckties, heavy bracelets of Swiss wristwatches, rings and gloves, engraved and gem-encrusted canes—simply everything a man could wish for.

The ladies' department, understandably, was invisible from the street, its treasures hidden behind reflective glass, hidden like Ali Baba's cave. Zeynab did not hurry in to see them as usual; she was enjoying the fine weather. When she was finished, she would have to call Malik on his cell phone. And with him she would observe the glory of the spring day from behind the closed windows of the Mercedes. The windows of the Mercedes were tinted, of course; you could stare as much as you liked and no one would look back.

What a beautiful day! Not even the poor, whining incessantly over their begging bowls, managed to annoy her, nor did the piercing whistles and loud screams of children playing. Soft pies shone white in the hands of street vendors and passed in the blink of an eye into the hands of buyers. Loose couscous sparkled as it leapt from the boiler into small paper bags. Flies greedily circled above the baklava and Turkish delight, as customers in street cafes alternately sipped steaming black brew and ice water. How beautiful the Champs-Élysées was in spring!

For some reason, everyone seemed to be hurrying toward the Arc de Triomphe. How interesting, what could be going on there?

Eugène-Olivier stopped so suddenly in front of the neon sign of the department store that he almost knocked over a pudgy woman. This was bad, very bad—he hadn't calculated the time properly. Whoever arrived too early could also arrive too late. Sevazmios always appeared everywhere on time, to the minute.

For as long as Eugène-Olivier could remember, the square around the Arc de Triomphe had been a pedestrian zone for public celebrations. But now they had begun to build something. A dozen metal containers similar to those used for garbage had been placed around the Arc at equal distances. The container on the right was filled with stones, and to the left of the container there was a small truck with a trailer.

A car moved slowly across the pedestrian square, a green police car with a trailer for the transportation of prisoners. Eugène-Olivier became cautious—

but then checked himself and relaxed. The invisible statistician who lived inside him reminded him that he should not concern himself today with anything out of the ordinary. No matter what happened, he should only think about his orders. He wasn't even curious; he was just pretending to pass the time.

Eugène-Olivier turned his attention to the barred back door of the car that was moving through the crowd at a snail's pace. Behind the door there was a man. The green pick-up slowed down. *Why had they brought this poor wretch here? There was no prison or courthouse.*

Only now did he notice the fresh posters glued to the walls of the Arc and the round pillars. O, how he hated to read their worm-like letters! But he didn't have to, because an Arab sitting on a bench had just unrolled a poster and prepared to read it out loud to the crowd of gathered children and women. *Maybe I should pretend I can't read, either,* thought Eugène-Olivier, pushing his way through the crowd.

"He undermined the obligations he undertook upon accepting work," read the grinning Arab.

"What exactly does that mean, Mr. Hussein?" asked a tall woman in a blue chador.

"The *giaour* promised, Aunt Mariam, that all the grapes grown on his land would be delivered to the fruit drying plant," explained the Arab patronizingly. "And he also gave false information. He blamed spillage and frost when, in fact, he was hiding grapes. And you can imagine what he was doing with them."

"Don't tell me was making wine? Oh, the beast!" The woman clapped her hands.

"Dog!"

"Infidel dog!"

"We'll show him wine! Dog!" shouted the children.

The police brought the prisoner out of the car. He turned out to be an older man, but still feisty, full of strength—judging by his walk and his still-fresh, tanned face. He was thin and wiry, with iron muscles that rippled under his flannel shirt. His baggy denim overalls were so faded that they looked almost white, and his gray cap was so burnt by the sun that it was difficult to discern the advertisement of some sports competition banned long ago. He was a farmer, it was obvious at first glance, even if one did not know that he was a winemaker. But where were they taking him? To some stupid concrete pillar

right under the Arc that hadn't been there for long.

"Kiamran, hey, Kiamran, it's about to start!" A young man in a colorful shirt, obviously drugged, went up to the metal container and began to take several stones the size of apples in his hands. Maybe he thought they really were apples. His eyes were completely white.

Holding the stones with his left hand to his chest, he continued to take more with his right. He bent over awkwardly and a stone fell on his foot. Instead of screaming in pain, he stopped and smiled to himself, as if he had heard a joke.

"Leave them, you have enough already!" the woman in the blue chador told the young man. She raised the folds of her chador like an apron and began to gather stones in it.

Behind her two other youths were already hurrying to fill their pockets; a younger, chubby one who held his cigarette in his teeth to free his hands, and a very little girl whose face was uncovered.

Was it possible that they were all drugged?

Eugène-Olivier had considered himself a soldier since the age of eleven and strictly speaking, that is what he was. For that very reason he wasn't afraid to honestly admit what another person might have tried to describe less specifically: he was afraid.

The answer was like a ball that refused to go into the basket. It was so obvious, so simple, that he saw it but didn't want to understand it. *Calm down, weakling. You have to get a grip on yourself...*

Zeynab hesitated. She wanted to take some stones, too—she could wipe her hands later with the wet, scented napkin she always carried with her—but what would happen to her manicure? She hated to ruin it; she had put on this nice polish only yesterday! Really, they could offer people of position the opportunity to buy something more practical. Or at the very least wrap the stones in clean plastic wrap. Her husband was right; they whined for social assistance and complained there were no jobs, but when they needed to make a little effort to earn some money, all they could think about was entertainment.

But the poor woman (who really had no business being in that fancy neighborhood in the first place) had armed herself so well with stones that Zeynab couldn't resist. Oh, so what if the manicure was ruined? She could touch it up in the ladies' room of the department store, and the manicurist would come again tomorrow anyway.

The policemen were already taking out special handcuffs to rivet the old man to the post. Eugène-Olivier understood everything now, of course, before

he forced himself to go back to listening in on the crowd. Completely calm (he had already seen quite a bit in his eighteen years), he was standing thirty feet from the condemned man when something extraordinary happened.

Freeing his hand from behind his back, the farmer suddenly raised his chin and seemed to nod his head with dignity, bringing his cuffed hand to his forehead, which he touched lightly with his fingers before gently bringing his hand down to his stomach, and from there to his left shoulder and then to his right.

The old man crossed himself!

It was like a signal. The policemen barely managed to rivet the farmer to the post before fleeing.

“Bismilla-ah!”

Several stones missed, and then one hit the farmer in the face and started a trail of blood. It was impossible to make anything out after that. People were shouting, whistling, laughing, as the stones flew and fell like hail on the asphalt.

“Inshall-a-ah!”

“Death to the kafir!”

“Death to the dog!”

“Death to the winemaker!”

“Subhanalla-a-ah!”

Eugène-Olivier suddenly noticed a little boy in a fluffy little white outfit, not older than three, with light chestnut curls, who moved confidently on chubby legs—in his hands was a stone.

“And what are you saving your hands for?” A young man in a black shirt, apparently less drunk than the others, approached Eugène-Olivier. Probably one of the volunteers of the religious guard. He needed to get away.

The revelry of the crowd did not last longer than fifteen minutes, and died out quickly. The bloodied body hung helplessly on its chains, the stones knee-deep. He had probably died before the stones stopped flying.

Zeynab wiped her hands with a jasmine-scented towelette. She had broken a nail after all, but the manicurist would be able to glue on a piece of plastic that would be invisible under the polish.

Eugène-Olivier slipped silently out of the crowd. Another image of their lives, just another among dozens like it. Another death, just one of thousands of deaths. What was so unusual about that?

As long as the vineyards of France were alive, there would be winemakers,

and there would be a black market. And they couldn't cut them down because they loved raisins; it seemed they couldn't make any dish that didn't contain them. And as long as there was a black market, they would hunt down wine sellers and winemakers, and publicly torture them to death, according to the *sharia*. Nevertheless, there was something that fascinated him, something very important. *Wasn't that the magnificent sign of the Cross, the wide swing, the five fingers transformed into the symbol of the five wounds of Christ? Were there still believers? But twenty years had passed since the last Mass was celebrated!*

Eugène-Olivier did not believe in God for family reasons. The Lévêque family, which had occupied a house in peaceful Versailles for a good ten generations, was once a part of the ruling class.

"We are, of course, plutocrats," Grandfather Patrice used to say. He had a sharp tongue.

"Other authorities in the Republic do not exist. But your golden calf, in any case, is an aristocrat. The Liberals have demonstrated their cleverness with triple security and electronics, like the CIA—and for what? So that an auditorium of one hundred teens jumping to the sound of rap can't be infiltrated by the one-hundred-and-first, who isn't on the list? Let them go ahead and laugh. The purpose of the market is matrimonial. We won't mix our blood with new money, even if they have more of it than we do.

"What are their millions to our thousands? If one of our own stumbles, thousands of hands will reach out to help him. If the same thing happens to one of theirs, hundreds of feet will go out to bury him deeper. Vespasian was a fool—money does have a smell, after all. Some of it even stinks. Money with a decent smell grows slowly. There are really only two things that can lend dignity to money. The first is time. Money, like good wine, needs to age properly. The second is tradition. Without our own tradition behind us, we are no one."

The Lévêque family had its own tradition. Some of the women became nuns, but not too many. Men went into the priesthood very rarely—there were too many workers' and farmers' genes in them. Nevertheless, from generation to generation, the head of the family, wearing an alb over his three-piece suit, served at festal masses at Notre Dame. The Lévêques were the hereditary altar servers of Notre Dame. This privilege did not come cheaply. They always made contributions for restorations, for benevolent purposes, for the priests' vestments. This was also a tradition.

Great-great-grandfather Antoine Philippe was the altar server during the time of the Second Vatican Council. Many old acquaintances joined the movement led by Monsignor Marcel Lefebvre in the 1970s. People of traditional orientation, even those who were not especially devout, could not accept the “democratization” of the Mass, the expulsion of the Latin language, the dismantling of the ancient altars.

A schism ensued, and many people left the Church. But not the Lévêque family, although the new form of the Mass, called the *Novus Ordo*, hurt them more than others. The reason the Lévêque family stayed in the embrace of the Catholic Church was simple. It was called Notre Dame. They could not reject the holy shrine any more than one could abandon any old friend in need. So Antoine Philippe suffered together with the Church. He endured the 15-minute-long Mass, the priest who stood facing the people (instead of the Lord), and the placement of the Sacred Gifts in the hands of the faithful.

“We can flee from the Modernists,” Antoine Philippe used to say, “but the Church cannot.”

It so happened that Patrice was the last altar server of Notre Dame. Grandfather was more than fifty years old when the Wahhabis broke into the church and began to destroy the statues and crosses in it. The priest serving that day quickly removed the nylon gown representing the chasuble he wore over his alb, which was actually a white collar attached to a red cloth with white sleeves at the sides. (The color was red because it was the day of commemoration of a martyr.) The priest had no desire to become a martyr himself. He hastily divested in the sacristy, removed the white collar from his blue shirt, and made his way to the exit. No one tried to stop him. All attention was focused on Patrice Lévêque, who stood in front of them with the most comical of weapons in his hands—the hook he normally used to adjust the high drapes.

He hit two or three Wahhabis on the head, and pushed a few more aside with jabs of the hook. The battle didn’t last more than a few minutes. Grandfather fell, his throat slit from ear to ear, bloodying the pedestal of the Holy Virgin—the one where it is said she was offering the Christ Child a stone lily. (Now that all statues have been destroyed, we cannot know whether the Christ Child was truly stretching his little hands toward the flower of France, or if this detail was added later to make the story more interesting.)

Eugène-Olivier’s childhood was dominated by this scene: the altar server who dies waging a senseless battle for Notre Dame, and the priest who flees,

removing his white collar with trembling fingers and later tossing his dangerous plastic garment underfoot—together with his vows.

Eugène-Olivier couldn't explain why he felt no sadness at his grandfather's death, and that all his thoughts about God were accompanied by the angry recollection of the traitorous priest. No, God did not exist. Only demons and punishment for such demons existed. His hand unconsciously felt for the secret pocket sewn into his stupid clothes. That was the only thing he believed in.

Pleasantly excited, Zeynab finally entered the shade of the large department store, like a huge aquarium filled with soothing semi-darkness. Of course, the room lit by hundreds of lights only looked dim to someone just entering it from a street bathed in strong sunlight.

"Madame is here to see the fashion show?" asked a store clerk wearing a mauve chador (the official color of the store) pleasantly. "It's only just begun; there are still plenty of comfortable seats in the showroom."

Zeynab gladly passed through the open glass doors into a small room where about forty women were sitting around the stage. And there was Aset, with an empty chair right next to her.

"Have you already bought the entire collection or did you leave half of it for me?" whispered Zeynab to her friend as she sat down.

"How did you know it was me?" Aset smiled through the crocheted netting covering her face. The question was rhetorical; the young woman knew no one else in the room could have the same gold-knitted clothing. Silk taffeta imported from China was hard to come by, even in Paris.

A hostess spoke into the microphone, explaining the advantages of the First Rose model. A girl ran out onto the podium wearing ankle-length black pants with gold trim and a matching micro-blouse that left her stomach bare. A casual vest of dark red crêpe de Chine accented her movements. Her lips were smeared in dark red, carefully framed with pencil. In her black hair was a red rose of crêpe de Chine whose petals mingled with her thick curls.

"Oh, how divine!" sighed Aset with resignation. "But only for a real brunette!"

Well, of course, if blonde Aset wore something like that, her husband would run away. He would say *talak* to her! But Zeynab simply must buy it; such a beautiful garment would make *Qadi* Malik happy. No matter that she was a little on the plump side; the model wasn't exactly skinny, either. Zeynab would buy it and then boast in front of Aset.

She glanced at her friend patronizingly, as she did rather often. After all,

Aset was only a first-generation true believer from a family of wealthy French industrialists who had managed to convert before the others. They had been friends since childhood and Zeynab, of course, knew about all the skeletons in her friend's closet. The old, evil woman who had died only five years ago stubbornly called the little girl Annette, even in front of her school friends! Aset would sometimes try to draw her friends' attention away with her toys, and sometimes she would yell at her grandmother, artfully avoiding her blows. It was quite funny. But in any case, Aset was not even the equal of a Turkish woman; she simply lacked what true Arab families usually have. Something was missing in people who changed their religion, and something would always be missing. They talked convincingly, but when the time came to take a stone and throw it at a *giaour*, they immediately began shying away and making excuses.

* * *

Eugène-Olivier, moving his lips out of habit, repeated all the instructions he had received from Sevazmios. Usually, he repeated everything word-for-word once an hour, but this time he did so once every half an hour. Not because he was afraid that he would forget something; it was simply pleasant through repetition to recollect her voice, intonation, eyes, the movements of her hand holding a cigarette. It was not often that one got one's orders directly from Sevazmios. What he was feeling could have been described as infatuation, but it wasn't really that. It was a special feeling of adoration unlike anything else, adoration that one can only experience during youth when the soul is still growing and absorbing ideals, disregarding age and sex. It is bodiless and savage, more like death than life.

The gleaming purple Mercedes slowly came to a stop in front of the department store. The *qadi* was sitting at the wheel. It was well known that he liked to drive new cars. But he did have a driver who could have been on the job today. Had that been the case, Eugène-Olivier would have been forced to return empty-handed. A driver (who always doubled as a bodyguard) could have spent his down-time nibbling on sunflower seeds, but he could also have decided to inspect the car one more time. An unexploded device is an awkward thing; it has fingerprints and many other things on it. One could say it is simply papered with business cards. Moreover, the next attempt would have been at least twice as difficult. But today, the *qadi* was alone.

He pulled his corpulent body out of the car with difficulty. Eugène-

Olivier's vision suddenly became focused. As if he were less than an arm's length away, he saw the round face tanned on the beach (back from Nice a week ago), the trimmed beard, the tinted eyeglasses with thin gold frames, the thirty-two unnaturally shiny porcelain implants in his calculated smile of satisfaction.

Qadi Malik was smiling. Not even an hour had passed since he had said *talak* to an attractive girl whom he had married three hours earlier through the *imam*. The girl (what was her name?) truly deserved the praise she received from his friends at the club. A lusty, red-haired girl with blue eyes and a pug nose, rounded and elastic—the body of poor Zeynab didn't bear comparison. It may be that Zeynab wasn't much fatter, but it wasn't just a question of being fat. Her thighs and buttocks were like gelatin, and they trembled under his hand like jellyfish. And were about as attractive. But this girl... ah.

So he didn't mind taking the time now to fetch his wife from the store. Zeynab must also get what she had coming to her. No rags could possibly make her attractive again in her husband's eyes, but rags themselves make women happy. *Let her be happy. A sensible man values peace in the home, and dedicates attention to each of his wives.*

Eugène-Olivier forced himself to interrupt this endlessly long moment. In actuality, he had been observing *Qadi* Malik for no more than a few seconds. *Enough, it was time! Five, four, three, two, one, go!*

Qadi Malik frowned as he shut the car door. Right in front of him, some girl—young, judging from her abrupt walk and her thinness that not even her clothing could hide—apparently mesmerized by the window display, dropped her bag of groceries. White onions began to bounce on the pavement. *Fool! What was she doing here anyway, with such cheap food? She was wasting time looking at the display window of a store where she would never be able to buy anything in her life, while her family at home was waiting for lunch!*

A few onions rolled right under the wheels of the car. The woman bent to retrieve them. *That's right, go ahead and pick them up!* Another man would have intentionally stepped on it, but *Qadi* Malik only pushed away a tomato he found in his path with his foot.

Several young men stopped to laugh. The woman swiftly gathered her groceries and put them back in her bag.

The tinted doors of the store had already begun to open, but *Qadi* Malik suddenly stopped and angrily slapped himself on the forehead. He had forgotten his cell phone! He wouldn't have gone back for it, but he was

expecting a call from Copenhagen. Every second could cost him dearly—the market wouldn't wait.

The same clumsy young woman jumped away from the car in fear. Apparently, the phone was already ringing. *Qadi* Malik hastily took it out, put it to his ear, and got back in the car. Of course, he needn't have. He could have let the phone wait and gone into the store. Or he could have simply retrieved his phone and then talked as he walked. By choosing either of these things, the eminent *qadi* of District 16 of the city of Paris could have prolonged his life by as much as half an hour. But he preferred to sit back down in the comfortable leather seat and shut the door.

Eugène-Olivier pressed the remote-control button.

The caller from Copenhagen could not understand why his client responded to his very important news by simply hanging up. He tried to call back, but *Qadi* Malik did not answer.

Zeynab and Aset stood next to the lingerie counter. The sales clerk was packing the exquisite pink teddy Aset had chosen into a mauve bag. Zeynab would have preferred a juicier tone, like raspberry. But she was sorely disappointed. In her size (50), they only had white and blue! What could possibly be worse, for a pale brunette! It was an insult, pure and simple. They had said they could order it. Of course they could order it, but she wanted it today! She was tempted to pinch the poor sales clerk until she hurt her, and Aset, too—who was nonchalantly writing out a check with a diamond-encrusted pen.

“Shall we have a coffee, my dear?” asked Aset, replacing the gold pen cap. “I just can't resist their *baklava* .”

“But of course.” Zeynab hid her annoyance and decided she would have a glass of pomegranate juice.

She was not sure if her best friend had mentioned the *baklava* casually, or if she were alluding to the fact that not every woman had to watch what she ate for fear of gaining weight. It was true that the *baklava* here was superb; maybe she would allow herself just a small piece after all.

The two friends were already walking toward a corner with comfortable mahogany chairs when the glass wall behind the counter shattered into thousands of brilliant pieces. An entire sky of sunlight burst into the aquarium-like dimness of the store. The blue sky outside started filling with billows of smoke. Shoppers on the store's second floor looked down to see throngs of people running and screaming below.

But all the screaming was soon drowned out by the siren. It wailed above the crowd like a mortally wounded leviathan. Eugène-Olivier got up from the asphalt, where he had been crouching. As could be expected, the fact that someone had dived to the sidewalk a split second before the explosion had gone unnoticed.

The ambulance parted the throng of people. It wasn't clear where they were heading—some were running away from the scene of the explosion, while others approached out of curiosity. The result was chaos.

One of the youngest store employees, not a sales clerk but a cleaning woman, carefully made her way through the glass and hurried out to look, still wearing her rubber gloves, not in the least concerned that her face was uncovered. Who would punish her now?

“What is it, Shabina?” shouted a woman with a manager's card, staying at the counter with its samples of silk drapery.

“An explosion!” the girl called back.

The mellifluous voice of the girl clashed with the bass of the siren and carried well on the upper floor. “They've blown up a car, a purple Mercedes, right in the parking lot! A fancy SUV; I saw it parking! They're not even trying to pull out the driver; the car is burning like a torch. There's a man behind the wheel. He's all in flames. The firemen are not even trying to put him out! The ambulance is here, too, but the doctor just waved his hand and went to help the wounded; he didn't even approach the Mercedes. They blew it up right in our parking lot!”

Zeynab turned to stone. A purple Mercedes SUV in the store parking lot! Ten minutes ago, as she and Aset entered the lingerie department, *Qadi* Malik had called on the phone to tell her he was on his way.

Zeynab was certain that she had become a widow. But it was not because of the car—there were other such vehicles! No, the horrible conviction came from another source, a savage sense that she had been humiliated. It was as if she had been robbed, tricked, deceived by someone looking her straight in the eyes, by invisible enemies who were now laughing and pointing a finger at her. The First Rose dress had been bought in vain, the raspberry teddy had been ordered in vain, the bottle of Opium perfume was packed in vain, and different colors of hair gel, the plush shoes and pearl clutch. All her purchases had been in vain, and there would be no others. Her brother-in-law's wife, the evil Emina (a plain Turkish woman who had always been jealous of Zeynab,) would take care that the widow respected the customs. All the customs.

Standing next to Zeynab, Aset did not know how to stop herself from trembling. She suddenly remembered her Grandma Madeleine, who refused to leave the house for the last ten years of her life—just so she would not have to put on a chador.

“You are shapeless, utterly shapeless! You are not women, you are uglier than frogs,” she would say, shaking her stubborn head. “Since your mouth is already covered by fabric, then at least keep it shut! Do not be a shapeless, mouthless pile of screeching cloth!”

Zeynab was wailing spasmodically next to Aset—who was suddenly overcome with unexpected disgust. She found no strength to help her friend. Soon the wailing stopped. Zeynab slumped and fell.

No one, of course, even attempted to put out the red flames licking up through the metal shell of the vehicle. When it finished burning, the crime inspectors would come. The loiterers standing next to Eugène-Olivier were arguing about the best and worst features of the model of SUV burning before them. Eugène-Olivier dropped the remote control into his deepest pocket and moved back several steps. He turned around and began walking. Slowly, even more slowly!

Planting a magnetized device under the raised floor of an SUV was less than half the work. Much more difficult than organizing an explosion was walking away slowly, instead of rushing to escape. Eugène-Olivier, who imagined for his own reasons that Sevazmios was watching him, forced himself to occasionally stop or slow down, imitating someone whose curiosity was occasionally overcoming his fear. The stupid clothing would protect him; the only important thing had been to choose it correctly.

“ATTENTION! ATTENTION! REMAIN IN YOUR PLACES! SEAL OFF THE STREET AT THE INTERSECTIONS!”

Wasn’t technology wonderful? A policeman’s voice suddenly came through on the loudspeaker normally reserved for the call of the *muezzin*. Earlier, they wouldn’t have thought of using it. Now they would place a vehicle in the middle of the street to block it off, and then they would start checking everyone, without exception.

Luckily, the intersection was near.

Eugène-Olivier bolted toward it as one hustles toward an elevator whose doors have begun to close.

He was running now, moving in such a way that the wind flapped his uncomfortable clothing around, billowing the sleeves like sails, lifting the hem

he was holding; he didn't care about authenticity any more. A young black man, obviously one of the volunteer deputies of the religious guard, tried to trip him with his foot—since his hands were busy with the pie he had just bought, and he had no intention of putting down the pie for the sake of catching some criminal. But he had to say goodbye to his pie stuffed with mutton and red peppers anyway when Eugène-Olivier kicked him in the knee as he ran. The kicked youth fell, and the pie began to roll around on the pavement. The crowd did nothing, simply milling around on the sidewalk, because they feared the fugitive might have a pistol. Eugène-Olivier didn't. The police did. A few shots rang out above the wailing of the sirens.

Shelter was not far away, about ten minutes. It was a very special place, used only in exceptional cases. Actually, he doubted there could be anywhere to hide near the Champs-Élysées. But the address he had learned only this morning was carved in his memory as if he had always lived there. Here it was, a two-story building from the nineteenth century.

Vaulting up the marble steps of the main entrance, Eugène-Olivier hurried toward the side door. An old electric buzzer that must have been a hundred years old rang shrilly. The intercom came on.

“Hello?”

A stupid word, even the Arabs could pronounce it correctly. And the voice was young, female.

“Artos.” He didn't even try to guess who had come up with the secret code. Someone, somewhere still liked Greek words.

“Inos,” she replied, and the door cracked open. The figure of a shortish girl appeared out of the semi-darkness on a dim, narrow, steep little staircase.

She motioned him into the shadows, murmuring, “*Faster, faster!*” The girl opened the door wider, and with an impatient gesture caught him by the arm and pulled him in.

The door bolt fell back in place.

“Follow me.” The girl did not continue up the stairs, but stepped around them into a small, glass-enclosed veranda that led to an inner courtyard. Usually such verandas are used for flowerpots. But here, there was a pile of newspapers and an almost-full case of Perrier.

“Wow, your heart is really pounding,” said the girl, using her foot to push open the unlocked door while she grabbed a bottle from the case. “Take those rags off. You want some water?”

“No,” answered Eugène-Olivier in an unexpectedly hoarse voice. He

followed the girl. The courtyard, which had once been enclosed only by hedges, was now hidden from the world in accordance with Muslim custom by a solid concrete wall. Conveniently, as it turned out.

* * *

Here were several trees once sculpted to make the shape of a pyramid, but now uneven, a lawn, and a garage door on the wall leading to the street. Eugène-Olivier looked around the drab place with curiosity before he took a closer look at the girl.

She was about sixteen years old with chestnut brown hair, slightly wavy, inexpertly trimmed with scissors. The haircut looked like that of a medieval boy page. Her clothing was also boyish—worn-out jeans and a blue-and-white checked shirt with sleeves rolled to the elbow and an unbuttoned collar. But her figure was not at all boyish, although not fully mature. She looked plumper than she really was.

“Relax,” said the girl, opening the bottle and taking a sip of water. “This is the safest place in all of Paris. You can start stripping.”

“The safest place,” snapped Eugène-Olivier, nevertheless removing his chador. “Even if all your documents are in order, where are you going to hide a stranger when they start combing the neighborhood? They could be here in fifteen minutes.”

“In fifteen minutes we won’t be here,” she said with a smile. Her mouth was small and soft pink, and even after she stopped smiling, the smile remained in the corners of her lips. Eugène-Olivier’s heart really was beating more strongly. He was still enjoying her simplicity and naturalness in grabbing his arm with her small, firm hand to pull him through the door to the staircase—a young man she didn’t even know. It was like something her grandmother might have done in her youth, and so different from her peers today. They might have done the same thing just to prove to themselves that they were not poor Muslim girls. But violating the *haraam* they were under constant pressure. They reluctantly thought about how it all might end, and their moves were unnatural and affected. But she acted indifferent to danger.

Not suspecting the storm she had awoken, the girl stood before him, sipping her water, which sparkled with tiny bubbles. With her head tossed back and her shirt unbuttoned at the collar, her raised hand stretched the worn fabric in such a way as to leave no doubt—there was no trace of a brassiere underneath.

Eugène-Olivier had traveled several times to regions where Muslims still

permitted women in the streets with the upper part of their face uncovered. He would remember the eyes of these Muslim women forever—with their eyelashes lengthened with mascara or simply glued on, edged with pencil, with metallic shadow on their eyelids, or eyeshadow that glittered, or eyeshadow that changed color. You could argue with those eyes the women looked less decent than if they had been completely nude. Whereas this girl with her bare neck and arms, with small breasts swelling against a shirt that had become too tight for them shone from within with chastity.

She took another sip. Eugène-Olivier would really have liked to have had some water from her bottle, but not because of thirst. She noticed his intense gaze.

“Hey, what’s the matter, are my ears green?” The empty bottle went into the wooden trash receptacle standing on the asphalt. “Let’s go!”

The girl approached the garage. Behind the open door there was an old Citroën that didn’t take up a lot of room. She began to move a toolbox standing beside the wall.

Eugène-Olivier also started pushing the box. It was so heavy, you would have thought the tools in it were made of lead.

“I’m Eugène-Olivier,” he said, continuing to push.

“I’m Jeanne.”

Eugène-Olivier had never met a girl named Jeanne before in his life. His father once told him that by the end of the twentieth century, this name, once so popular, had almost disappeared. City dwellers had begun to consider it too peasant-like and vulgar. Then people in the villages tried to show the city dwellers that they, too, were sophisticated and could name their daughters Renée and Leonie.

“It was already clear then that France would fare badly without girls named Jeanne,” his father had told him. “If we had had a daughter, that’s what we would have named her. But unfortunately, you don’t have a sister.”

“What a rare name you have,” said Eugène-Olivier.

They looked at each other and smiled, their heads almost touching over the rough boards. The box suddenly moved, as if it were on rails—which in fact, it was.

There was a trap door underneath, revealing stairs that led down. They looked nothing like the ordinary wooden stairs in Paris houses. Made of lightweight metal, they had a certain elegance.

At the bottom of the steps was a metal cubicle lit by the glare of a

fluorescent lamp. Two panels on one wall parted like the doors of an elevator. Beyond them a small passage appeared, and another sliding door, leading to a long, winding corridor.

The corridor was not dank like a sewer depot or a rat-infested subway tunnel, or even like the passageway of a crypt from ancient times (there were a lot of those under Paris). The floor had tiles the color of sour cherries, without a single scratch or nick. The flat walls might have been smooth concrete, but were painted a glossy gray. A row of dimly glowing bulbs on the ceiling lighted the way down the corridor.

“You’ve never been in a place like this?” There was a hint of boastfulness in Jeanne’s voice—as if to suggest that although she didn’t personally build these corridors, she had ruled them for at least two or three generations. “Luxurious, isn’t it?”

“Almost too luxurious.” Eugène-Olivier could not hide his enthusiasm. “What is this place?”

“It’s a bomb shelter. It’s very old, almost a hundred years.”

“From World War II? The time of Hitler?” Eugène-Olivier was pleased to display a little knowledge of history once again.

“Oh, no, about ten years later.”

“What kind of bombs were they hiding from?” Apparently he should not have rushed to demonstrate his knowledge of history.

“There were no bombs.” Jeanne was walking in front, and her walk seemed to be that of a girl younger than herself. “They were simply very afraid of nuclear war. So just in case, they dug a lot of places like this one. They’ve come in very handy for us. This one had entrances in several different locations and it could hold about a dozen families from the neighborhood.”

The corridor was interrupted by yet another metal door. It was oval and also discreetly attractive. In front of the door there was a stool, on which was a white plastic bowl filled with water.

“What’s the water for?”

“Maybe it’s used to breed fish?” She was obviously kidding. “All right, let’s join the others. There’s no point in staying here by ourselves.”

Eugène-Olivier wouldn’t have minded if they stayed by themselves, but there was work to be done.

The doors were sound-proof. As soon as they opened, one could hear voices.

In the enormous room, people filled two rows of tables with benches. Some

were reading books. Others talked in small groups, speaking in low voices. There was a tall, old man with gray hair tied back in a ponytail like a lord from the eighteenth century. He welcomed them with a nod. The crowd was mostly old, but to Eugène-Olivier's surprise, there were also children among them, even babies less than a year old. The children seemed unusually well behaved—very different from the Muslim children in the streets. A little boy of about three sat on the floor with great dignity, playing with a simple toy that looked like a turquoise necklace, with beads of varying size.

The women's clothing was an obvious rejection of Muslim dress — they did not even wear turtlenecks. Older women wore blouses with collars; the young women had denim jackets and men's T-shirts.

On the other side of the room there was another door, quite small, which now opened. A man entered. When he saw him, Eugène-Olivier concluded that all this must be a part of a dream, along with Jeanne and the strange, elegant underground of the war that never was.

The man who entered was a priest—but not the sort of priest Eugène-Olivier had seen in photographs of the last days of Notre Dame Cathedral. He looked as if he had just stepped out of a time machine from centuries ago.

His bell-bottomed black cassock was closed by a row of cloth-covered buttons that started at his neck and went down to the floor. There were thirty-three of those buttons, but Eugène-Olivier would not find that out—or why—until much later. The tall, light-haired priest was young, although his stiff expression made him seem much older. The room fell silent as he entered.

“Today there will be no Mass,” he said in a melodious, husky voice. “Our wine provider has fallen into the hands of the Muslims. May the Lord grant repose to his soul.”

CHAPTER 2

VALERIE

“Poor Monsieur Simoulin!” said an old woman in a purple blouse that set off her gray hair. Her voice was measured, but Eugène-Olivier noticed that her thin body was trembling. “As a widower, he neglected all caution. No, not neglected it, but threw it away like a thing no longer needed.”

“I spoke with him by telephone two days ago,” said the long-haired old man softly. “He was aware that it would have been better not to work for a week or two, but he really wanted today’s feast to be commemorated. He knew that the last bottle of wine had been opened and the last cruet used during the last Mass.

“Today the vestments are red, because the Apostle John before the Latin Gate is willing to accept the martyr’s wreath—even though martyrdom does not come to him. But it is appropriate that the vestments are red, because now another martyr will be remembered on this day.”

“And I thought he was a smuggler,” Eugène-Olivier whispered to Jeanne.

“You thought?...” Jeanne clenched her fists. “You... you *saw*? You saw something?”

“An hour ago.”

Others also spoke. Some of the women wept. But the priest said nothing more. He turned and walked toward the wall. How could Eugène-Olivier not have seen the crucifix he was wearing right away? He now realized that the chest-high platform covered with a white cloth was the altar. The priest knelt. Silence fell. All that could be heard was the rustling of the pages of small books with many ribbons marking pages.

Eugène-Olivier welcomed the silence, which let him collect his thoughts. Where did the priest come from? If there was a priest, there must be a bishop; and if there was a bishop, there should also be a Pope. But there had been no Pope for some time. The last one had renounced the Throne of St. Peter back in 2031. The Vatican itself had been leveled to the ground a long time ago and was now used as a garbage dump for the entire city of Rome.

The little boy was still playing with his beads. How could Eugène-Olivier have not seen the small cross among them?

Now everything seemed different. The small images on the walls represented moments on Christ’s path to the Cross. Also hanging from the wall was a silver icon lamp that had not been used today. The altar was set apart by

a symbolic barrier—two rope-lines, one in front of the other.

And how impressive, when one looked at it closely, was the cap on the priest's head! Such caps were not even worn in the middle of the last century by the Lefebvrists, judging from the photos. It was a small, black cap, square in shape, with four corners and a tassel of soft wool.

The priest periodically removed the cap, pressed it to his breast, bowed his head, then put the cap on again.

During the silence of prayer, the muffled sobbing slowly faded. Then there was a whispering silence. The people were all doing things—reading from their books, murmuring prayers, making the sign of the cross, kissing small cards they pulled from their pockets—all except Eugène-Olivier. Finally, the priest arose.

“He really liked to carve wood,” Jeanne remarked aloud, addressing no one in particular. “He made everything they had on the farm himself—the doors and the furniture.”

“The hardest part was getting the wood,” said the long-haired old man with a smile. “Furniture factories today use wood right from the tree, before it has a chance to dry. That's why it cracks. Simoulin bought barrels that were not fit for apple juice. Then he'd straighten the boards in water and let them dry. He said his work would last more than a hundred years. It was a whole philosophy. He would say that trees did not die when they were cut down if they were used to make something—but lived a new life, like man after his physical death.”

“And how he hated varnish!” added another man, also well on in years. “I remember he used to say ‘Wood needs to breathe! Imagine if I painted you with a coat of varnish. In a week I would have to bury you!’ ”

Everyone fell silent.

The priest announced, “I have forbidden Jacques le Difarre and young Thomas Bordelaise to even try to reach the place where he was stoned. One victim today is more than enough.”

“You were right, Father. The last attempt was unsuccessful, and we lost three more.”

People began to disperse. Before leaving, groups of them knelt before the priest, as in old times. He would hold up his hand, make the sign of the Cross in the air and say:

“Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus, in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.”

Latin! Eugène-Olivier had studied Latin with his Grandfather Patrice, but he'd never finished his studies.

"Who are these people?" whispered Eugène-Olivier.

"You've never met them before? They let us use their shelters. Sometimes they hide with us, too. But they don't fight the Saracens, they just keep the liturgy. They don't want to fight. They believe that the Crusades can't be repeated, and that there can be no more good on Earth. Until Judgment Day, they simply want the Mass to continue to exist as long as there are even a few Christians. There are three parishes in Paris. Christians began in the catacombs, and now they are going back to the catacombs."

"But where do they live?"

"In the ghettos."

Eugène-Olivier was startled. He often went to each of the five large ghettos of Paris where the defeated French lived who refused to convert to Islam. Their life behind barbed wire was miserable and hopeless, with horrible poverty and misery. There were daily deaths at the hands of policemen—who considered "infidels" equal to dogs. But the ghetto residents took great pleasure in spitting at the cries of the *muezzin* while sitting in a street cafe, knowing that the collaborationists in their luxurious houses on the other side of the barbed wire were fearfully on their way to a mosque to bow on their faces toward a rock thousands of miles away, with their rear ends in the air.

It was mortally dangerous to make wine in the ghettos. Women went out of their houses with scarves on their heads because if they were seen scarfless, the police had the right to kill them. But they did not cover their faces!

The inhabitants of the ghetto remained French. They taught their children as best they could, even though there were few books left. Every *Astérix* comic book, every *Babar the Elephant* book, was falling apart, handed down from generation to generation as long as anything could be discerned on the worn pages. Sometimes there were random police raids on the ghettos, depleting these small, personal libraries even further.

But there was something much worse. Occasionally, whether arbitrarily or as part of some strategy, the religious police would decide to harass one family. An *imam* would start visiting the house. Young assistants who were even more aggressive would follow him.

It was painful to look at the petrified faces of the family members. They knew, as did everyone around them, that in three months—no one knew why it was exactly three—in the morning the neighbors would see either a moving

truck transporting the new converts to a Muslim quarter, or an empty house or apartment with closed blinds and the door swinging open. On the thresholds of the empty dwellings, young people would sometimes take the risk of lighting candles.

So there were believers living in the ghetto!

“Where did they come from? Didn’t the Pope dissolve the Church?”

“He had no authority to dissolve it. Christ told them from the beginning that the gates of hell shall not prevail against His Church.”

“Why do you keep saying ‘them’? Aren’t you one of them?”

“I’m from the *Maquis*, ” Jeanne said irritably. “No, I’m not from here. Don’t ask me any more questions, OK?”

Well, fine, if I’m not supposed to ask any more questions, I won’t. But if Jeanne was in the Resistance Movement—but not the one led by Sevazmios, since they had never met—that meant they would see each other again. If he asked her point-blank if he could see her again, she would know why, and she would surely tease him. And how could he ask her anyway, since they had practically just met? No, far easier to blow up ten more qadis! He didn’t have to propose or ask them anything! He had to spend at least 24 hours here. What about her?

“Let’s go talk to Father Lothair,” said Jeanne, jumping up. She had no doubt that Eugène-Olivier would follow her.

Oh, what a name, Lothair! The smell of heraldic lilies permeated the half-darkness of the underground. There had been some snobs in the Lévêque family, but not even they had gone to such extremes. However, Eugène-Olivier did not want to talk to the priest, even if he was called Father Peter.

But what could he do? He was here on business, and the priest, it appeared, was the boss. Eugène-Olivier would just make it clear by his behavior that spiritual matters did not interest him at all.

Jeanne, however, casting a sideways glance at her guest as if it pleased her to shock him, bent down before the priest on one knee like a boy and bowed her head.

“Jube, domine, benedicere!”

“Hello, little Jeanne,” the priest’s lips were smiling but in his eyes, fixed on the light-colored head, there was a flash of pain. *“Benedicat te omnipotens Deus...”*

“Father Lothair, this is Eugène-Olivier from the Resistance Movement.” Jeanne was already dusting her jeans. “He will be waiting with us until his

new documents are delivered from Colombes.”

“I remember, Jeanne.” Apparently, Father Lothair could not help smiling good-naturedly when looking at the girl. He turned to Eugène-Olivier. “Apparently you’ve not had an easy morning.”

“I’ve been rewarded with a whole day of rest in a place more beautiful than the Côte d’Azur.” Eugène-Olivier was pleased that he had resisted making the shocking remark that it had been a trifle, nothing at all. It would have been very cheap, and the priest would have noted it immediately.

“You are here for the first time,” Father Lothair said, observing Eugène-Olivier intently, confident that he had the right to be curious. “Strange place, isn’t it? It was created at a time when people thought religion was an old-fashioned eccentricity—just because they had managed to fly a few dogs and a monkey around our sinful planet. They thought a lot about the future, which they were sure would see the unimaginable flowering of all sciences and artificial forms of intelligence. I’ve read books from those years. The only thing that the worshippers of progress of that time could not imagine was our present. None of them could have even dreamed what their shelters would be used for, and by whom.”

“I don’t believe in God.” Eugène-Olivier looked the priest in the eyes. “How could He have allowed them... to install foot baths in Notre Dame?”

“Was He the one who allowed that?” responded Father Lothair. “We did, or our ancestors did. First, by treating Notre Dame as an architectural monument instead of the house of the Throne of God. That’s what they did during the entire 20th century: appease and appease. Speaking of ancestors, yours must have been from Normandy; I’m sure they were.”

“Probably, I don’t remember.” The question of his origin didn’t particularly interest Eugène-Olivier, but it was clear the priest wanted to change the subject. “We lived in Versailles for a long time—before, of course.”

“Still, there’s no question. The upper part of your face even looks like Jeanne’s.” Father Lothair glanced at the girl. “And she’s a typical woman of Normandy. When I was a boy, I saw a portrait of Charlotte Corday. It was painted almost thirty years after her death. She was rendered as a generic beauty, I think—nothing to do with the subject. But whenever I see Jeanne, I like to think that I am looking at Charlotte’s real portrait. And it’s quite likely that I am. Charlotte was a girl from Caen. And there are hundreds of girls like Jeanne in Caen today.”

“How awful,” said Jeanne, “Hundreds of girls with thin hair and short

legs!”

“And you would prefer you looked more like Miss Universe of 2023 than Charlotte Corday?” asked the priest.

“Miss Universe—what’s that, Father?” asked Jeanne, jokingly. “The best paid model of the year?”

“No, just the winner of a beauty contest. They were not only models, but students and hairstylists, librarians... There was even a police officer’s wife,” sighed Father Lothair. “I always feel so terribly old when I realize how little you know about the old world.”

Father Lothair was certainly not an old man; he looked somewhere between 30 and 35. But in order not to make him feel even older, Eugène-Olivier did not ask him who Charlotte Corday was. A nurse shot during World War I? Probably.

Another woman, tall and slender, entered the church. Eugène-Olivier saw her out of the corner of his eye before he realized who she was.

“Oh!” Jeanne’s eyes opened wide with surprise

From afar she looked young, thanks to her narrow hips and quick, youthful gait. Her long, dark hair seemed to have an inner silver glow; it was straight and fell to her fragile shoulders. But when she moved closer, it became evident that the glow was because the dark strands were abundantly mixed with gray. Not only was she not young, she was at least 60. But in her narrow, black jeans, a black turtleneck, running shoes, and a light jacket, Sophia Sevazmios wasn’t exactly old. The most feared of the seven leaders of the Resistance Movement Army— *Maquis* for short—for the moment, she lived outside of time.

Eugène-Olivier saw Jeanne’s gaze slide involuntarily to Sophia’s left hand, in its thin leather glove.

“I take it off when I walk around in their neighborhoods at night,” said Sophia with a smile. You know the song, don’t you? Good day, Father.”

“Yes.” Jeanne blushed, and Eugène-Olivier discovered with new delight that her blush was somehow English, not warm, but decidedly cool. “I’m glad to see you, Sophia,” said Father Lothair, grinning like a little boy. “This is Jeanne Saintville and I don’t think I need to introduce the young man to you. I imagine you’ve already met today.”

“You’re an impossible man to surprise, Father.” Sophia’s hand reached toward a large pocket but seeing the altar, she changed her mind.

“You can sit with me in the sacristy since you can’t survive half an hour

without your cigarettes with the Mesopotamian name,” Father Lothair said, motioning toward the small door with his hand.

“The cigarettes are called Belomorkanal. As far as the young man is concerned, it would seem that the late *qadi* —by an incredible coincidence, I must say—was responsible for the new use of the Arc de Triomphe. Of course, we didn’t know that the first victim would be Simoulin. Two days more and we might have been able to save him, but time was in their favor.”

“We need not pity him any longer—now he pities us,” Father Lothair said, opening the metal door to let in Sophia, Jeanne, and Eugène-Olivier. “I have another guest here, but I don’t think she’ll complain about the smoke.”

In the so-called sacristy, a room with a wardrobe, a desk and a few armchairs, there at first appeared to be no one. Eugène-Olivier’s attention was drawn by the bulky clothes hangers, each of which held vestments of velvet and brocade. Closest to him was a chasuble that even *looked* heavy, made of dark red brocade, embroidered with dark gold thread and eaten in places by moths. The gold thread formed the letters “I”, “H” and “S.” Eugène-Olivier knew that they meant “Jesus,” but he couldn’t remember how.

Hiding behind the hangers was one of the children who had been brought to hear Mass. She was apparently in the mood to play hide-and-seek.

“Hey, I see you, come out!” Eugène-Olivier called softly.

The little girl peeked out from behind the chasuble to one side and then the other before emerging. She was about eight years old, maybe less, and as pretty as a picture in a children’s book.

Something else about her appearance startled Eugène-Olivier: Her light-colored curls, probably the color of flax, were so dirty that they looked like dark ash, and fell to her waist uncombed. Her sole article of clothing was a gray man’s T-shirt, printed with an advertisement for Monoprix supermarkets. The T-shirt fell over her knees like a dress. But because the neck opening was too wide, one or the other of her skinny shoulders peeked out when she moved. The little girl’s shapely bare feet stood on the tile floor as confidently as if she had never worn shoes. No wonder she had managed to cut herself! There was blood on her little feet.

The little girl stared at Eugène-Olivier with enormous blue eyes. One tangled curl annoyed her by falling across her face. She impatiently pushed it away with her hand. On her little palm, which looked as if it had been carved from ivory, there was also blood.

“Valerie!” Jeanne called her in a soft voice. “Valerie, I have something for

you, come here!”

The little girl paid no attention. She continued to gaze at Eugène-Olivier.

“So you sent the devil back to hell and you think the job is finished?” Valerie finally said. “But the Mother of God is still crying. Do you know where she lives? She has a big, beautiful house with multi-colored windows. But the buttocks are in her house now. She didn’t invite them, but they came anyway. The Mother of God doesn’t want the buttocks to go there anymore. Come on, do something—you’re grown ups!”

Father Lothair and Sophia observed the girl with sadness, but without surprise. Jeanne got down on her knees and pulled a big, round Chupa Chups lollipop from her pocket and tried to lure the girl, holding the candy toward her in her outstretched hand.

“I don’t want it!” Annoyed, the little girl pushed the candy away. Her left hand was also wounded, quite strangely, in exactly the same place as her right—in the middle of the palm. Her bare feet were also injured identically, just above the toes. Although they were not large, all four wounds were bleeding.

“Come on, please take it, Valerie,” Jeanne cajoled her. “I stole the lollipop just for you. The buttocks could have caught me! But you don’t want it and my feelings are hurt.”

The little girl made a face and reluctantly took the candy but she did not unwrap it; she pressed it in her hand and approached Sophia Sevazmios.

“Sophia, dear Sophia, do something so they can’t go there anymore! You can do it, I know you can!”

“No, Valerie, I can’t. For you I would, but really I cannot.” Sophia Sevazmios spoke with the child as if she were speaking to an equal, although her voice softened a little. “Please understand that my soldiers and I cannot expel the buttocks from Her house as you would like us to do. My army is so small we couldn’t hold Notre Dame for a week.”

“You can, you just don’t want to know how! And I can’t help you! The Mother of God won’t let me help you!” And Valerie burst into tears, smearing dirty rivulets on her face.

“What is this all about? How did she hurt herself like that?” Eugène-Olivier asked Jeanne quietly. They moved away from the priest and Sophia. “Why doesn’t someone bandage her wounds?”

“She didn’t hurt herself,” Jeanne looked at Eugène-Olivier peculiarly.

“Look, you don’t stab yourself like that by accident! How did she get those wounds? Who would dare do such a thing to her?”

"I guess you don't know about stigmata."

"No." The word seemed vaguely familiar, like the letters IHS.

"The wounds of Christ... They appear of their own accord, and they bleed. It happens to some saints, to the righteous. Valerie is a fool for Christ. She knows everything about everyone; it's impossible to deceive her."

"Why does she call the Muslims 'buttocks'?"

"Have you ever seen them at prayer—at *salah*?"

"Of course."

"What's the only part of them you see?"

Eugène-Olivier whistled.

"She's little. She says what she sees. If only you knew how afraid they are of her! She goes all over Paris and threatens them with her fists and she stamps her foot at them... But most of all, she loves Notre Dame."

"Notre Dame?" Eugène-Olivier couldn't help noticing that Notre Dame had been on his mind all day, painfully reminding him of its existence.

"Yes, she calls it the house of the Mother of God. And she wants us to expel them from it. She often goes around crying because it's now a mosque—"

Just then, Valerie came running up to Eugène-Olivier. "Your grandfather was good," she said very seriously. "He's in Heaven now. And you, will you chase them out?"

She moved closer to Eugène-Olivier, then turned around and headed toward the door. She sang softly in a remarkably pure, ethereal voice:

Meunier, tu dors,

ton moulin va trop vite!

Meunier, tu dors,

ton moulin va trop fort!

("Miller, you're sleeping!

Your mill turns too quickly!

Miller, you're sleeping!

Your mill goes too fast!")

Her little figure, a statuette dressed in rags, had almost reached the door. But first she turned, faced Eugène-Olivier once more and shook her finger sternly.

"I don't know anything about your grandfather," said Jeanne, "but now you probably understand why everyone is so afraid of her."

Tears fell from Jeanne's gray eyes and their black lashes as she watched Valerie depart. Jeanne did not seem to notice that she was crying.

“No one knows where she came from or what happened to her family. She’s always barefoot, even in winter, and she sleeps in the streets. Don’t even bother offering her shoes and warm clothes. Once in a while I manage to bathe her or at least comb her hair. But for that, I have to catch her in a particularly good mood. What she is, I can’t imagine. I think sometimes she eats nothing all week except the Holy Eucharist. She loves to nibble on the leftover hosts; Father Lothair always leaves them for her.”

“I told Father Lothair that I don’t believe in God and he intentionally changed the subject,” said Eugène-Olivier.

“I should warn you he’s quite sly.”

“And you... you *do* believe?”

“Of course,” she said with surprise. “I’m not a fool.”

“Thanks. Then why are you killing them? Aren’t you supposed to sit and pray or something?”

“I asked you not to ask me that!” said Jeanne intensely. “You’ve touched a sore spot. A very sore spot. During the Crusades, I would have lived well, but my soul is really not mature enough for Judgment Day. Or maybe I’m not brave enough. Don’t laugh, but it’s true: It takes more courage to sit, pray and wait for someone to come and kill you than to fight a war.”

“I understand.” Eugène-Olivier really did understand. Only an hour ago, he couldn’t have imagined anything of the sort.

Sophia had finally taken her box of cigarettes, pulled one out, flattened it with her fingers, and put it into her cigarette holder.

“Unhappy girl,” she said, blowing out smoke.

“The girl is extremely unhappy,” replied Father Lothair. “But I’m not talking about the younger girl. I mean the older one. Valerie is above our human understanding. She has consolations available to her that we cannot even imagine. But Jeanne Saintville is torn in two by her heart and her soul. Like evenly matched horses.”

“For you, those are two different things. For me, they are not.”

“Is that true, Sophia? Have you forgotten what they have threatened us with these days?”

“Of course not. I really want to tell you something, Father. Perhaps tonight. Would that be possible?”

“Closer to midnight, yes. Now I must go to the ghetto to someone who is dying. God knows how long I will stay there. But after that, I will wait for you.”

Jeanne was already running through the corridor leading to the church, confusing Eugène-Olivier, who was following her. In front of the next metal gate, she stopped and pressed some kind of metal plate.

“Here it is, the cell for guests. Normally, it’s used by visiting monks.”

The tiny room looked more like a ship’s cabin in the old films. Only there was no porthole. The ceiling was right above one’s head, and the bed was attached to the wall. Jeanne opened and closed the wardrobe doors a few times, showing empty shelves for clothing, some folded blankets and a few books. There was a small shower behind frosted glass in one corner. There was nothing else except a glass table with a single, asymmetrical leg. At this point, Eugène-Olivier was not surprised by the small, wooden cross on the wall with some juniper branches stuck behind it.

“Classy. Just like Hotel Lutetia.”

“And here is the hotel map.” Jeanne pulled a sheet of paper out of the closet with a map sketched on it. “The bomb shelter is really not as big as it looks, but if you don’t know the layout, you can get lost. What kind of documents are being prepared for you?”

“The usual, ghetto inhabitant with exit rights. What I’ll be doing outside the ghetto, I don’t know yet. Most likely a street cleaner.”

“A collaborator’s ID is better, you have more freedom of movement.”

“And do gymnastics? No way!”

Jeanne nodded knowingly. The eyes of the young man and the girl met. To “do gymnastics” in young people’s slang meant *salah*— to bow at Muslim prayer with your fanny in the air. As far as paperwork was concerned, radical sharia law, because it forbade pictures of faces, worked in favor of underground fighters: It could be changed as many times as necessary. No one looked at faces. And since women were basically not to be seen, you could give a woman’s documents to a man.

The only problem was fingerprints. That was how identity was determined. But in order to catch anyone that way, the authorities had to pull up the electronic database, and nobody wanted to take the trouble. There was no photo you could put up at every street corner. There wasn’t a computer-generated portrait you could show to witnesses.

As early as the first decade of the twenty-first century—well before the revolution—Muslim women had won the right to cover their hair and ears in photographs. Ten years later, they had the right not to be photographed at all, in order not to show their chaste faces in front of brazen state officials. After the

revolution, all that was left to do was to add that any image of the human face was inherently sinful—it being a Muslim belief that making any image of a *living thing* is sinful.

Eugène-Olivier knew that the higher and middle echelons of the police, comprised of educated men from families who had lived in France for three or four generations, were doing everything possible to encourage the return to the use of photographs in official documents, at least for men. They understood how much easier this would make the lives of the police, and how much it would complicate things for illegals. But, luckily, those efforts clashed with the conservatism of government circles.

“All right then, if you need anything, just follow the map! There’s always somebody here.”

Then Jeanne slipped out the door.

Eugène-Olivier peered into the closet: four identical volumes bound in leather impressed with Christ’s monogram—breviaries. Divided into three trimesters, apparently. There were embarrassingly few ordinary books: There was a biography of Monseigneur Marcel Lefebvre published at the beginning of the century. There were a few children’s books: *The Little Duke* by Charlott Mary Yonge, in English, and *Sire* by Jean Raspail. Now that was much better! He had started reading *Sire* once but he didn’t get to finish it. It was in the ghetto and the book was confiscated from its owners.

Eugène-Olivier pulled the bed down from the wall and lay down. He could read for the next twenty-four hours!

The day itself had been a rather successful one. He had “sent the devil back to hell,” seen yet another sharia-style execution, found real Christians, seen Sophia Sevazmios and spoken with her again, and moreover, he... The open book slid slowly from his hands. But the face that then appeared before his closed eyes was not the sweet, unbearably dear face of Jeanne. It was the amazingly pretty face of little Valerie—glowering with anger.

CHAPTER 3

SLOBODAN

Gusts of spring wind played in the darkness like benevolent night spirits. They tousled his hair, slipping under the collar of his silk pajamas. It was a little chilly, standing on the balcony of the twentieth floor, but he didn't feel like going in to the warm, brightly lit room.

Paris lay below him, silently sleeping as always—except during Ramadan, when the fires in the streets flashed and fluctuated. Then, true believers would sit until dawn in restaurants like the elegant Monde Arabe, Maxim's, or Procope, admiring the view of the Seine and Al Fraconi Mosque—which was once Notre Dame. If their means did not allow, then they went to Grand Véfour or Fouquet's to stuff their gut with charcoal-braised meat from the small restaurant on the corner of Bastille Square; or have couscous in some Charly de Bab el Oued. Fortunately, Ramadan was finished. Nights in Paris were unpopulated.

How pleasant the silence was, and what a good thing that he had chosen an apartment on a high floor, far above the ones where you couldn't have a window looking out on the street.

He wasn't sleepy. The few remaining hours were too precious. Soon the loudspeakers would be filled with the voices of *muezzins*, and the devil would set out on patrol through Paris to piss in the ears of true believers insufficiently devout to get up for early morning prayers.

Enjoy your just desserts, Frenchmen! Dear God, didn't you have it coming? Weren't you the ones who shaped this day with your very own hands? Now live in what you have made, because there is a God.

You didn't know anything about the history of Serbia; you didn't know anything about Kosovo. You didn't know how the Serbs died heroically on the battlefield of Kosovo Polje. The soldiers of Prince Lazarus, defending the cradle of their people, stood in the path of the foul army of Sultan Murad. You didn't know that Bayazit came in like a mortal plague, and that the Muslim Albanians followed in his footsteps.

Five hundred years under the Ottoman Empire! You didn't know what a scourge the Ottoman Empire was; you didn't know how much Serb blood was spilled to vanquish it. After the Serbs returned to the banks of the Sitnica River, not many years passed before they were expelled again!

Adolf Hitler became the new Bayazit. Did you humane Europeans forget

about that? How many among those of you who applauded the bombing of Belgrade were taught in school that it was none other than Hitler who toppled the Serbian Peter II and pushed Kosovo into the hands of the Albanian Zog I as a gift?

The Albanians descended into Serbian lands like new Bayazits, like hyenas trailing the scent of blood, occupying once again the abandoned homes, reaping once again the crops sown in Serbian fields. But how many armies did Hitler and Mussolini have to keep there, to keep Kosovo Albanian? You Europeans, have you even bothered to thank the Serbs because Draža Mihailović's Chetniks began to fight the Nazis long before you?

In the 1990s, what inspired you to help the Albanians to etch in stone the borders drawn by Hitler? How could you believe so gullibly the simple-minded lies about Serb brutality?

Obviously, the question was not *what* or *how*—but *who*. You were poisoned. You were led on a leash by the Muslim diaspora. And you, toys in the hands of puppeteers, believed yourselves to be fighters for “human rights.” You thought you were enlightened humanists—when you were only traitors to Christian civilization.

You were still reading Dostoevsky then. Alarm bells should have sounded in your heads. Today, none of you knows who Dostoevsky was. And it serves you right.

Milošević was already a mangy old wolf, but you poked at him like bear-baiters with sharpened sticks, forcing him to retreat and retreat. His soul bears responsibility for the shame of the Dayton peace agreement, but even that was not enough for you. When he finally realized there was no more room to retreat, a new war began. Oh, how closely your “peacekeepers” watched, to make sure that the Serbs didn't raise their heads!

But in 1997 they didn't see what was going on under their very noses. And when the Albanian Muslim KLA snake hatched in your shadow and began to carry out ethnic cleansing—not imaginary, like your claims of Serbian mass murder, but real—you were blind, or worse than blind. Your television channels showed footage of Kosovo Albanians covering the coffins of their fallen comrades with red flags with black eagles, of the thunder of gun salutes in their honor, and of wild peonies swaying over fresh graves. Meanwhile, behind the cameras, your heroes slaughtered Christian families and murdered teachers and priests. And when Milošević defended his people, bombs fell on Serbia.

Churches that had existed for almost ten centuries were turned into ruins under your bombs. Of course, these were not your holy shrines. What makes you different from the Afghan Talibans who blew up Buddhist statues?

Your oh-so-civilized Albanians needed Kosovo as a drug-trafficking route. The money involved was too big; the Serbs didn't stand a chance.

So peace came at last to Kosovo, the hub of European drug traffic. That was when the last Serb was expelled or slaughtered, when the last Orthodox church was destroyed and desecrated. The peacekeepers eventually left the region, because they were no longer needed.

But the poison was still brewing in the pot. The dirty foam of Islam and corruption rose until it spilled over the whole region. Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa shared the same fate as Kosovo.

The Serbs were pushed back further and further. When Belgrade became the capital of Greater Albania, the European Union began to be afraid. So, out of fear, it continued to do what it had previously done out of stupidity—concede.

So it was only right that Parisian women now walked around in *chador*, whose grandmothers had wept sentimental tears watching roses laid on the graves of Kosovo Muslims on television.

* * *

Slobodan Vuković was fifty years old, but he remembered the events of his childhood with incredible precision.

He remembered the house that looked like a half-peeled Easter egg from the outside—white walls under a red roof of tile. Inside, the walls were painted a warm terracotta red-brown. He could see the ceramic floor polished to a shine, the creaky wooden stairs. The two-year-old boy crawled along them, holding onto the banisters, toward the hearth where his father had already placed the Yule log. It still needed to be sprinkled with a bit of flour and some wine.

It was the last Christmas in the house of his birth in Priština. They celebrated Easter that year in the same house, but it was a wartime Easter with little joy. Could one call it war—bombs falling from the sky from an invisible, unpunishable, enemy?

He did not know when his child's eyes had seen the image he now remembered in its minutest detail: nuns in robes red with their own blood, their throats all slit, lying on the white ground; pieces of shattered icons; the broken doors of a church. How many such martyrs, how many such churches

were there?

He recalled the flight from Kosovo to Belgrade when he was three, when his mother prayed for hours clutching the child to her breast in dumb fear as the old car rolled down the ravaged road.

Less horrible, but more hopeless, would be their departure from Belgrade—which was also their departure from Serbia.

He spent his youth in Belgrade-on-the-Amur, a completely new city in Siberia that grew in height like mushrooms after the rain. What powerful mind had conceived this plan—to offer the 300,000 remaining Serbs autonomy near China? Some people said—then and later—that Russia simply wanted to rake the hot coals with someone else's hands, but Slobodan never believed this.

Everyone knows that it's difficult for a demobilized soldier to adjust to civilian life. But who can understand what it's like for a demobilized nation? The blood doesn't cool so quickly.

His youth, in short, was not a pampered one. But nevertheless, many of his peers, as they matured, fell into the groove of a life that was perhaps perhaps Cossack-like, but at least peaceful. They started their own families—beginning to rear the first generation of Serbs after Serbia.

Slobodan could not. As a nineteen-year-old, he left for Moscow by train because he did not have the money for a plane ticket. At that time, Serb young men were not conscripted into the army; instead, they were required to attend regular military exercises from the age of 16 to 25 for one month each year. Young Slobodan excelled as a marksman. He had a good number of parachute jumps, driver's and pilot's licenses, and sniping and explosives skills. He also had an intimate knowledge of Muslims, like something dirty that could not be washed away. It was almost genetic, from the days of his childhood, eagerly absorbed from the stories of old people, read in books. He wanted only one thing. To return to Kosovo.

But instead of Kosovo, seven years later they offered him France, one of the three main countries of the Islamic bloc. Moreover, his childish lust for revenge was already balanced by the ambitions of a mature intellectual. It was clear to him that the French arena was more interesting and broader in scope. He agreed, although in fact the consent was not given by the brilliantly educated twenty-six year old master of sciences Vuković, but by the nineteen-year-old boy Sobo, who still resided within him, confident in his ignorance.

It turned out that there were many things for which he was not prepared, despite all his preparations. He was prepared for cooperation with dense,

anonymous brutes, basically amalgams of incompetence, lust and sadism. He was ready for battle against religious fanaticism. But naturally enough, he more often met very different Muslims—including intellectuals gifted with quite human qualities. They had become involved in scientific research after realizing, to their surprise, that the path to political power, if not completely shut, was full of bitterness.

There were a great many whom he could not imagine taking pleasure in human agony, or slitting the throat of a living man. They were too cultured, too normal for that. They were Muslims of the third or fourth generation born in France. They had been educated in good French or English schools; they did not spend every day of their childhood reminding themselves who they were and what they were bringing into this hospitable world. And they, too, got what they had been fighting for, with paradoxical results for themselves.

What they got was seeing the genie released from the bottle. Educated, with a European polish that fit in very nicely with Muslim life, they had become increasingly influential, relying on the masses of illiterate Muslim poor for whom they had opened the borders of France. What the Muslim intelligentsia imagined was that in a hundred years, Europe would simply wake up one beautiful spring morning and be Islamic. No one would even notice that anything had changed.

How could they have known that those who didn't know the strategy — those dark Islamic masses—didn't want to wait? That they would boil over, flooding and surging over society like a lethal river? And that they, the enlightened European Muslims of the second or third generation, would have to submit to the masses to avoid being slaughtered or drowned?

It was only because the impatience of the masses exploded prematurely that *Maquis* was founded and the catacombs appeared.

The French resistance movement enjoyed neither Slobodan's sympathies nor his support. He was aware of its existence, but without a real reason, he would not have worked for them under any conditions. Let them fend for themselves. He had lived in France for more than twenty years for the benefit of the Christian world—despite the fact that the price he had paid for this good deed was quite high. No, not every Orthodox Christian would have been as generous.

Perhaps in his old age, if he lived to see it, he would succeed in obtaining forgiveness for his sins. It would be best to do so on the Holy Mountain, Mount Athos, in one of its most isolated cells.

Ah, Greeks! You paid a lower price than the Italians, of course. Greece remained a Christian country. But what national humiliation you experienced because of your pride! In all the rich countries at the end of the twentieth century, the Greek diaspora bloomed like a flower, and everywhere the Greeks lived according to European customs. A microcosm within a macrocosm, helping each other but never thinking of witnessing to the truth.

The Greeks from birth considered Orthodoxy a national privilege. Orthodox people who were not Greeks were an unnecessary, lower class. And what do you have now, Hellenes! The Greek parishes did not upset anyone anywhere—simply because they did no missionary work. The only thing they managed to do in the end, they did only for their own.

When Euroislam drew close to Greece, their millionaires from every country agreed on and proposed a ransom. The sum was so large that the joint Islamic governments of France, Germany, and England could not refuse. And that is how the Greeks became Islamic subjects, paying for the inviolability of their homeland as the Russians once paid the Tatars.

There was one exception—and there was nothing the Greeks could do about it because for that, the Muslims would not take money in exchange. Euroislam wanted to destroy Mt. Athos.

Horrible scenes from the chronicles have been preserved describing how the monks prepared for death. The frightful tolling of the bells echoed above the Holy Mountain announcing the end, calling the monks to martyrdom. Troop carriers filled with happy young Muslim men with green head bands in camouflage uniforms, armed with their perennial Kalashnikovs and equipped with mountaineering equipment, were on their way toward Athos on Easter morning in the year 2033.

The first ship that approached Mount Athos broke in two like gingerbread in the hand of a child. It filled with water at lightning speed. No one understood what was happening before it was too late. Later, it was explained that the fuel tank of the main troop carrier had exploded.

The second ship sustained a hole in its prow. They managed to get many of the men thrashing in the water onto the third ship—before it, too, broke in half. Several of the carriers simply lost all engine power.

The Muslim army pulled back, waiting for reinforcements to help them take on the opponent that had attacked them.

But there was no opponent. No one was shooting from the cliffs of the “land of the monks” when three helicopter detachments smashed into smithereens on their

approach to Athos. The choppers just fell out of the sky. Cannons suffocated on their own grenades, crippling the crews serving them. Healthy soldiers who sat to rest in the shade of a cypress became paralyzed. Military physicians could only surmise that they had had heart attacks. A soldier, having suddenly lost the use of his legs, would lie screaming and clawing at the white dust with his hands—but no one would hurry to help him. His comrades would pull back in horror, afraid of contamination.

Some got fevers; others lost their sight or their hearing. One simply went mad and imagined he was a child; he cried and begged them to give him a lemon lollypop. This incomprehensible war lasted three months.

The army didn't withdraw. It fled. It fled despite its orders, with soldiers trampling each other to escape—at least as many as are trampled to death every year during the hajj.

Athos had successfully defended itself, but Europe didn't find out. Television and newspapers had already been censored for a long time. Internet use was also tightly controlled, using information-filtering technology devised long ago in Communist China and Korea.

Ignorant of their countrymen's—and Christendom's—victory on Athos, the Greeks' national vices came back to haunt them in the form of shame.

The Poles, on the other hand, benefited from their faults. They had always been foolish nationalists, the stingy Lachs. Their stubbornness had always outweighed their stinginess and all else. In earlier times they intrigued all of Europe with their desire to profit from going their own way—which they perhaps learned from the Jews, whom they had harbored so long and loved so little—until the Nazis decimated them. Like their Jews, Poles were hard, petty pragmatists almost incapable of generosity—and yet deeply, deeply religious.

At the start of the twenty-first century, the Poles typically went their own way. They were the first from the former Soviet bloc to understand that they did not need the labor of rivers of Muslims from the Third World. During the first years of Polish membership in the EU, there were no heavy influxes. The Polish standard of living was lower than in old Europe, making Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, and Latvia less attractive to poor migrants.

However, the differences gradually diminished and migrants pressed forward into the former socialist countries. Still torn asunder by their newness, many of these countries dreaded the disapproval of their EU masters in Brussels, and dared not risk appearing insufficiently committed to the ideals of

democracy.

But the Poles immediately opposed any Muslim immigration. At first, they acted through quiet bureaucratic sabotage. But soon that was not enough. So the President of Poland, Marek Stasinsky, announced that his country was pulling out of the EU and NATO—after working for so many years to get in! President Stasinsky was hailed as a national hero.

Since he was now freezing on the balcony, Slobodan went back into the apartment, into the kitchen. Oh, the Russian habit of drinking cup after cup of tea during sleepless nights, pondering the fate of humanity! But what could he do?

He would have been far happier to honor another Russian tradition and have a juniper brandy instead of tea. Yes, juniper brandy. Two glasses of it and his insomnia would disappear like historical geopolitics. And with it he would nibble some pink wedges of smoked bacon, cut translucently thin and interlaced with meat. Hey, stop that! He mustn't even think about juniper brandy or smoked bacon, or his mission would be exposed.

The Poles paid dearly for their rebelliousness. The opposition proclaimed Stasinsky insane. How could he imagine sharing a border with Germany—with its army comprised of three-fourths Muslims—and not playing by the general European rules? But the people believed their president. The second Polish ploy was even crazier than the first. The famous pact of May 5, 2034 brought the former socialist camp to a frenzy. Not even old Europe could believe it when one beautiful morning, it found the Russian Army on the Germany-Poland border.

Russia had not invaded. Nor had Poland suddenly learned to love Russia. It simply undertook, yet again, realistic measures. Without the Russian military presence, the armed incursion of Euroislam into Poland would have been only a matter of time. For its part, Russia wanted to push the border of Euroislam as far from Russia as possible. Better to maintain a buffer state like Poland between itself and Euroislam than to stare at minarets across a dotted line. The move was in the interest of two countries who were bound into alliance by a thousand years of mutual annexation of each other's territory. An old enemy is better than two new ones.

In 1990, the grandmothers and grandfathers of today's Lachs wouldn't have believed that one day, not only would the Russian Army be in Poland, but that this would be to the betterment and satisfaction of their grandchildren! Moreover, as the Russian soldiers admitted, it is blissful to serve in Poland

today. It can be dangerous, of course—occasionally there are shots fired at the border. But there are also very few Sundays when they are not invited to partake in Sunday lunch with a local family.

Yes, it is a festal Sunday lunch because the Poles, like the Russians, observe Sunday, not Friday, as a religious day of rest. The Poles remained Catholic. When the ill-starred year of 2031 began, and the Roman Pope surrendered, exactly one month later, white smoke appeared above Holy Trinity Monastery in Krakow. A new Papal see was established in Poland. Its borders were now identical with the borders of the Catholic world. The Polish clergy began to ardently advocate for the old, pre-Vatican II Mass. Things did not go so far as reverting to the use of Latin. No one knew Latin anymore, or how to serve the Tridentine Mass. The oldest priests celebrated it as best they could, but in Polish.

That's how matters stood. Poland was the alpha and omega of modern Catholicism. Who, at the end of the twentieth century, could have imagined that Catholicism would be the religion of only one country? History advances in unpredictable steps. In Poland, the simple colored bulbs of small chapels still shone by the side of the road, with statues that looked as if children had painted them.

After celebrating the Poles' liberation from halal smoked-horsemeat sausage, Slobodan opened his refrigerator with a frown. He still could not force himself to eat the meat of livestock slaughtered according to their practice. He remembered all too well from his childhood that they slit the throat of a ram or a man with the same expression, and even the same words: "*Bismillah allahu akbar!*"

He cut the pie with revulsion. If it was peach pie, it would go well with the tea. Especially once warmed in the microwave. That was why he had been putting on weight, but what was one to do?

Yes, a lot had changed since NATO disintegrated. A weakened United States now had only itself to think about. The white south and the black-Muslim-Hispanic-UrbanWhite north engaged in a tug of war for power in the Senate and House of Representatives, maintaining a fragile balance to avoid civil war.

The southern U.S. Christians were very fortunate in that they were confronted, not just by the Muslims, but by four mutually inimical religions (if you count voodoo and atheism). None of them wanted a vicious, well-armed, redneck wave of revenge. Thus, America was too preoccupied to be the

world's power-broker anymore.

There were no global power-brokers, in fact. Everyone was involved in this confrontation of opposites. Most territories inhabited by Russians formed a protectorate; the army was there. It was useless to draw maps. Governments changed almost overnight—today Christian, tomorrow Muslim. This took place not only in every country and city, but in every village.

And what about proud, independent, little Chechnya, Russia's main headache at the turn of the century? Nothing. The flow of Saudi money had been cut off. And there were no fools willing to fight for nothing. Dear God, let it never be forgotten or erased that in every place in the world, there can always arise "a fifth column"—like the microbe of a monstrous disease able to sleep a million years in salt crystals.

Before Slobodan's eyes on sleepless nights, sometimes the virtual map of the world moved steadily, like wool in the hands of an old Serb peasant woman. Sometimes a fragment of it would suddenly change its format and grow larger, like Israel, which had grown unusually strong thanks to massive immigration in the 2010's, beginning with Sharon's historic invitation. Or Australia, which remained an idyllic oasis of old-fashioned Western life, but played no role in world politics. Or Japan, even more enclosed in its cultural isolation, like a pearl that had returned to its shell. Or India, which lived in a state of permanent war that it had not lost, thanks only to the numerousness of its population.

And who was he, Slobodan Vuković, whose thoughts were so engrossed by the geopolitical kaleidoscope? Perhaps he was a man who had replaced his tribal passions with abstractions. In particular, his mind had become a fine tool that accurately gauged the balance of power.

The arrow on the device was quivering dangerously. Something could be changed. That is what Paris at night whispered to Slobodan through the windows of his luxurious apartment. That is what the piece of already-cold pie muttered to him from the plate. That is what the rhythm of the blood pulsing in his temples told him:

The balance could be disrupted.

CHAPTER 4
CONFESSION WITHOUT A CONFESSIONAL
Estonia, 2006

Anne Virve opened the window, and the room was instantly filled with the hum of Narva Street. This was even though the windows did not face the street itself, which was one of the apartment's shortcomings. Another was that the streetcar tracks passed underneath the window. There was also a third—the ceilings were too low.

But what was the point of fretting, when something different cost more, and not every single woman nowadays could afford to buy a four-room apartment practically in downtown Tallinn before she was thirty? In Tallinn, a fifteen-minute walk from the towers toward Viru was not exactly on the outskirts, but still...

Anne closed the window decisively. If the air conditioner was good, the polluted street air was not necessary. In recent years, she had stopped making good money and was hard-pressed to put aside one or two hundred euros per month. And time was passing. Could a poor girl living with her parents in the poverty-stricken Õismäe quarter hope to find a decent match? Ridiculous.

Before moving in, Ana had spent a long time hesitating over whether to enlarge the kitchen by tearing down the inner partition. She would have gotten a kitchen-dining room. She finally decided against it, and she made the right choice: It was no longer fashionable to display sinks and refrigerators. It was much better to pass from the living room into the winter garden, with green plants visible through the glass wall of the small kitchen. With a smile, Ana touched the mane of the papyrus peering out from a ceramic pot. There was even room for a small bench, where one or two visitors could sip their coffee.

Oh, what a lot of money had gone into the living room! It was horrible to even imagine what it had looked like before! Wallpaper with an old-fashioned pattern on uneven walls, gray linoleum with black cracks. Apparently, the previous owners had been elderly people.

The intercom buzzed merrily. A camera in the entrance really was necessary. She would have to seek an agreement with the other neighbors.

"I'm with the Problems of Democracy International Fund," said a young female voice in English. "And I'm conducting a random survey. May I ask you for a few minutes of your time to answer some questions?"

Ana hesitated for a moment. On the one hand, ever since Estonia joined the

EU, various sociologists and public workers gave it no peace. On the other hand, it would be nice to welcome a cultured person to her new home.

“Come in,” she said, pushing a button. Her English was not perfect, but nothing to be ashamed of.

The visitor, who was a very young woman, disappointed Ana at first sight. She was thin and not particularly tall, dressed in the manner of educated female representatives of the old Europe: running shoes, black jeans, a dark-colored turtleneck, and a light, pink jacket. Her long chestnut hair fell loose over her shoulders, and she obviously hadn’t visited a good hairdresser in a while. It was difficult to conclude whether she lived in a trailer or an inherited castle. You could never tell with such people.

“Please have a seat in the living room.” It was hard to imagine that the girl, probably a student, would notice the light-colored beech furniture standing out nicely against the perfectly flat, blue walls, or the huge, 2-by-1.5 meter home theater with its LCD screen occupying almost an entire wall.

“Nice place you have here.”

“Do you like it?” Anne beamed with satisfaction. “I just moved in.”

Sitting down in a linen armchair, the girl immediately pulled out a palmtop computer from her pocket and began writing on it with a stylus. There was something odd about the way she held objects in her left hand.

“Would you care for a cup of coffee?”

“Thank you, perhaps later.” It was only now that Ana noticed the girl’s unusual voice, melodious but at the same time husky.

Ana suddenly lost all desire to show her new apartment. There was something incomprehensible about this girl, who as they talked was checking boxes on her palmtop: age, sex, marital status, occupation, favorite sports—skiing, rifle shooting. Good, at least it wouldn’t take long.

“We’re interested in the opinion of Estonia’s native inhabitants regarding the problem of the so-called Russian-speaking population. How do you see the solution to this problem?”

She needed to formulate her answer carefully—to be politically correct but to answer honestly. The old Europeans should have no illusions on this issue.

“Unfortunately, I see only one possible solution; the Russian-speaking population needs to be extradited to Russia. Russia can deal with its own.”

“And would you say that among Estonians there are many supporters of allowing the Russian population to stay and assimilate?”

“To the great resentment of all Estonians, including myself, there is a

misunderstanding between the Baltic countries and other countries of the EU. The issue of the Russians is unique. The historical guilt of the Russian occupiers of the Estonian nation is too great to relegate to oblivion. We are essentially a very hospitable and friendly people. Haven't we granted asylum to so many Muslim migrants?"

Just try not granting them asylum! The whole EU would be howling at them in fury. But that was better left unsaid.

The girl listened to Ana carefully, but something was not right.

Ana went on, "We are happy to welcome those who have done us no harm. But no matter how hard some Russians try to adapt to our way of life, and there have been such individuals, how can we forget that Russians imposed the bloody Communist regime on us in the 20th century?"

Surely that made sense.

But the girl shot back: "If you had spent less time in 1919 betraying Yudenich to the Bolsheviks, they wouldn't have had Communism to impose on you."

Who was Yudenich? Oh, this was in 1919!

"But the Bolsheviks had ceded territory to us!"

"How nice! They were good to you— *then!*"

Only now did Ana realize that the girl was speaking in Russian.

"*Mina ei raagi vene!*" Ana exclaimed with a fear that she did not understand. Imagine, an impudent Russian girl pretending to be a sociologist! Russians liked to behave like this when they were young, but they were quickly broken. Once they were registered by the police, employment problems were guaranteed.

Although she tried to calm down, Ana remained nervous. "All of you *raagi* speak English quite well when you need to."

The girl slipped the palmtop into her pocket. Ana noted again the awkwardness of her left hand.

"How dare you intrude into my home? It's illegal!" Ana made three steps backward toward the window, as if fleeing from the visitor.

"Don't move!" said the Russian girl, pulling a pistol from the right pocket of her jacket. "Stay where you are, and don't even *try* to get close to the alarm button!"

Something frightened Ana so badly that her hands began to tremble. It wasn't the pistol. It was how this juvenile non-citizen knew where the alarm button was!

“What alarm button? I don’t have any alarm button here.”

“No—except for the fake switch next to the real one that opens the blinds. You still don’t recognize me?”

The girl’s right hand held the gun without trembling. The left was buttoning the pocket with the palmtop, but with effort. Only three fingers were moving. The ring finger and pinky were rigid.

“No!” Cold sweat appeared on Ana’s forehead. “It can’t be you!”

But it was her; she hadn’t even changed much. Her hair was now long, whereas before it had been short; it had been impossible to tell the color because of the dirt. Her face hadn’t grown much. Before, it had even seemed older, bloated, and ill. She now recalled the hand—wrapped in a gray rag, stained with dried blood—and an old, quilted vest over a light T-shirt. They had kidnapped her in summer and it was already November outside. A hard, dead season—the trees were bare. It was no time to work.

That was why Ana had come to visit Ahmed. She had seen the girl just a few times. But she remembered her well—a poor girl with her head bowed in fear. That’s what had made it difficult to spot her now.

“You used our occupiers’ language to babble with him while you screwed. And you did business in our language.”

“But you’re not even Russian!” exclaimed Ana.

“You even remember that,” said the girl, smiling almost amicably. “My mother was Russian, although you wouldn’t know that. And there’s Russian blood everywhere. Ask any Estonian genius, scientist or composer. Just please don’t mention Ristikivi; we have so many classics like him that the publishing houses don’t know what to do with them all. You are mono-ethnic quadrants, just like in Marquez, and in the end you’ll produce children with pigs’ tails.”

Alright, let her babble about Marquez if she wants. The most important thing was that she wanted contact. The longer the conversation, the more difficult it would be for her to pull the trigger. Talk to her, get closer. If she already knows about the alarm button, simply grab her by the hand and flip her over. You’ll beat the slender girl easily in a real fight.

“All that was so long ago... And then you just show up. What have you been doing all these years?”

“Studying.” The girl was cautious. It was too early to get close to her.

“Studying. And what have you been studying?”

“What have I been studying?” said the girl, smiling. “How to be a qualified hater. It’s a complicated program. How much effort one needs, just to examine

all the possible variants of the Stockholm Syndrome! And I didn't even know I had it. I thought it was just a fabrication by the experts. But I did have it. Oh, there are so few people who are qualified to hate!"

"But why me? Why do you hate me personally?" *The girl really was insane. A fruitcake. That wasn't good; the physical strength of crazy people sometimes exceeded the strength of their muscles.*

"You? I hate everybody who was there. And everybody who *could* have been there. In the end, it's all the same."

"I was just there by accident. I'm not a Chechen. It was just business."

"And not a bad little business, at that." The girl motioned with her head toward the sofa, which was covered with a beautiful throw—ultramarine with an orange geometrical pattern. "One hundred dollars for a soldier, three to four hundred for an officer. So how much did that rag cost? At least three men, yes? It's not cheap. And how many children didn't return home because you were perched in a tree with your scope? Just so you could furnish your apartment. This place is awash in blood."

"No, no, you're wrong!" Ana struggled not to show her fear, knowing that it would mean certain death. But sweat ran down her spine under her light dressing gown. Big drops appeared on the palms of her hands.

"I was in Chechnya a very short time! I got most of my money here, from restitution. A big factory was built on the land where my grandmother's house once stood!... Look, I can compensate you for moral damages! I have a bank account!"

"I have a bank account, too." The girl was growing increasingly adult and self-confident, and most important, she kept her distance. "Money solves a lot of problems, doesn't it?" she added. "But you can't always buy a life."

The girl also kept an eye on the alarm button—actually, she kept the pistol pointed at it. For some reason, Ana thought of the straw trapezoid she had wanted to hang for Christmas instead of setting up a hackneyed, too-European Christmas tree. This would not happen, it was quite clear to her now. It wasn't the girl and it wasn't the pistol, but something else—a strange and ugly conviction that her hour had come and that it was pointless to resist. So this was why people sometimes behaved so strangely before death!

"You're going to kill me?" Ana did not recognize her own voice, already dead, hollow.

"I'm going to kill you. Free of charge. Move over there, against the wall."

The art of sniping had always been just a business for Ana. She had never

spoken with her targets, had never seen them close up while they were alive. However, she had heard this intonation many times. What difference could it possibly make whether she was killed in the middle of the room or against the wall? None. Or was there a reason after all?

Ana had no time to comprehend.

The girl in the pink jacket suddenly became immature again. She came up and carefully bent over the body of the elegant woman in her black lace dressing gown. Her tanned and muscular legs were spread on the shag carpet. The girl stood and looked at her for a while. Then, from another pocket, she pulled a flat plastic container with sanitary wipes. Quickly and meticulously, she cleaned everything her hands could have touched.

CHAPTER 4 (CONTINUED)

SOPHIA

“You are too young, Father, to understand what a melodramatic collision is happening within you now!”

The woman inhaled the smoke from her cigarette. “When my parents were young, a lot of movies were made, and we are just like the characters in one of them. An old woman who has sinned, but whose heart has grown soft, tells the story of her life to a young, celibate priest who is full of the noblest aspirations. He’s handsome, of course. In those years, the movies treated celibacy so romantically. That was before they banned movies about Christianity because they were offensive to Muslim Eurocitizens—and then all movies.”

The priest paid no attention to her ironic words. He was used to such speeches, a standard “protection ritual” well known to students of psychology. What was remarkable was the story of this great soul, almost destroyed in her youth, who found the strength to live—even in hatred.

“You said a change occurred that day?” he asked softly.

“Not in my soul—I hate to disappoint you. In my body.”

“What do you mean?”

“After the kidnapping, I stopped growing. The doctors gave me all sorts of things! They began to believe that I would stay 4’11”. But from eighteen to twenty I suddenly spurted up to 5’5”. I had blackouts from my rapid growth. Then I grew another inch over the next year and a half.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t grow after every similar episode,” the priest smiled, looking for a moment younger than his thirty-three years, “or today you would be as tall as the Eiffel Minaret.”

“They invoke me to frighten their children just the same,” the woman exhaled a ring of smoke. “Unfortunately, without reason.”

“You’ve never killed children?” The intonation that could be felt in the priest’s voice was reminiscent of the fingers of a physician cautiously approaching a spot suspected to be malignant.

“Alas, no, although the ‘alas’ will shock you. It’s stupid not to kill them, but I have permitted myself this stupidity—not to kill them, that is.”

“All children are cruel,” said the priest softly. He was sitting across from Sophia, covering his eyes with the palm of his hand, as was his habit. He wore no stole around his neck. The hand was just a reflex. When someone told him

such things, the priest had no right to see his face.

“That’s something else, Father. Honestly speaking, they’re not really children in our sense of the word. They’re just people who haven’t reached adult size and the ability to procreate yet. Their soul and intellect stop growing at age five; only the amount of stored information increases. It’s also it’s hard to say these children are not adults, since even the adults never mature to the point where they can distinguish between good and evil.”

She went on, unstoppable: “You’ll say that their child in good hands can be educated to become a good person. I just know you’ll say that. And they love the fact that we think that way. But they themselves don’t believe it’s true. Where I was, they called themselves masters of eugenics. They planned whom they should cross with whom to get better offspring. The brave with the intelligent, the modest with the outrageous—combinations of all the types available. But the product of all their genetic research, for some reason, was always the same—a killer and a bandit. Their eugenic masterpieces should be stifled in the cradle or better yet, in the womb. Or best of all, in the germ.”

The priest was already used to this woman’s strange manner of speaking. She uttered words of furious passion in a serene, cold voice completely lacking in emotion. The more fervent the emotion, the colder her voice became.

“But what kept you from sin, when you considered it beneficial?”

“My right to not resemble *them* in any way. I just told you the story of the Estonian woman who tried to strike up a conversation with me. They know—the longer you talk to a person, the harder it is to kill him.”

“But isn’t that true?”

“It is, for people like her. The logic of the hired killer is that you shouldn’t see anything human in the face of your victim. My logic is just the opposite. You should look the person in the eyes, you should see whom you are about to kill. That’s the only way you can assume responsibility. If you can’t kill while looking someone in the eyes, you shouldn’t do it. It’s just not necessary. Sometimes that happens.”

“But that’s so difficult.”

“Father, whoever said it should be easy to kill?” The old woman smiled. “But we’ve strayed from the subject. The logic of the woman sniper was ‘just business.’ She thought of herself as a gun for hire. Whereas those who don’t mind talking with their victims get a tremendous feeling of satisfaction. But no matter how much they enjoy killing our children, we shouldn’t kill theirs—despite what logic and common sense dictate... What are you laughing at,

Father?”

“Please don’t be angry, but I really don’t think a theoretical infrastructure is necessary when it’s the result that counts.”

“My husband’s father used to say the same thing.”

The digital clock showed one o’clock. One could only tell whether it was day or night outside by its blinking green numbers.

“Is it true he was an Orthodox priest, Sophia, and that you were baptized in an Orthodox church?”

“What a Jesuitical approach. It wasn’t my father-in-law who baptized me, but my mother’s sister, who took me to church when I was only an infant. It was to the great dissatisfaction of my Jewish relatives.”

“They were Jews?”

“They were secular people, inasmuch as that historical phenomenon is conceivable. They thought all religions quaint. My grandmother on my father’s side was also a physician. She thought it unhygienic to take a child somewhere and dip it in something.”

“In Western Europe, there was something even worse—Christian materialists. And your father-in-law?”

“He was a priest. I think that he wanted a different wife for his son—my husband, Leonid Sevazmios. Quite different. He understood and accepted that there would not be any children, that I couldn’t have children in a world where I couldn’t guarantee their safety.

“My father did not survive what happened to me. He burned out at the age of forty-five from an amalgamation of illnesses. They appeared suddenly, one after another, sometimes two at a time: his heart, his liver, his blood vessels... Before, he hadn’t even been sick with the flu for years. It was as if his body sabotaged itself. I was incredibly sad for him, but there’s no way I could permit myself to be in his shoes, either.

“Nor would I have wanted to be in the place of my Leonid. And it wasn’t about me, or our unborn and unconceived grandchildren. For Father Demetrios, my father-in-law, it was terrible that his only son, for whom he so much wanted a spiritual career, was buying weapons under the auspices of his uncle’s trading company—most of which he was going to give away. It was, to put it mildly, atypical for a Greek!

“The Greeks at that time, as always, behaved quite selfishly. They believed that the Islamization of Europe wouldn’t affect them. It’s funny, but in essence the impractical and silly boy, as Leonid’s family thought of him, was far more

practical and sensible than all of them put together. He had personal assets, which he inherited from his mother, and he spent everything without asking anyone's permission. Coming from a prominent family, it was scandalous for him to be dealing in weapons. Fortunately, we met after all that had quieted down.

"My father-in-law accepted Leonid's line of work when his son told him just one thing: 'If you had done your missionary work yesterday, we wouldn't have to buy weapons today.'"

"He was right, Sophie," said Father Lothaire. "The truth is that people get tired of permissiveness, because they realize it is empty and dangerous. They start to long for clear rules. It's the last spasm of spirituality: Tell me what's not allowed! What is Great Lent? Not stuffing yourself during Passion Week! Here, the Orthodox religion could have won over Catholics—who never knew the severity of the Protestants! So your husband did not join the ranks of the nonbelievers, but of those fighting for the faith?"

"Yes, he remained a believer."

"But he did not succeed in turning you to God."

"What could we do? He received his faith with his mother's milk, whereas I... Father, perhaps you don't understand what inspired me to have a conversation like this. You are too tactful, of course, to say that such things happen when people pass the age of seventy. But if that's what you are thinking, you're wrong. I have walked hand-in-hand with death my whole life; the salvation of my soul is as unimportant to me as it has always been."

Sophia stood up and, to hide her excitement, began to pace quickly in the small room. "You have to understand that old soldiers like me have a special intuition. Perhaps I am thinking about issues of faith more than ever before because I sense something is about to occur. And I sense that something concrete needs to be done... How can I explain what I don't understand myself?"

"Sophie, the reason really isn't important to me." The caught her eye and looked at her intently. "I'm happy that such thoughts are crossing your mind because you really do have something to think about."

"Oh?" Sophia smiled.

"Doesn't it occur to you, Sophia, that there's something illogical here? Let's look at things from your point of view. You're a materialist, as you've always been. I'm an idealist mystic, primarily someone who lives among nonsecular abstractions."

She took a fresh cigarette from her pack, smiling to herself.

“Sophie, how is it possible that I have a practical goal and you don’t? I’ve wanted to say this to you for some time but to be honest, I’ve been afraid.”

“Lord, you’re still a boy, Lothaire. How can you even imagine that you could say something to me that would devastate me?”

“No matter how illusory my goal may appear to you, it is realistic. It serves a practical purpose. The Mass must exist—as long as there is a single priest left, one drop of wine, and a handful of flour. This is why we endure being killed and tortured. But you, your entire resistance movement, have no goal. War can’t be a goal in itself; it’s only a means to an end. You don’t understand that you can’t defend Europe any longer. The war that the Resistance Movement has been fighting for more than a decade has been lost, completely lost.”

“You’re right, Father. You see that the brutal truth doesn’t make me tear out my hair.”

“You have a widespread spy network; there are training centers; there are channels for the delivery of ammunition. There are, I believe, accounts in banks outside Eurabia; the Chinese wouldn’t give the *Maquisards* their fireworks for nothing. But a goal—*Maquis* has no goal! And hundreds of people are dying in this war. That young boy risked his life today to eliminate one corrupt Muslim. But in the end, the reserves in the military warehouses will be depleted, the shelters will be discovered, and the last one of you will be punished. The Muslims will win in the end.”

A mischievous flame danced in Sophia’s eyes. “And in the end, they’ll cut down the vineyards, the shelters will be uncovered, the last missal will be destroyed, the last priest will be killed. The Muslims will win in the end.”

“Not so!” the priest said, his blue eyes flashing in response. “Here is the difference: When there is no more Mass, Judgment Day will come. They will not win; they will end up in hell. This event will outlive you, according to your logic. But it will not outlive us, according to ours.”

“Ah, what infinite Catholic hubris! You just need to add that the Poles serve a non-traditional Mass, and that Orthodox Russia and Mount Athos don’t count!”

“I wouldn’t say anything of the kind, and you know it. In our sufficiently difficult times, everyone is responsible for himself. I’m not in Russia or Poland. I serve in France. And I must serve God as if the coming of Judgment Day depended on my prayers alone. Of course, there are elements of pride in

this. But we have been taught to turn our shortcomings into the moving mechanism of good deeds.”

“I understand,” said Sophie quietly. The candles in her eyes went out, and her face became somehow lifeless. “The boy, Lévêque, he will probably not live to my age, or even yours. But Father, what choice does he have? To live as a Muslim?”

“To remember that he was born a Christian.”

“That’s really the same solution. To die with dignity—that can’t be considered a goal?”

The digital clock displayed two-fifteen. Somewhere outside, morning was drawing near, a spring morning filled with the fragrance of trees in flower.

Almost all the smuggled Russian cigarettes had been turned to ash, leaving an unpleasant smell.

“Father Lothaire. I’m truly grateful to you for digging with me into the lava of my past. As for the practical purpose... I really don’t do anything without a purpose. Something is in the air, something very important that will concern you and me and *Maquis* and the inhabitants of the catacombs equally. That may mean that I’ve found my goal; I don’t know.”

CHAPTER 5

AHMAD IBN SALIH

The next morning Jeanne brought Valerie a bottle of soap solution for blowing bubbles. The little girl was rapturously blowing into the pink plastic frame and laughing merrily as the iridescent balloons filled up and launched themselves into the air. Jeanne and Eugène-Olivier were catching them, sometimes trying to save them on the palms of their hands, sometimes bursting them with a clap in mid-air, rejoicing in Valerie's delight.

But suddenly the little girl stopped, not because she had tired of blowing bubbles, but because she seemed to forget about them. She crawled into a corner and began thinking her own thoughts. When she stood up, she noticed the plastic bottle she was still clutching in her hand with puzzlement, and then put it down as something quite useless.

"Where's she going?" Eugène-Olivier whispered as he watched her incredibly thin little back moving away down the corridor.

"To the city," Jeanne answered nonchalantly. "Probably Notre Dame again. She'll cry there. The buttocks are afraid to chase her away."

Eugène-Olivier started, as if he had accidentally touched a toad. He had been to Notre Dame only once, and that was enough for him. He had seen the *mihrab*, the concrete building resembling a kiosk that had been added in the south-southeast.

To go inside and look at the bishop's throne, now transformed into a minbar with two crescent moons haphazardly stuck to its back, and on to the gallery, which was now divided by a wall to separate male from female—where two dozen foot baths were installed, looking like a public toilet...

Muslim women washed their feet where the organ once stood. Another level was set apart for them to pray, reached by stairs awkwardly added to the outside of the building. Instead of stained glass with decorations, the windows were plain glass. Eugène-Olivier could not imagine returning to see the backward squiggles that were posted to replace serene, dignified Roman letters, to see the scars on the floor where statues once stood. Or to guess where the Holy Virgin stood as Grandfather Patrice fell... No, no, once had been enough.

Valerie went there almost every day, Jeanne said.

That must be more painful to her than any whipping. How could he protect her from that? How could he ensure that "the buttocks don't go

there”?

“I must be going mad,” said Eugène-Olivier. “It’s so stupid. No one will ever drive them out.”

“Forget it,” Jeanne said irately. “She doesn’t need your pity. She wants only one thing from us, and we can’t do it for her. We’re the weaklings. By the way, here are your documents.”

Eugène-Olivier did not tell Jeanne they had just been thinking the same thing. Jeanne was right; he was a weakling. Eugène-Olivier realized that he was looking at the sealed envelope in his hand with the same puzzlement as Valerie looking at her toy.

It was a whole pile of documents. Someone had done a lot of work. A certificate that he lived in the ghetto, a permit to work in the city, a city climber’s card, a commonly used credit card. Also in the bag was a newspaper in French, wrinkled, with a coffee stain on it, cheaply printed and meager in content. In the censored edition, what else could remain besides tips for the care of houseplants, recipes, ads for the sale of automobiles and the rental of rooms, and crossword puzzles? Somebody had managed to solve a few words of the crossword.

Eugène-Olivier stopped at a nearby phone booth and made a call, as if responding to an ad in the newspaper.

“You’ll get your equipment in Violette Street number ten. The apartment occupies the entire twentieth floor.” The young male voice sounded familiar, but Eugène-Olivier forced himself not to try to recognize it. Only a fool could claim he won’t talk when the buttocks start pulling out his intestines. The less you know, the less of a danger you are to everyone else. “You know a lot about computers?”

Eugène-Olivier nodded automatically, even though there was no way for the voice to see him.

“Copy everything, all the files, the entire hard drive, just in case. You’ll have a lot of time to work, about four hours. But try to keep it to two and a half. And don’t leave a mess. No prints; leave everything clean. Good luck!”

The wrinkled newspaper flew into the trash.

Less than an hour later, Eugène-Olivier, dressed in synthetic overalls and a red helmet, was moving up the wall of a high-rise building, built in Islamic times, in the basket of a crane. There were no normal windows until the fifteenth floor. On the lower floors, windows had been replaced by long, narrow openings under the ceiling with some sort of strange glass, a row of

tinted glass, then a row of matte glass, then again tinted glass. Above that, the windows were quite normal; those apartments were probably more expensive. He passed the twentieth floor, carefully inspecting the plastic frames. They were closed, of course, but there was a set of special openers in one of his pockets.

Below him, he could see the penthouse roofs of the old buildings. The leaves of the trees planted in big pots cloaked the old roofs decorously. For a moment, he imagined that this was all a nightmare, that he was just a normal workman singing to himself in the fresh air, and that after work he would go to a disco with a girl who looked like Jeanne.

They would enjoy the music in the flashing, polychromatic darkness and they would giggle at bad jokes. It would be a triumph of the joy and youthful folly to which he had a right. How he wished he could believe in it! But he couldn't. First of all, he could not imagine himself as a construction worker. In a normal world, he would be studying at the Sorbonne, at the greatest of universities. Second, some forty years ago, when it still seemed that nothing could threaten the normal way of life, a girl like Jeanne Saintville would not exist. Girls like Jeanne were only born under overcast skies. And he didn't feel like going anywhere with a girl, even to a disco, if she were not actually Jeanne.

What a shame! He had just wanted to dream a bit, but it was pointless. Father Lothaire would no doubt say that from a Christian point of view, daydreaming was a useless activity, just a waste of spiritual energy.

Eugène-Olivier positioned his basket between the twenty-first and twenty-second floors. In the right place. With the basket hanging here and the employee entering there. A sight that would not attract attention.

He climbed down the wall carefully. He had the necessary skills, but he was out of practice. He managed to open the window and easily slipped inside.

He should have put plastic covers over his shoes while he was still outside. As soon as he touched the floor, the shoes left dirt marks on the carpet. The large room, some 300 square feet, was completely covered in plush carpet. Only the devil knew whether it was Persian or Turkmen. It was a luxurious apartment, to be sure.

It had light-green leather furniture that looked so soft, you could fall sleep in the armchairs. There were unusual plants in antique flowerpots and vases. In the bedroom, there were also white furs on the floor as if the carpeting hadn't

been enough. And look, this must be his office. There was an oak desk in the middle of the room, and a computer monitor on the desk.

Something wasn't quite right, though—something was urging him to be cautious. This venerable Ahmad ibn Salih was somehow too correct. What did he use to watch movies, to listen to music? Of course those were forbidden, but educated Muslims indulged themselves in such luxuries. Converts were afraid to, but born Muslims thought nothing of it.

Maybe he put everything on his computer. But look, the computer didn't even have password protection. Anybody could look at anything on it. There was no music or television on the computer.

Eugène-Olivier started copying files with disgust. This was all for nothing. He didn't even want to know what headquarters was hoping to find, but he would be willing to bet there was nothing useful on this all-too-orderly, all-too-obedient machine.

What if all this were camouflage? What if there were a laptop with less obedient files, somewhere on this huge desk among the meticulous file folders and scientific journals?

As he asked himself these questions, Eugène-Olivier did not forget to place the copied disks in his breast pocket. He still had plenty of time. His cheap digital watch was actually an alarm-signal detector. If Ahmad ibn Salih suddenly decided to return home, the men monitoring the entrance would have enough time to inform him. One could say he was completely safe. Maybe he should check out his hunch.

Eugène-Olivier sat in the comfortable leather rocker, placed his head on the high headrest with his hands on the armrests and closed his eyes. Let's say that he was the successful, perhaps slightly lazy, head of a research laboratory. Where would he put his laptop so it was not in direct sight, but still close at hand? He was right-handed, judging from the position of the mouse. It would be awkward to pull anything out with his left hand, so it must be on the right side—and close enough not to make him get up from his armchair. (Eugène-Olivier rejected the cozy assumption that Ahmad's real workspace was somewhere in the kitchen next to the apricot jam jar he had left on the table).

And what do we find on the right side? A pile of books on a table and a cabinet below it. A pile of colorful magazines—in English, of course. One couldn't very well follow scientific developments in Arabic. There were a few Russian magazines with inserted slips of paper inscribed with the repulsive squiggles—not for all texts, just those marked in red. So he could

read English, but not Russian. Nor Japanese, apparently, according to the next pile.... Aha! A handwritten notebook, and another... And here it was!

Eugène-Olivier was not in the habit of speaking to himself, but in his moment of elation he couldn't resist uttering an exclamation of triumph.

What at first glance appeared to be another notebook turned out to be a laptop in a raspberry-colored plastic case. It was manufactured by the Farhad Corporation in Paris, although any fool could see that only the design of the box and perhaps a few keyboard details were Farhad's. Everything else was Chinese, down to the last chip. China insisted on selling finished computers, not just parts, which is why Farhad computers cost 50% more. The buyer paid for the design.

Eugène-Olivier hesitated as he held the computer—as if he were trying to weigh the repulsive things on it. He might not be able to get in without a password. Somehow, he almost didn't want to turn the thing on.

The laptop came on by itself as soon as he lifted the lid. No password was needed. Everything loaded at lightning speed. He could see how much more powerful this device was than the desktop. A menu appeared, but Eugène-Olivier didn't get to make a selection; the laptop continued working on its own.

And what was this now? Some kind of stupid chat window appeared on the screen. In English—or more precisely in the Anglo-Arabic slang spoken today in England—the monitor advised that an unknown person had entered the chat room.

Apparently, opening the laptop had been a mistake. Ahmad ibn Salih only used this computer for virtual communication. It might not be a bad idea to check out what his contacts blathered about, but it really was better that he leave. He had already downloaded the needed information.

“Unknown: Uninvited guest, enter,” appeared on the computer in bright orange letters.

He decided not to leave after all. It wouldn't take much time to see what was going on.

“Unknown: Uninvited guest, enter,” reappeared on the monitor.

“Unknown: Uninvited guest, I know you are there.”

Who was playing hide-and-seek with whom? Probably these were some kind of love games. There was no reason for him to waste his time.

Eugène-Olivier began to close the lid of the computer.

“Unknown: Uninvited guest, you are sitting at my desk and you still have not

logged off. Do not log off.”

The laptop fell on Eugène-Olivier’s knees. It stayed there; instead of falling to the floor, it spit out a new line of orange text.

“Unknown: Uninvited guest, that would be stupid. I am not guessing, I know.”

Apparently, he really did know. He had been caught. But he had the files he had already copied, so there was no reason to worry.

“Uninvited guest entering chat room,” advised a gray caption.

“Uninvited guest: Unknown, take a hike...”

Eugène-Olivier knew he was writing nonsense but his fingers flew on the keyboard with a will of their own.

“Unknown: Uninvited guest, you have no reason to concern yourself with where I should go. All the more so since you can’t go anywhere anymore.”

That, my dear, is where you are wrong, Eugène-Olivier mentally replied. Whatever is installed on the door, you relied too much on your altitude. If there had been a sensor, it would have gone off a long time ago.

“Unknown: Uninvited guest, see for yourself.”

Something clicked, but not in the computer. A steel grate, sturdy in appearance, descended instead of the blinds. Casting the computer aside, Eugène-Olivier lunged toward the other windows—where the same thing happened, as it did on the front door and the emergency-exit door.

What an idiot he was! The laptop was actually the signal device. But not for thieves—only for those who wanted to get their hands on information.

Inside his thin plastic gloves, Eugène-Olivier’s his hands were suddenly wet.

Cold sweat ran down his cheeks, and the hair on the back of his neck was completely soaked.

The laptop on the carpeted floor continued to spit out more new lines.

“Unknown: Uninvited guest, I need to talk to you.”

Who would have guessed?

“Uninvited guest: Unknown, shut up.”

The bright lines stopped making sense—the mere flickering of letters. Out of the corner of his eye, Eugène-Olivier noticed that they continued, but he didn’t want to read them. The only thing he was sorry about was the files.

And you, filthy pig, won’t get a chance to talk to me. To hell with you! You won’t cut me in little pieces or burn out my eyes with cigarettes like you usually do. You won’t get the chance... It’s my own fault.

Eugène-Olivier passed through the spacious apartment and entered the kitchen. The stove was electric. No good. Hmmm. One of the kitchen drawers was also sealed off with a grate. Everything that stabbed and cut was probably in there. He was afraid of resistance.

And if I had brought my gun? They would have spotted me from somewhere and suffocated me with gas. But I don't have a gun. And in about five minutes there will probably be a whole gang of them here. Not the security guards from downstairs. They would have been here by now. A car will arrive with some kind of privileged unit of the religious guard. I have to hurry.

What could he find here for a quick snack? *Ah, look.* Eugène-Olivier picked up the toaster and unplugged it. *You're a moron, Ahmad ibn Salih. No, you're not exactly a moron; you just don't understand.*

The bathroom was all in marble, amber-like, glistening. The enormous jacuzzi bathtub and champagne-colored sink were framed in ebony. *How you filthy pigs love the good life. Let's hope that, for that very reason, there's an electrical outlet by the sink... So there is!*

A pale face with dark circles under the eyes peered at him from the bathroom mirror. For some reason his gray eyes looked black. Only his hair looked the same—fair, quite light-colored on the surface, and somewhat darker inside. The Norman type, as Father Lothaire had said.

Eugène-Olivier plugged the sink and turned on the tap. The water foamed and bubbled. *What's Jeanne doing now? It doesn't matter. It's not important anymore. The button on her shirt was nearly falling off and hanging by a thread... the radiant waves of soft hair... her little mouth the color of berberis.*

His wristwatch began to beep shrilly, but the sink wasn't yet full. *Faster, faster! They will make you sing later if you don't hurry now!*

At first the plug wouldn't go into the socket, but then it did. Eugène-Olivier pushed the switch on the toaster, grabbed the metal casing with both hands, and plunged it into the water.

Nothing happened. Could the toaster be broken? Eugène-Olivier laughed. He was still wearing the rubber gloves!

His watch was beeping. Eugène-Olivier tore off the gloves.

The last thing he heard before he fell to the floor was a man swearing in some unknown language, Persian, perhaps...

The face of a large, well-groomed man with a moustache was bending over

him. Eugène-Olivier realized in despair that he was not dead. There had been no electrical shock. Instead, there had been a blow to his head, to his left temple. Everything swam before his eyes and rang in his ears from that blow.

Ahmad ibn Salih's light brown eyes, when they met his, were full of hatred no less intense than his own. Apparently satisfied with something, the Arab straightened himself, gritted his teeth as he pulled the cord from the outlet, and mightily hurled the toaster to the tile floor with a loud clang.

To hell with everything! How was it possible for this slothful Arab to fly through the air from the door, through the large living room, into the bathroom, and to hit him, a Maquis soldier! Ah, you buttocks, damn you!

Eugène-Olivier slowly sat up, leaning against the wall. He wished he had a sharp object. Not for the Arab. That was pointless. He was surely not alone.

"Did you at least read everything, you miserable wretch?" asked the Arab breathlessly, his wide chest heaving like a blacksmith's bellows. "I told you, I didn't intend to turn you in to the police or the religious guard."

"And I was supposed to take your word?" snapped Eugène-Olivier.

"Can't you see that I'm alone? Open your eyes. Why would I need all that?" Ahmad ibn Salih took out a cambric handkerchief, rolled it into a ball and began to wipe the sweat from his face. Eugène-Olivier noted with vague pleasure that the adroit blow had not been so easy for the scientist.

The host went out of the bathroom quite calmly turning his back to the visitor, certain that he would follow him. Was he really alone? Or was he joking? Let's see. The venerable *effendi* was somehow too self-confident.

"There are no bugs in my apartment." Ahmad ibn Salih sank heavily into a leather armchair. His height saved him from being quite fat. The soft seat immediately sank 8 inches toward the floor.

"I don't think that's my problem," Eugène-Olivier said with a smile.

He still could barely stand on his feet from the blow but Ahmad ibn Salih seemed not to care whether the uninvited guest would remain standing or find a place to sit down in the small guest room with three black walls and an illuminated aquarium as the fourth wall. Eugène-Olivier sat down on the couch.

"You think not? It's about Sophia Sevazmios." The Arab sat opposite from him without taking his ponderous, persistent gaze off the boy. That gaze was now full of cold revulsion and a sort of disgust.

"Wh-who?" His heart skipped a beat, but Eugène-Olivier knew his face would not betray him.

“You heard me. I have her address. Panthéon ghetto, corner of Seventh and Eleventh Streets.”

Eugène-Olivier was again engulfed by hatred so strong that he couldn't think. Two years ago the mayor of Paris had suddenly ordered that the names of the streets in all the ghettos be replaced by ordinal numbers. Among themselves, of course, the French continued to call the streets by their old names. If they mentioned a number, it was with a grimace of revulsion that all understood. Only an enemy could mention a street number with such sterile indifference, but in all the eighteen years of his life, this was the first time that Eugène-Olivier was talking to an enemy—and moreover, while sitting across from him, sunk in soft pillows.

Watch out! Stay calm! The devil only knew what was happening but he should keep his eyes and ears open. Lord, if he only had something cold to put on his forehead or at least to drink, he could pull himself together right away.

“You could hardly be expected to know it, but others know it well. Panthéon ghetto, corner of Seventh and Eleventh, apartment number 5. Sophia Sevazmios has been living there for a week and she plans to stay for a few days more. As soon as you tell her someone knows this, she will, of course, change her address. But I must say that would be a superfluous hassle. She doesn't have to do that. She can stay there in peace. The point is that the religious guard doesn't have this information. Although if I were in your shoes, I would be cautious about being seen in the ghetto.

“A new procedure is going into effect. They will start arresting teenagers and young people for minor infractions from every twentieth family, but not entire families. The detainees will be prosecuted and sent to the jails for infidels—to Compiègne, for example. I think you have heard what things are like there. It will not be unusual for a fifteen year-old boy to be caught in some undesirable gesture during prayers, prosecuted and sentenced. But the parents will be ready to do a lot to ease their child's stay in Compiègne. Not even for the sake of getting him released—just to better his lot. To give him a chocolate bar, to bail him out from solitary confinement under the toilets, to save him from sexually serving the wardens. They will decide that a dozen strangers's lives is a reasonable price for this.”

Whatever was in the smooth, well-modulated voice of Ahmad ibn Salih, it was certainly not pity toward people forced to make this undignified but terrible choice.

But what if he is not lying? thought Eugène-Olivier quickly. He probably wasn't. It was true that they had begun to arrest more young people. He hadn't thought about it much. In any case, he himself was unlikely to end up in prison. Compiègne was for minor violators. The Arab wasn't lying about that, but what about the rest?

"Why are you telling me all this? I have no intention of continuing to play cat and mouse with you. What the devil do you want from me?"

"Now, why would I be talking in *Maquis* passwords with someone who broke into my house to steal my spoons?" Ahmad ibn Salih grinned for a moment, glancing at a small turtle peering through the glass of the aquarium.

Eugène-Olivier could tell him that he had come to steal antiques, but he had gotten distracted and began to play with the computer. Ahmad would never believe it.

The turtle for whom Ahmad ibn Salih was rapping on the glass was opening its mouth, not understanding why it could not catch anything except the smooth surface.

"I need to meet with Sophia Sevazmios. I understand that you don't know who she is. But the guarantee of my interest in such a meeting is that I know what the religious guard does not, and that I remain silent."

He was an ordinary fool, nothing more! Sophia would never trust any of them or believe anything they said. She would never allow *them* to dictate the rules of the game.

"You can give her something for me." Ahmad ibn Salih suddenly got up and left the room. *To bring his men? To make a phone call?* Eugène-Olivier silently slipped toward the door. The only thing he could hear was impatient banging, as if all the drawers of a chest were being pulled out one after another.

"You can give the files you copied to anyone you want. I believe you have my entire hard drive," the scientist called from the other room. "But I must warn you that they are unlikely to interest Madame Sevazmios. They have been absolutely filtered. But I think she will find *this* more interesting."

With these words, Ahmad ibn Salih, who could move noiselessly, it turned out, despite his weight, appeared in the doorway, one step away from Eugène-Olivier. In his hands was a cellophane bag with a small box inside. The Arab shook the box out onto the palm of his hand; it was a little smaller than a pack of cigarettes, made of pear wood, with half-erased carvings on the lid.

"Here." The Arab held the box out to Eugène-Olivier.

"Open it," Eugène-Olivier said, taking a step back.

Nodding, Ahmad ibn Salih carefully lifted the lid, showing its contents—or more accurately, the absence of contents. The little box was empty. Then he brought the box closer to his face and sniffed it.

“The smell is very strong but it’s not dangerous.”

The dark wood smelled strongly of some kind of spice. Eugène-Olivier turned the box over in his hands several times, perplexed. It was an old thing. At one time it had been decorated with amber, but almost all the stones had fallen out. So now what? He hated such games! Before him was an enemy, a real enemy, who didn’t even know how to hide it.

“You could, of course, toss it into the first trash can you find as soon as you are in the street.” Ahmad ibn Salih stepped into the hallway, clearly showing that the conversation was over. “But in your place I wouldn’t do that.”

And my life depends on knowing what you would or wouldn’t do in my place? What’s more important to me is figuring out what I should do in my place. What if this is all some kind of fiendishly clever trap? It’s no big deal sacrificing a pawn to claim a bishop. Or better yet, a queen. So, thanks for your advice about the trash can. It won’t be in the first one I see.

Ahmad ibn Salih, who had been walking ahead of Eugène-Olivier toward the front door, suddenly stopped as if he had read his mind, and turned around. “You know what? If Sophia Sevazmios is at that address tonight, that means I’m right. See for yourself whether she’s there or not.”

* * *

There was a small antique shop at the address the Arab gave him, although it would be more accurate to call it a run-down second-hand store. There were racks on the walls hung with clothing preserved from earlier times. Women’s sleeveless and short-sleeved blouses were still sewn for lounging at home, but those were emphatically sensual. It would not have occurred to any Muslim designer to make a blouse such as this one, made with a modest checked fabric with pockets. Or that one, which was solid beige.

The shelves were crammed with Faience teacups, interspersed with photo frames—which in a Muslim country were useless. The items that attracted the most attention were completely neutral: coffee pots, vases, trays, little boxes. That’s why Sophia, who was turning the suspicious parcel over in her hands, looked as if she were evaluating one of the items displayed for sale.

Even the expression on her face was that of a person lazily contemplating an unnecessary purchase.

“I really do recognize it.” Sophia was sitting back in an old rocking chair in the far corner of the smoke-filled room. “My father-in-law used to keep red myrrh in this box. Even if I had forgotten the remaining amber stones, I think that the smell would have reminded me. It was his quirk; he preferred myrrh to incense. No question, it’s useful to have a letter that only the addressee can read. That means all of this was planned a long time ago.”

Eugène-Olivier remained silent. A soldier has no right to question a general, even when the general is musing in front of him. Sophia Sevazmios, in fact, was just thinking out loud, and could not possibly be interested in the opinion of a person who had failed twice before noon today. A new record! His first failure was that he had not succeeded in killing himself, and the second, that he had endangered the safety of many others as a result. And being a fool could be considered a third failure, perhaps the biggest of all.

“Don’t worry, young man, this is a hard nut to crack for someone who still has only his milk teeth. As you can see, nothing awful happened, because you are still alive.” Sophia dropped the box in her pocket, taking out her cigarettes at the same time.

“I’m not so sure.” Eugène-Olivier dared to raise his eyes.

“You’re probably wondering if any of my husband’s relatives are still alive.” Sophia smiled, pausing. “Would you be so kind as to pass me the ashtray? If I get up, ashes will start falling on the floor and old George doesn’t have a maid. As far as I know, there’s no one left. At least not in Eurabia. Moreover, everyone knows they can’t get anything from me by blackmail.”

Eugène-Olivier had heard that they tried. The hostages were all killed, but they were avenged so horribly that the Wahhabis had not made further attempts. The retribution took half a year, and did not end until the last of those involved in taking the hostages was dead. One actually did survive, but he went mad waiting for his turn to die. Now he hid under his hospital bed whenever he saw a new nurse or aide. Unless all this was legend—one of many that accumulated around people like Sophia Sevazmios.

“It was the only thing I could think of,” he said, moving only his lips. “He’s an enemy, and what can an enemy have up his sleeve except blackmail?”

“There are a lot of possibilities.” Sophia rocked in her armchair. “Do you know why they didn’t manage to occupy the entire planet after all? You wouldn’t remember, but there was a moment when they could have done just that.”

Eugène-Olivier remained silent. The feeling of guilt gnawed at him. The

only thing he could do was endure and not show it. After all, he wasn't asking for forgiveness or trying to justify himself.

"Sit down on that crate. Quit pacing in front of me." As usual, Sophia's most benevolent sentences sounded like orders.

"You see, even in the old world, the sons of Allah liked to claim that they, unlike Christians, talk to the higher power, so to speak, without intermediaries. It's all nonsense. If you want details, talk to Father Lothaire. But in this nonsense, there's some truth—because every proud Muslim who has 'spoken directly with Allah,' as he describes, can't understand why Allah has told another Muslim something very different! They can't agree among themselves!

"That's why we haven't disappeared completely. And they still can't agree now. Maybe some enthusiastic renegade is playing a game against a brother who is a true believer by helping a *kafir*. Whether it is this Ahmad or someone backing him, we don't care."

So all the pieces fell into place. There you go, buttocks. And you thought Sophia Sevazmios would want to meet with you.

"And where did this person propose that we meet?" Sophia extinguished her cigarette. Eugène-Olivier jumped up so suddenly that some Chinese paper fans spilled on the floor.

"You young people will never become gamblers," Sophia said with amusement. "Let's suppose he wants to use the *Maquis* forces for his own purposes. If he's doing that, it's to betray someone from his agency. Maybe it's just to create a few opportune incidents so that an official on their side who keeps losing men, loses his job. They constantly betray each other out of self-interest—that much I know. In the process, we get a chance to play a game of cards with him—not for his advantage, but our own.

"But how does he know what the religious guard doesn't know yet? He didn't lie about that. I don't like that, I don't like it at all.

"So the *effendi* will have to satisfy my curiosity. There is something strange here: Where did he get this box? Father Demetrios Sevazmios left all his personal belongings in Russia."

CHAPTER 6

THE PRICE OF INTIMIDATION

A suburb of Athens, 2021

“If you had done your missionary work yesterday, we wouldn’t have to buy weapons today.” His son’s words echoed in the ears of Father Demetrios.

The white stairs of the crypt of Sienna marble were strewn with the petals of dark roses, and thus looked sprinkled with blood. The cloudless sky shone with the blueness not known in colder regions. A young woman stood apart from the crowd among the light-colored crosses on both sides of the narrow path. She was motionless, absolutely motionless, as her black skirt and wrap danced in the wind.

Father Demetrios realized that it was the first time he had seen his daughter-in-law like this. A black scarf of handmade lace covered her hair, which was gathered in an old-fashioned bun. The free, wide hem of her long skirt—which came down to her ankles in their black hose, giving way to thin, elegant, high-heeled shoes. In mourning, dressed so femininely, her beauty finally shone in its full glory.

She, who was so un-Greek, not only looked like a Greek woman, but like a supremely Greek embodiment of ancient female sorrow, like Medea or Elektra. Sad, but divinely beautiful with her calm face. She would not wring her hands and tear her hair—but where did she get that icy black spirit?

Had her husband been aware of how beautiful she was? Probably not. She probably wore running shoes to her own wedding. Not that anyone knew for sure, because they had married practically in secret—terribly insulting a good part of the family.

Her beauty was usually well hidden in light jackets, men’s sweaters, and jeans. Her noble neck was concealed by carelessly falling hair, her face by abominable dark glasses.

Had she wanted to, she could have shone in the elite Greek society to which Leonid had been born. This was despite her origin—for she was Russian, and if not worse, almost a Jew. But she did not want to.

The little cemetery was old and belonged to the family; consequently, there was no need for ritual transportation. The procession walked to the villa on foot and scattered at the bend among the graves and the cypresses.

* * *

“How can I entertain so many of you? All right then, I won’t insist. You two, see what’s wrong with the toilet in the bathroom in the corner—the water runs for fifteen minutes every time we flush. You, there, pick up the empty cans and take them to the trash bin downstairs; there must be a lot of them everywhere, especially in the bedroom under the bed. You’ll find garbage bags in the kitchen under the sink. That’s right, but first of all, polish my shoes.”

These were Leonid Sevazmios’ last words, although Sophia did not know them as she walked like a dark shadow among the dark cypresses. Then he fell, strafed with bullets, into a deep armchair in their small apartment not far from Kifisia—not the most exclusive spot in Athens, but quite decent. The apartment, surrounded by a balcony swamped in flowers and greenery, consisted of a bedroom, a small computer office, a still smaller room for frequent guests, and a dining room that was also not ostentatious, but suitable for a small family without children—*still* without children, as their friends put it.

Instead of a kitchen, there was a corner in the dining room with a sink, a stove and a refrigerator separated by matte green glass through which daylight could pass. There was only room for one person in it at a time. One couldn’t really say that the young housewife worried much about this inconvenience. Even when they dined at home, which was not often, one could always order something from the nearby restaurant. They gorged at two in the morning on pita bread stuffed with grilled meat and smothered in hot sauce. They remained slender and healthy.

She could almost see Leonid’s face as he said those words—his open smile full of the unconscious, inherited air of a gentleman, placing his foot in his evening shoes with laces and thin leather soles on the small table with newspapers. They had been getting ready to go to the theater, to a modern adaptation of something ancient.

The words were not quite ancient but they were completely him. When the lights suddenly went out and then the mechanical part of the locks on the door silently yielded, and four men with automatic rifles suddenly burst into the apartment, Leonid didn’t even try to check whether the telephone was working. “It would have been pointless,” as Sonya would say.

But it was one thing to be aware that something was pointless and another not to lose one’s head. He understood in a flash that he could not escape, and provoked the leader of the four to kill him on the spot instead of torturing him

according to their custom. He bluffed and won a quick death.

Walking among the white crosses, she knew only one thing: He died at peace. He knew very well that Sonya would never enter the house without first calling from outside and hearing a familiar voice from the headset, unless an absence had been agreed upon earlier. And even that familiar voice had to use certain words and could not use other words.

Leonid loved pomp. Sometimes Sonya, when she wearied of shocking her husband's relatives with her torn jeans, made concessions to him. Not often, of course, but on that day when he didn't answer the telephone, she had spent three hours in a hair salon patiently submitting to the hair stylist's efforts to transform her rebellious, coarse hair into a fanciful evening style with large and small curls.

They managed to hide, all four of them, although they greeted the police, not Sonya.

Sonya found out her husband's last words only three and a half years later. The third of the four criminals (she had not managed to catch the first two alive) began talking immediately. Having a pistol sliding over his face stimulated his memory. She believed him because everything matched—he remembered that Leonid had been in a white shirt with the collar up but still without a necktie; he remembered many small details that proved he was not making it up. And how could he make up something like that anyway? When he repeated the whole sentence for the third time without adding anything, Sonya pushed the gun barrel in his mouth. She was impatient lest this unworthy, subhuman creature that transmitted the words of her husband add something of his own to them.

But she did not pull the trigger right away. For a minute she saw the young face, which looked as if it were split in two: the forehead, nose and upper part of his cheeks tanned from the sun, while the lower half was all white. Not even the thick beginnings of a new beard could hide the bluish whiteness. The terrorist had shaved his *mujahid* beard in the hope of cheating death.

But Death was looking him in the eyes with a smile in the corner of her lips, smiling with eyes in which small fires now danced. Death had thick bangs like a little girl, her hair was gathered in a ponytail, and she was dressed in a blue denim shirt. It was pointless to scream upon feeling the salty, cold metal in his mouth, the face of Death rocked above him despite the tears, most sincere and abundant, that filled his eyes and ran down his cheeks. *Don't, don't, don't!*

It was the last time she killed any of them with any emotion.

Before that, many days had passed. Many laborious, difficult tasks had to be done.

* * *

“Sophia, wait.” Father Demetrios decided to disturb her solitude.

She slowed her walk, stopped, fixed the scarf that had been loosened by the wind, and smiled only with her lips, but calmly.

“I wanted to talk with you,” said Father Demetrios quietly. “Not about Leonid. It’s unlikely that there is anything we could tell each other about him. As an old man, I would just like to have a little chat with you. It’s difficult in the house, so many people...”

“Let’s talk, then. What about, Father?” Her calmness was unbearable. It would be easier for him if she wept. Lord, send her tears as a gift, poor creature!

“About Russia. If I understood well, Sophia, you don’t intend to return to your homeland?”

“Perhaps for half a year, I still don’t know. But I don’t intend to live in Russia or in Greece. First of all, because I no longer need a home. Even one the size of the Earth.”

“Is that the only reason you don’t want to live in Greece?”

“Should there be another reason?”

“You understand very well what I’m saying. Your husband condemned his compatriots.”

“He condemned a lot of people. What should I do, then, move to Mars? They say there’s no air there.”

“He condemned his compatriots more than others,” Father Demetrios spoke with strange pauses, as if there were not enough air *here*, in this spot filled with cypresses and wind that brought a faint scent of sea salt. “Even I can’t stay here anymore.”

“Why is that? Isn’t Greece ‘the only country in this senseless world that is saving itself,’ Father?” The young woman softened her intonation. She wasn’t intending to be spiteful.

“I’m not renouncing my words,” said Father Demetrios. “Greece will save itself, but it will not save anyone else. Russia will save others, but only if it manages to save itself.

“About 15 years ago, I traveled through Russia with a large delegation of Orthodox churches. You probably don’t know about it, Sophia, but there were

powerful unifying processes still in effect then. Not everything turned out as we wanted, but a lot did. This strengthened the Orthodox world. There were a lot of things I didn't like about Russia at that time. For an enormous country, the position of the clergy was too elevated. An unnatural loftiness placed it above the people. Enclosed residences, automobiles, dozens of administrators and secretaries on the Internet, on the telephone, who filtered access to the bishop by mere mortals...

"The archbishop served in church on a feast day, saw crowds of believers, including young people, women with children in their arms, visited classrooms full of students, visited churches being rebuilt from ruins. He saw the freshly printed church books and read theological magazines. And he started to believe that he was a bishop in an Orthodox country. The most dangerous of illusions! My child, I saw the statistics then. Horrendous! There are more people who call themselves Orthodox than believe in God.

"My daughter, they have reduced Orthodoxy to a national color! To colored eggs and feast-day cakes! The percentage of people who fast is practically the same as it was during the time of Communism—when believers were persecuted.

"The priests complained about the problem of drop-ins. Those were people who considered themselves believers, but really were not. Drop-ins considered it normal to baptize their child, but not spend a thought on his religious education. They married in church and then divorced. They went to church once or twice per year.

"Many believers told me then that the most recent Passion Week had overlapped with the senseless Communist holidays. And what happened? All the TV channels were showing entertainment programs, clowns. Where was at least the shadow of respect for Orthodox sorrow? Would this have been possible here among us in Greece? And those awful New Year's holidays in the middle of the Nativity fast! Let's leave the debate about the calendar aside. My point is this—the Christian state must adapt itself to the church calendar, not the other way around! Russia must understand that, unlike Greece, its Orthodox members are a minority in its society. Just because there are so many churches, an illusion is created of an Orthodox majority."

"But why are your thoughts now in Russia, Father?" Sophia told herself that this long, excited tirade was proof that her father-in-law was still alive, not only on the outside. The death of his beloved son could have sucked all the life from his soul, leaving only a body to move toward the grave for as many years

as he had left. It was good that this had not happened.

“Because my thoughts are leading me there.”

“What do you mean?”

“The tears have washed my eyes, my daughter, but I can’t tolerate the behavior of my compatriots. I have understood many things, I have paid too high a price, while they, they remain the same as before. It is better that I leave Greece so as not to tempt the Lord by the wrath of weak heart. I have another pasture for missionary work. I have found a place where I am needed. Let the church princes float on the clouds of illusion, God will judge them, but among the sparse masses of the middle clergy, there is room. I will take monastic vows in Russia and Demetrios Sevazmios and his guilt will disappear forever.”

“When are you leaving, Father?”

“Next week. I will leave all financial and real estate affairs to my brothers. I think there will be a use for my money there. The family will also see to it that you receive your share. According to Leonid’s will, they will divide your part into various accounts so you can withdraw money under various circumstances. Don’t worry; our family is virtuous with respect to finances. I know you need this money and I think I know how you will use it. I don’t judge you, Sophia; I have no right to judge anyone—not only as a Christian, but as a man who has made many mistakes.

“There is just one thing I want you to know. Thanks to Sevazmios money, your capabilities have increased tenfold. May the Lord help you to increase your responsibilities tenfold as well. I know you’re not religious, even though we never discussed it. You only respected the rules in order not to insult your husband and his family. I believe this was an huge burden on your unruly soul. I believe you will now throw away all restraint and cast off even the empty shell of church culture. Don’t make a face, my child, a realistic view of things is part of the Greek national character. I would be surprised if I were to learn that you entered a church of your own volition in the next decade. But with my vision stripped of illusions, I see that you will come to God, Sophia. Not soon, but you will. Forgive me for everything. Know that I am praying for you.”

“Father... Only now did I realize why my husband was so special. It’s true that heredity is an important factor. Forgive me for the grandchildren who don’t exist, most of all for that.”

Paris—May 2048

“Really, how did he come by something that had belonged to Father

Demetrios?” Sophia thought again as she descended into the auto mechanic’s shop. The underground workshop was incomplete, like the supermarket building above it, but no work was being done today because it was Friday. There were bags of cement, coils of cables, the bare cement of the walls, and the phantasmagoric outlines of a building. In old movies such places served as some kind of urban sublimation of the silent forest. It was there that freaks, gangsters, extraterrestrials, or monsters usually attacked heroes. How many years had passed since she had seen an ordinary movie?

“And so. This isn’t such a bad place, is it, Sophie? Lots of exits, easy to set up security on the access routes.”

Sophia nodded. The narrow windows below the ceiling, already covered with a thick layer of construction dust, did not give too much light, but when the young man pushed away a piece of cardboard covering the unfinished entrance for automobiles, the outlines of this unusual place became clear. The workmen had left a folding chair, an old painted stacking stool, and several empty crates labeled “Moroccan oranges.”

Footsteps rang out. A tall man dressed in work overalls descended into the passage. However, one could imagine he was a workman only if one didn’t see his face. His high forehead, the circles of tiredness under his eyes, and his pale face indicated a man who was not a physical laborer. His military posture and the elegance of his movements were surprising.

“I almost got lost but I heard you cleaning the passage,” he said by way of a greeting.

“Please don’t be angry, but I can’t imagine why it was necessary for you to come here,” Sophia said with a frown. “I’m sorry the whole thing came up.”

“I won’t get in your way; I’ll sit a little and listen. I’m not sure why myself, but you have to admit, Sophia, that you’re not the only one with an intuition.”

Sophia lifted her hand and made a sign to all to be quiet. It was obvious that she liked even less the sound of new footsteps.

The man who soon appeared was obviously an Arab—tall, plump in the manner of middle-aged Arabs who were not athletic, with wavy chestnut hair and full, sensuous lips. He wore a light-colored summer suit, ostentatiously decorated with a pile of heavy gold: a signet ring, cuff buttons, tie pin, all of them studded with rubies.

“Are you convinced that I didn’t bring a tail?” He sat across from Sophia on a dusty crate with the nonchalance of a man who has a lot of clothes which are taken care of by others. “Good evening, Madame Sevazmios.”

"I'm not sure the evening can be good for both of us at the same time." Sophia smiled bitterly. "Let's get right down to the matter for which you disturbed me."

"It's a disputable issue who first disturbed whom," he said, turning his head carefully. "Yesterday my home was searched, not to mention broken into illegally."

"Really? I believe that you, like any decent, law-abiding citizen, attempted to detain the offender and that you advised the authorities?"

"Has my conversation with Sophia Sevazmios already been recorded by a photographer?"

"No, nothing is being recorded or photographed. Or perhaps it is being recorded and written. Why would you take my word for it?"

"In any case, it is no longer important. You were interested in the contents of my computer because I am the director of the Paris Laboratory for Atomic Research." Ahmad ibn Salih smiled ambiguously.

"Atomic waste doesn't interest me," she said, tensely watching the Arab. Her eyes were feeling out his face like the hands of a blind person. "That's the headache of somebody in Moscow. Or Tokyo. Or maybe Tel Aviv."

"Sophie, no one is accusing you of a sudden curiosity in atomic research," said the handsome, twenty-four year-old Larochejaquelein, one of the seven representatives of the underground. "The idea was mine and I admit it was a failure."

"It was a failure not only because I have insured myself against such curiosity," added Ahmad ibn Salih, "but also because one could say that you shot the moon. There is nothing on my computer. Nor is there anything in the laboratory. In fact, there is no laboratory. It's an empty field. Like the optical illusions of the Dutch school, the ones they placed on the table to look like three-dimensional objects."

"In Russia, they call them Potemkin villages," observed Sophia, keeping her eyes on Ahmad. Unlike the men of the Underground, who were too surprised by the information provided to notice, she hadn't missed that a Muslim was talking about the Dutch school. The times when the Wahhabis were tearing up paintings and breaking musical instruments had passed. Some Muslim, Europeanized intellectuals even allowed themselves to have a piano in the house and "incorporeal paintings." But to hear an Arab talk about the Dutch school of painting was odd.

"That's too good to be true," said Larochejaquelein sharply.

“Well, then you can believe it because it’s not good at all,” said Ahmad ibn Said coldly. “On the contrary, it’s even very bad.”

“Please explain.”

“With pleasure.” Ahmad ibn Salih paused as if he wanted their focused attention. “However, I must begin at the beginning. It is well known that even before the EuroIslamic bloc achieved its borders of today, atomic research was being done in the Muslim world. The most serious was, and remains, the atomic base in Pakistan. It should be kept in mind that none of the Pakistani experts of that time were trained in their own country.”

Of course not. We trained them. They couldn’t have done it; they lived the entire twentieth century as oil leeches. They produced nothing and they discovered nothing, thought Sophia.

“When the non-Islamic countries brought down the ‘green curtain,’ ” continued Ahmad ibn Salih, “the situation with atomic weapons ceased to be transparent. The *kafir* states knew that the network of scientific research institutions was functioning. However, it is obvious that there have been no atomic weapons, in fact, for a long time. Even mechanical devices cease to function without qualified support, let alone... Especially if we take into account the historic agreement in Kyoto.”

Larochejaquelein nodded. The Kyoto Agreement of 2029, signed by Russia, Japan, China, Australia and very reluctantly, the USA, listed in detail the technologies in the field of science that must not be exported to the countries of Euroislam and the old Muslim countries. It was only thanks to that agreement that they managed to keep Eurabia at the technical level of 2010.

“I’m sorry, but what’s very bad about that? Or why is it bad for us?” asked Larochejaquelein.

“A little patience. As I have already said, the atomic school of Pakistan remains the most competent. Until recently, there was hope that all additional works were not in vain. But now that hope has finally vanished. Pakistan has failed for the second time to make a bomb.”

“So what?”

“Like metastasis, the *ghazwa* will not stop of its own accord.” Ahmad ibn Salih’s brown eyes became somehow ash-like, like the earth after a fire. “In order to continue it, they were waiting for a bomb. But if there is no real bomb, and there *will be* no real bomb, that means—”

“A dirty bomb! Lord!” Larochejaquelein struck himself on the forehead. “Don’t tell me they’re going to make a dirty bomb.”

“Yes.”

“Will someone be so kind as to explain to an old woman who doesn’t know about such things what a dirty bomb is and how it got dirty?” Something made Sophia smile. She was no longer piercing the Arab with her eyes.

“It’s actually not a bomb, Sophie,” said the man in work overalls quietly. Something in his voice provoked a grimace of revulsion from the strange Arab. “It’s simply residue, a product of atomic dissolution. You don’t need missiles or missile launchers. A container can be carried and planted by any saboteur. The question is purely logistical, assuming he wants to commit suicide.”

“And there are as many saboteurs and kamikazes as you want. They are a cheap commodity,” continued the scientist, managing to regain self-control. “For Islam, there is nothing cheaper than human life.”

“You’re not Russian...” Sophia’s eyes again met with those of Ahmad ibn Salih but she was now looking at him completely differently. “You’re not Russian, although you have lived in Russia. Why are you surprised? You’re not the only one that knows the secrets of others. Moreover, it takes my experience to see that the corners of your mouth almost moved when I mentioned Potemkin villages. For Europeans that expression would be completely meaningless.”

“Sophie, it can’t be!” Now it was Larochejaquelein who was drinking in the man with his eyes. “His face—”

“Yes, his face.” Sophia smiled. “When I was young, plastic surgeons left scars behind the ears. Today, a year later one can’t tell that a scalpel was used. Absolutely harmless magic that doesn’t take that long. The shape of the lips, of course, adjustments in the slant of the eyes, a bit of nose work. But why you have unmasked yourself, *Monsieur Resident*, atomic science does not explain, at least not to me.”

“So it has come to this.” The man whom it was no longer possible to call Ahmad ibn Salih smiled at Sophia without hostility. “The destruction of such a great diversion justifies my unmasking, and unmasking is an inevitability.

“It’s a form of redemption, with interest. One hundred and forty commandos, recruited among the Russian Muslims, are drawing near the waters of Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara, Yekaterinburg, Tsaritsin, and Vladivostok with their radioactive infection. Some of them would have been caught in any case, but the results would have been spectacular. But all of them will be arrested before the appointed hour. The tragedy will be prevented. The response will also be multifold.

“But I am handling those problems, more or less, by myself,” continued

Slobodan. “I am here before you for other reasons. Events are unfolding, it should be noted, with lightning speed. Two days ago, I did not know about this new branch of jihad.

“They know that states with atomic power are not suicidal enough to use these weapons first. In such a war, there is no winner. But nothing will stop them, even if they have to turn the whole planet into a desert inhabited not only by two-humped camels but also two-headed ones, with small oases of clean territory inhabited by their princes, the direct descendants of the Prophet. That’s why they will initiate activity now on all fronts. Their plan is to make simultaneous use of the dirty bomb and intimidation. And that is something that will directly concern all of you.”

“What is their goal?” Larochejaquelein’s voice was hoarse with excitement.

“The complete destruction of the ghettos, beginning with Paris.”

A heavy silence fell. The words were too simple; they did not manage to fully convey their horrible meaning.

Slobodan finally continued, “They will throw all the city dirt, the so-called volunteer deputies of the religious guard, into the five Paris ghettos. They will pass through the streets like a tide, without hurrying, easily converting anyone that trembles, and the last people who remain free.”

It suddenly became much colder in the basement. Sophia’s shoulders trembled. For an instant, her wondrous youth disappeared and blood could not warm her sufficiently. Larochejaquelein was very pale.

“I believe that it’s no secret to anyone here that Euroislam owns TV,” continued Slobodan. “But it is broadcasting from behind the curtain. They got that idea from the time of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Then it was the signals from the West revealing all the things the Communists tried to hide from the Soviet people.

“But now, commercials are being broadcast from here in Islamic-occupied Europe that are following the propaganda strategy of the Third Reich. They advertise the joy of newly converted Muslims. Beautiful girls whisper how much they like to wear the chador. In the free world, there are people who enjoy laughing at these stupidities by satellite. Young people, especially, think it’s hilarious. But soon the TV audience will stop laughing.”

“Yes,” said Sophia—her eyes like black ice, the ice of Lake Cocytus. “I recognize the style. They worked that way as long ago as Chechnya. Then, the authorities thought the terrorists put themselves on camera to prove they held a

hostage—otherwise, how could they get their ransom money?

“But there was a puzzle. Our special services couldn’t comprehend why the stupid fools kept collecting evidence against themselves. They didn’t even cover their faces when they filmed what they were doing to people. One theory was that, since during the time of Yeltsin, it was clear that they knew they wouldn’t be punished. Another was that whoever didn’t follow the usual practice didn’t get any money. But this practice, this jihad-by-video, was actually a result of the fact that the jihadis themselves couldn’t live without it. All of them are actors.”

Sophia’s expression became gloomy, turning within to a memory frozen in black ice, among many memories. She remembered the not-quite-successful actor who had become a successful trader in blood. Wearing a plush, light-blue robe and house slippers made of crocodile skin, he had already been shot in the legs. A black stain grew in front of him on the silk carpet as he crawled, weeping and humiliating himself in front of the twenty year-old woman. He swore and he begged. Why wouldn’t he? There were no cameras present and no witnesses to his shame except his locked-up mistress—the wilted movie star who wailed from somewhere in the depths of the apartment?

It would be interesting to know, Sonya thought to herself later, how he would have behaved if everything had been filmed. Would he even have known how to die with dignity? These jihad-actors believe that unless you’re arrested, you’re not a thief. They have no court of conscience. In them it is replaced, sometimes quite successfully, by the desire to preserve face in front of others.

Sonya Greenberg researched these psychological quirks and distinctions for years in books. And then, when she was left alone and sufficiently provided for materially, she crossed the border where hatred is transformed into revenge.

For several years before meeting Leonid, she had relished her role of solitary avenger. He managed, not to stop her—that would have been impossible—but to take her to a new level and to introduce her to the general resistance movement, which made practical sense. That was why she loved him. What could she do? She did not know how to love without a reason.

For minutes, everyone was silent, buried in his own thoughts. There was no need to discuss how television would be used to broadcast to the whole world scenes that would be repeated a thousand times over, where a beaten-up, horrified man, suffocating as if he were suffering an asthmatic attack, between the torn-asunder body of one child and another still alive, wailed “*ilaha...*

illa... allah...” And then, accompanied by approving laughter, prodded by poles, himself went to the house of a stranger “to witness his faith in blood”—dragging himself with his torturers from door to door until he found a throat for the knife pushed into his hands.

“What can I say, I can’t really thank you,” said Larochejaquelein, standing up. “You Russians are not interested in the panic behind the curtain. Our interests coincide, that’s all.”

“I’m not Russian, but you have no reason to thank me,” answered Slobodan. “As you yourself observed, I wouldn’t move a finger to save the souls of the French. But now we have to work together. I would like to take part in the planning of a response to what I have described, and I can propose some help in this respect.”

“We’ll decide about that,” Larochejaquelein exchanged looks with Sophia. “But who are you, anyway? Why do you hate us? What should we call you, at least to make it easier for ourselves?”

“He’s a Serb,” said Sophia. “The first question answers the second, and you’re too young, Henri, to understand the reasons why he hates us.”

“Not you, Sophia Sevazmios,” objected Slobodan, casting a glance at the silent member of the group. “You’re Russian and Orthodox.”

“And in the same pot with the Catholics, so out of respect for me please don’t look at the priest like that anymore. He wasn’t even born when other priests were blessing Croatian murderers. Let’s leave emotions aside and return to our task.”

“Very well.” Slobodan made a visible effort, but the lines of his face did not soften.

“Perhaps everything is not that terrible,” said Larochejaquelein quietly. “The catacombs beneath Paris are enormous. They can temporarily receive all the inhabitants of the ghettos. But we need to start taking people there right away. Gradually we may be able to transfer them abroad.”

“It is characteristic of man that he does not believe in impending catastrophe,” observed Father Lothaire. “The inhabitants of the ghetto are accustomed to living in a mine field. Many, very many of them, will not want to leave their homes and go underground.”

“He’s right,” said Sophia bitterly. “The majority simply will not believe in such a massive slaughter. They won’t believe it until they see the bestial mob in their streets.”

“What do we do then? Save our own and leave the rest to be slaughtered

like chickens?”

“Slow down,” Sophia reminded Larochejaquelein. “How much time do we have?”

“Not more than a week,” said Slobodan. *Yes, that was about right. They would probably prepare something in celebration of the anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople. They liked to organize such events on holidays.*

“Will the Christians believe that preparations are afoot to slaughter them?” Larochejaquelein asked Father Lothaire.

“They’ll believe it, but I think they will not want to leave their homes. That is, everyone will make an effort to send the children and the weak underground. But many will stay. They will think that the moment has come for them to witness the truth. In essence, this monstrous slaughter of people is another step toward Judgment Day.”

The silence grew electric.

To Eugène-Olivier Lévêque and Paul Bertaud, who were keeping watch in front of the door, time seemed to stand still.

“By the way, *Monsieur Resident*, you didn’t introduce yourself,” said Sophia with a smile. “Tell us your name!”

“Let’s say it’s Knezhevich.”

“Alright, if it’s Knezhevich, then it’s Knezhevich.” Sophia laughed.

“But Sophia, it doesn’t make sense.” Larochejaquelein became upset. “What do you have in mind?”

She did not acknowledge his question. “However, please satisfy my curiosity,” she said, again looking at Slobodan. “Regarding the box for myrrh.”

“That’s easy.” Slobodan smiled. The spasm on his face disappeared. “Ten years ago, GRU finally decided to disturb Hieromonk Dionysos in his solitude.”

“Ten years ago?”

“Yes, he lived to a ripe old age in Solovki. Moreover, with a clear mind and sound sense. He reacted to this contact with deep thought. At the same time, he was asked to provide us with a sign of confidence, completely secret, so that we in case of need we could give a sign to Sophia Sevazmios. The father then gave us the little box, making the little joke that the members of the intelligence service were helping him to repent for the sin of greed. It was a fortunate circumstance that the box bore no Christian symbols. On the other hand, there were also doubts. Articles from our lives are erased from our memories after a few years. You might have simply not recognized the box.”

“No fear of that!” Sophia laughed, shaking her head. “He knew what he was doing. My father-in-law once threw that little box at me and his aim was so good that he hit me in the forehead with it. I had to comb the bits of amber out of my hair. He called me a ‘criminal adventurer.’ To be frank, ‘criminal adventurer’ isn’t an exact quote, but that was the gist of it.

“You needn’t look at me like that; the Greeks are very emotional. With them, even church on a feast day is a kind of holiday fair. During the service, they walk all over the church, wherever it occurs to them to go, greeting their acquaintances. You can’t understand it, Father, with your strict rites. That atmosphere does have its charms—in moderate quantities.”

Father Lothaire sighed.

“We can stop the slaughter,” Sophia said, looking to Slobodan, Larochejaquelein and then finally Father Lothaire. “It’s true that our losses will be the same as if the slaughter did take place. But in this case, it will not be innocent victims who will die but soldiers with weapons in their hands. And they will be long remembered.”

“What do you propose?” asked Slobodan skeptically.

“We have to act first, and we have to strike terror into their hearts. Our operation must be proportional to theirs.”

CHAPTER 7

ANNETTE'S AWAKENING

Imam Abdulwahid's lettuce-colored Saab was slowly moving from the Austerlitz ghetto toward the botanical garden.

Abdullah, the driver, a young man who had converted to Islam, cast a frightened look at his patron, as he called him in his thoughts, who was sitting next to him in the passenger seat. It was obvious that the *imam's* mood couldn't be worse, and it was therefore entirely possible that he would hold the least little thing against him and dock a few euros from his salary.

"Another traffic jam and my blood pressure will jump. Don't think, Abdullah, that this is the year fourteen hundred and five, when every bare ass could own his own car. In just the past ten years, personal transportation, Allah be praised, has been reduced by a third! But I simply don't understand why we always have a problem with parking, and why all the roads are still so crowded!

"Statistics are a curious thing, venerable Abdulwahid! On the one hand, it's true that now only one family in ten has an automobile. But how many new families have established in the last ten years?"

"Don't get smart. After all, why do your Francophone wives have so few children?" The *imam* suddenly lost his temper. "*You think that no one knows what you're doing?* You take an older, unmarried woman into your house who is your wife's sister or her friend, supposedly as your second wife. But all she does is help with the housework and the children! You're bluffing, trying to deceive honest people! None of you adheres to the normal order of things! If it were up to me, I would check if men sleep with all their wives!"

Abdullah did not answer. Despite the *imam's* character, he wanted to keep this job. Abdullah made it a point to be especially patient after every visit to the ghetto. He remembered all too well the recent lean years, the abominable cigarettes, his brother's old clothes, the apartment that consisted of a single room in the attic...

What was saddest of all, they had already begun to convert all the different idiots in the neighborhood, who didn't even want to do it; some of them said the *Shahada* in tears, as if there were nothing worse in the world. Others preferred to go to their graves. And yet the religious authorities didn't think to call him; he actually got tired of waiting. Sometimes it seemed that his whole life would pass behind barbed wire.

On the other hand, there was an important detail: You mustn't ask to convert by yourself. Then you were considered cheap, very cheap. Finally, *Imam Abdulwahid* entered his house with the *Narrations of the Adherents to the Sunnah* under his arm. Abdullah's mother and brother left the room—silent, defeated, disgusted. But he stayed. He listened, he nodded his head, he concurred, and occasionally he could not contain his happy smile. It ended like a fairy tale: The *imam* considered his conversion a personal triumph; he made every effort in front of the bureaucrats to show off the promising young man. In the end, he hired him as his personal driver. Not every Turk could win such a position and not even a true Arab would be ashamed of it!

The *imam* continued his rant. “And actually, those of the true faith with a pedigree are sometimes no better than you. They teach their children to enjoy the inventions of the devil—pianos, and what do you call them, double basses, violins... It's a good thing there are none of those awful, enormous things with dozens of pipes left in the city, or they would be playing them, too! It would be better if they took care that their children didn't sleep through the early morning prayer! But no, the *salah* is something of secondary importance; it's much better that children learn to bang on the piano! Yes, Abdullah, remind me to send my assistant to burn all those packets of music notes in the house of that *kafir* woman we took care of today! Otherwise, she'll hide everything, I know the scum in the ghetto...”

The summer promised to be hot. Even now, the afternoon was quite warm. The *imam* was tired of the ghetto, tired of climbing stairs in buildings where the elevators had stopped working long ago, of visiting miserable, dusty apartments without air conditioning. If that weren't the case, perhaps he would not have called the police right away to arrest the elderly music instructor who eked out a living by giving lessons in the Austerlitz ghetto. The woman, whose name was Marguerite—ugh! What a name! Marguerite Teillé?—had attracted attention long ago, but she could have easily lived in her den in peace for another five years.

“But it's easy to deal with the *kafirs*, you simply come and arrest them for music!” *imam Abdulwahid* continued. Sweat ran down his face from under the bright green turban of shiny brocade, despite the car's air conditioning. “Now look at that. I just knew we would get stuck in a traffic jam, I just *knew* it!”

In fact, the Saab was still moving steadily in a column of automobiles. But at this speed, one could drive for a whole hour to get to Quatrephage Street. And *imam Abdulwahid* wanted to arrive at the old Paris mosque as soon as

possible. He wanted to go to the sauna, and then to drink hot mint tea in the mosaic room of the mosque. Mint tea and honey cakes! How wonderful they were!

The car was moving more slowly than the pedestrians, and the distance between the Saab and the Citroën next to it was so small that the *imam* couldn't have opened his door!

The *imam* unconsciously envied the plump boy he saw in the rear-view mirror, who was easily weaving between the cars on his shiny Harley Light. How old could he be, if his parents permitted him to drive in the streets and had even bought him such an expensive motorcycle? Judging by his size, he couldn't be more than twelve! *What times we live in!*

Soon, the disagreeable boy appeared next to the *imam's* door. He stood up in his seat and suddenly used something metallic to scratch the body of the car—right in front of the *imam's* nose! The body of a new Saab! *Ah, the scoundrel! And he knows you can't catch him. You can't even open the door!* The faceless juvenile was already hurrying away, but his face had caught the *imam's* attention. *There was something in the line of the boy's neck... and in the light-gray eyes that met his through the barrier of bulletproof glass and motorcycle-helmet plastic... It was a girl! A girl in men's clothing, with her face uncovered! In broad daylight!*

The girl had said something, but he couldn't hear it. Her soft rose mouth had twisted itself into an ugly grimace. But if it wasn't just a twelve year-old hooligan, but a grown *kafir* girl who had the courage to move around Paris so inappropriately dressed in broad daylight, then surely scratching his car was not mere mischief. What *was* it then?...

In the next instant Abdulwahid understood. He understood the motorcycle, which was already moving away between the cars. The Saab moved even closer to the Citroën.

Panicked, the *imam* now tried to change places with Abdullah. Abdullah wasn't interested. Revolt ensued in the tight space in the front of the car. The obese Abdulwahid managed to pry one of Abdullah's hands from the wheel, trying at the same time to pull him on top of himself, so he could slide under him and into the driver's seat. The *imam* even managed, casting off his turban, to get his head under Abdullah's hip. The car swerved and hit the lights of the Chevrolet in front. All around, people were honking angrily. The mechanical sounds drowned the unexpectedly shrill cries of the *imam*.

But in the next moment, everything became very still. Abdullah could not

understand right away. Had he suddenly gone deaf?

The *imam*'s attempt to change places with his driver was not without result. Upon penetrating the roof of the vehicle, the "sticker"—the slang term for a plastic explosive mounted in a magnet—missed Abdulwahid's honorable head. But before embedding itself into the asphalt, it passed along his spine, through his waist, and exited through his groin. His head, with its cultured, thin mustache and obscene baldness, remained whole, completely intact. It continued opening its mouth for a long time without making a sound, like a fish in water, eyes bulging. It finally shuddered and fell into the lap of Abdullah, who desperately clung to the wheel on the other side of the car.

The white fur seat covers soaked up the blood, but this no longer concerned the *imam*, who had worried so much about keeping them clean. Nothing about him gave any further signs of life. Except his fingers, which were adorned with rings and kept grasping spasmodically.

Jeanne's cheeks were burning. It wasn't that she was ashamed. Everything had worked out perfectly. She was leaving peacefully. The driver was probably still alive, but he was unlikely to remember to use his cell phone. And even if someone in one of the surrounding cars called the police quickly, it was unlikely they would make the connection between the explosion and the motorcycle that had passed a minute earlier. By the time the police made their way through the traffic jam to the Saab and began taking statements, everyone would have forgotten about the motorcycle.

Nevertheless, it was shameful. Maybe she shouldn't tell anyone. She would just return seven "stickers" instead of eight and say that mice ate the eighth. No, seriously, it was shameful to lie to your own side. She would have to answer for her actions. Oh, how she wished she didn't have to do that! She would end up sitting at home for two months doing needlepoint.

Turning from Buffon Street toward the Lutetia Arena, Jeanne found herself in open space again and increased her speed. The fresh air cooled her hot cheeks. She would have to go back to the ghetto for the rest of the stickers, even though she didn't like that ghetto at all.

Lord, how could she have done otherwise? She had run up the stairs to the third floor with a long-prepared candy in her pocket for eleven year-old Marie-Rose. She found the poor girl crying on the threshold of the music teacher's sealed door, rocking a violin like a sick doll.

Mademoiselle Teillé had not been a professional instructor. In better times, she played only for herself. She began giving private lessons only after she lost

her small house when the Wahhabis came to power. But she came to love giving lessons. She taught piano, violin and guitar—explaining with a shy smile that she knew so much “only because I don’t know anything well.”

When she had looked at the hands of seven year-old Jeanne long ago, Mademoiselle Teillé had sighed and agreed to teach the girl, “only so she wouldn’t get an inferiority complex.” Nevertheless, soon it turned out that the little, dimpled hands had a large span. Soon Mademoiselle Teillé worried only about the insufficient diligence of her student.

And now they are driving her to the cemetery, in the back of a corpse truck.

It took her a few minutes to learn from Marie-Rose that this had been ordered by the “usual” *imam* —the same one who always came, and that he was still in the ghetto, heading for the library.

Mademoiselle had been correcting Marie-Rose’s mistakes, as usual, when the Muslim entered the apartment. Mademoiselle became angry and responded to his customary filth that she would continue teaching children “as long as I live!”

He had responded, in awful French, “Then, you old fool, that won’t be for long!” He snatched the violin from Marie-Rose and flung it on the floor. He slapped the old woman across the face, took out his cell phone, and began dialing numbers.

Mademoiselle only whispered: “Run home, child! I’m sorry I didn’t finish your lesson—but remember, every humiliation has limits when it can no longer be tolerated.”

Everything after that followed its due course. Jeanne had caught up to the monster and stopped him dead in his tracks with a “sticker.”

Well, now she needed to take care of some things. Jeanne braked next to the entrance of a small mechanic’s shop. Two young men from the ghetto, Paul Guermi and Stéphane d’Ourtal, worked there for the Turkish owner.

She saw Guermi under the hood of a model of Citroën that had not been manufactured since the 1990’s. He was about thirty years old with strong glasses that made his eyes appear small, and big sideburns. He was very thin and didn’t look much like a workman; he would not have been one in normal times. Twenty-year-old D’Ourtal, who was still not tired of life, was sanding off the scratches on a Volvo.

Guermi motioned with his hand for her to come in. The Turk, apparently, was not around.

“Can you change the shoes on my horse, guys?”

“Give us a break. We can’t get as many numbers as you need,” sighed Guermi. But Jeanne replied with an impish grin. Guermi knew very well that she would wind up wrapping him around her little finger.

Guermi believed that in those times it was easier for teen agers to handle the conditions of the Muslim occupation than it was for their elders. They were like the children of farmers in pioneer America—accustomed from the cradle to the war cries of Indians. They grew up carrying ammunition for their fathers. They fired their first shots when they had the strength to lift a carbine. For them, killing a man was not the Rubicon. There were no Hamlets in this generation—they made their decisions as they went. Guermi, on the other hand, had been raised by parents born at the end of the 1970’s. The illusion that somewhere there is a thing called safety can make a man loath to take risks—and perhaps not fight until there is no choice.

D’Ourtal was already bringing the Harley into the workshop.

“Can you do it right away, Stéphane?” asked Jeanne caressingly. “I’d like to wait here!”

“The creep would be happy to meet you,” d’Ourtal said with a smile. “But come tomorrow morning. It will be quiet then.”

“Wait. Where’s she going to go on foot?” protested Guermi. “Jeanne, wait a minute so I can look through these rags. I think Fatima recently gave us an old chador to make rags and I still haven’t used it. What about you, Stéphane?”

“Rats! We dirtied it already. It doesn’t smell like a woman anymore,” said d’Ourtal unhappily. “Of course, it’s better than nothing...”

Jeanne waved her hand. “Thanks, but don’t worry. I’ll spend the night somewhere close by and come back early tomorrow.”

“But not before nine,” said Stéphane.

“Okay!” Jeanne said, and ran into the street. She had a place to spend the night in the neighboring district. A woman who cleaned the antique shop and spent her nights in the ghetto let her sleep in the broom closet. Who would look for her there?

It was nevertheless humiliating, thought Jeanne as she ran down the sidewalk. Madeleine Méchin, who was only a year younger, walked calmly through Paris to her heart’s content. She could do that with her size 6 hips! She put on a cap and a jacket, and she was all set! Jeanne could pass for a boy only when she was on a motorcycle and moving fast.

A policeman in a patrol car was coming right at her at a snail’s pace. His

partner seemed to be checking house numbers. And perhaps something else. Jeanne did not have time to think. Turning around, she saw an entrance to a public restroom and went in.

Generally speaking, Jeanne was disgusted by public restrooms—with their plastic pitchers instead of toilet paper. *Yuck!* she thought yet again as she closed the door behind her. But they wouldn't find her here.

There was only one woman there, who was standing with her back to Jeanne in front of the mirror, fixing her lipstick with a cherry-colored lip pencil.

Jeanne asked herself, *What sense does it make to wear lipstick if you're going to throw a chador over your head?*

The pencil trembled in the woman's hand and her eyes opened wide.

Jeanne froze, more out of surprise than out of fear. She saw her own reflection in the mirror from behind the back of the blonde Muslim woman: She looked pale, wearing a denim shirt and light jacket and jeans. She was hatless, having left her helmet with Stéphane.

She had completely forgotten! How could she have gone into a women's toilet dressed like a man? No wonder the woman was looking at her as if she were seeing a ghost!

Jeanne hadn't believed it when people warned her that everyone does something really stupid at some point. And that the only way they got out was by sheer luck. Probably, those who weren't so lucky weren't around to tell about it.

The blonde woman and Jeanne looked at each other in the mirror.

If she starts screaming, I'll kill her, Jeanne decided. *I think I can manage.*

Footsteps could be heard in the corridor connecting the men's and women's restrooms.

"I'm telling you, I don't like it." The voice speaking in *lingua franca* belonged to a Turkish policeman. "Some punk goes into the restroom right in front of our eyes and then there's no one in the restroom."

"Ali, you can't even take a piss without creating a problem," answered another voice. "Is that why we're here?"

"Look, there's not even a window here. If he went into the women's restroom, is he a hooligan or something worse?"

"So what should we do?"

Now it was Jeanne who froze—from the roots of her hair to her bent knees. She was finished, completely finished. Lord, why hadn't she at least taken her

pistol? But no, she remembered the rules: No carrying a pistol in a sharia zone unless absolutely necessary!

“Let’s wait a little, check the documents of the women, and then we can search the building.”

The mirror showed Jeanne’s face growing paler. The pencil that stopped in mid-air looked like a dummy in a window display was holding it.

“But why are we checking the women?”

“I recently heard that a young man dressed in a chador took part in the murder of the *qadi* of the 16th district.”

“Children of the devil, as they say! Hey! Is there anybody in there?” echoed a voice.

“Yes, don’t come in here,” answered the woman with surprising calm, looking over at Jeanne. She was also pale. For a few moments they looked at each other. The woman brought a finger to her lips.

The policeman called, “Hurry up! Document check!”

Jeanne shook her head at the woman: *Thank you, but it’s pointless.*

The woman suddenly began to rummage madly through her shopping bags. She took one, broke the ribbons, separated the tissues and took out something made of pink material.

In the woman’s hands was a new chador that looked as if it had been sewn for Jeanne.

“Faster!” called the cop.

Taking off the tag, the woman held out the clothing to Jeanne.

There was no time to think. Jeanne sank into the pink folds of fabric. When she looked out through the net, the woman was crumpling the packing tissue, which she threw into the toilet. Only then did she put on her own chador.

“*Hold this!*” the woman whispered, putting one of her pretty bags into one of Jeanne’s hands and grabbing onto the other with all her strength with cold fingers as they emerged from the bathroom.

The plump policeman looked at the woman and the girl, who were carrying bags with obviously expensive things, respectfully.

“Is there anyone left in the restroom?” asked one of them, extending his hand for documents.

“I’m don’t think so. I’m not sure.” Jeanne’s fellow traveler extended a plastic card.

“And for the girl?” The policeman scanned a small rectangle with a pocket scanner.

“You can check your database,” said the woman disdainfully. “The record must show that I have a fourteen-year-old daughter, *Imam*. ”

“That’s not right, esteemed madam. She’ll be getting married soon and she shouldn’t be walking around without documents... You can pass.”

The policemen went past them into the restroom.

Jeanne slowly started breathing again as they slowly walked away down the block. “You saved me,” she finally said as she freed her hand and tried to return the bag to its owner. “I’ll be fine on my own from here.”

“Listen, girl, I see that you are in some sort of trouble. There are more police than usual in the city today, and you don’t have documents, do you? Come with me,” she said, walking toward an expensive-looking car. “You’ll spend a few hours in a safe place.”

“So you’re not a Muslim?” said Jeanne with a smile, forgetting that her smile couldn’t be seen.

“I am.”

Jeanne gave an involuntary start.

“Please,” said the woman.

“Why are you helping me?”

“You’re French.”

“Yes, I am... But aren’t you... formerly French?”

“Perhaps.” The woman seemed to take no offense.

Jeanne could have left long ago but now she was curious—her usual vice, for which she was often castigated. She wanted to see where these supposed collaborators were coming from, since things had already turned out as they had.

“Okay, thanks very much,” said Jeanne, sitting down in the front seat.

With a sigh of relief, the woman immediately started the car. The police, who could reappear from the restrooms at any moment, had frightened her.

A few minutes later, they were already driving by the Jardin du Luxembourg.

“By the way,” said Jeanne, noticing that speaking through a net that went into your mouth was unpleasant, “What’s your name?”

The woman did not respond right away. She appeared to be closely monitoring the traffic. Her hands, which held the driving wheel confidently, were shapely with narrow, fragile, long fingers. The manicure was imperceptible, flesh toned. But there were too many rings, and they were all in heavy gold. The rings did not match those hands. Not at all.

“You can call me Annette,” the woman finally said.

CHAPTER 8

THE ROAD THROUGH THE DARKNESS

“Father Lothaire, may I walk with you for a while?”

The priest, who had come out by himself, looked at Eugène-Olivier without recognizing him. Or perhaps he did recognize him after all? He nodded his head absentmindedly, without his usual good-natured smile.

“I really don’t like sharing such an unpleasant walk with anyone,” the priest finally said. “Tonight I will not sleep in my shelter, but in the subway.”

The young man knew that it was not good to spend the night in the same place over an extended period.

“What station are you going to?”

“Place de Clichy.”

“Doesn’t it seem to you, Father, that you won’t get to sleep until tomorrow? Because it will take you until dawn to get to Clichy.”

“It would on foot.” As the priest now looked carefully at Eugène-Olivier, and a smile finally appeared on his lips. Eugène-Olivier would never have admitted to himself how long he had waited for that restrained, good-natured smile. “I’m going to use transportation.”

“Transportation in an abandoned metro? A carriage with six white horses? Or by dragon?”

“How romantic you atheists are!” mused Father Lothaire. “You’ll see. You know what, young Lévêque. Keep me company, but only if you can sleep there as well. Then I don’t have to look for anyone else. Because I will need a bit of help.”

“At your service.”

When they had passed a part of the street, they descended into the Bastille station, mixing with the colorful crowd of workmen. It was dominated by blacks, who disliked work and preferred to live on social assistance, and Turkish workers, the most industrious inhabitants of the sharia zone.

Half of the Paris subway, known in the best of times for its discomfort and its tangled routes, was out of service, and the rest was very dirty. You wouldn’t be checked for documents, but you had to keep a hand on your wallet. The poor, who milled around, selling cheap wares or looking for hand-outs in the passageways and below the rusty advertising boards, were transformed into pickpockets in the blink of an eye. Dirty children begged for alms that no one gave, and then moved through the crowd searching for a victim. Cutting off a

passing woman's handbag was a trifle for them.

Official signs were posted to show which branches were in service. In some places, the empty tunnels were not even fenced off. Why would they be? Wealthy Parisians did not take the subway. Surface transportation with conductors was more dignified.

Making his way with Father Lothaire past the displays of smuggled merchandise arranged on the floor for sale, Eugène-Olivier was constantly afraid that people in the crowd would understand that they were looking at a priest. It was an irrational fear. In his overalls, they were as likely to know he was a priest as they were to think he was the *Imam* of Paris.

Having passed through two passages, they left the crowd and turned into the black sleeve of an empty tunnel.

"Do you think, your reverence, that it's prudent to wander around in abandoned tunnels?" Darkness soon replaced the dim light, and the sudden silence became deafening. "You probably don't even have a pistol."

"And what would I do with a pistol?"

"Ah, yes, you're forbidden to kill! But they say that criminals, thieves, drug dealers, and who-knows-who-else hide here."

"Have you ever seen them?"

"To tell the truth, I've never had the opportunity."

"Drug dealers, thieves, pimps, and murderers live peacefully above, in the sharia zone. The percentage of those who are pursued by the police is so small that criminals have little need to visit unpleasant places like this. The police catch exactly as many criminals as they need to organize public punishments and cut off the hands of some thieves. The rest are simply kept in check. That seems to be satisfactory for everyone."

Father Lothaire took something out of the pocket of his overalls. There was a click and then a light appeared in front of them. "Every megalopolis, even the worst, has to survive and maintain a complex balance. When the balance is disturbed, it results in a deadly hurricane."

The ground under their feet was damp, and it was necessary to climb onto platforms.

"I also wanted to ask you, reverend father, why the Muslims claim that they communicate directly with God, and this makes them better than Christians. Given, of course, that all this is nonsense."

"Excellent, Eugène-Olivier. For you, a materialist, everything that the Muslims believe is nonsense. But if you have already begun to comprehend

that you need to understand the nature of the conflict between them and those who believe differently, that means you are growing. The man who barricades himself behind the walls of his opinions limits the freedom of his own thought. Even if you remain a materialist,” Father Lothaire added, smiling slightly, “you will have an advantage over them if you see them with the eyes of a Christian.”

“There is no reason to praise me for a question. Sophia Sevazmios told me to ask you. What is it all about?”

“It’s a game with an open deck of cards where the ace is pulled out of one’s sleeve. ‘Direct conversation with Allah, unlike the Christians.’ So many people were caught up by that phrase at the end of the last century!

“Every Christian can address God directly; moreover, he must do so. It is called prayer. God listens to these prayers. Perhaps the Muslims mean a dialogue? Man addresses God and receives a response. But let’s think logically now: Is every man capable of absorbing wisdom from a Being who is incomprehensible to our weak reason? He might very well go mad. It’s not that God doesn’t want to respond to us ordinary mortals. It’s that we don’t readily understand the Truth.

“There are mortals who receive a sort of training. They lead a daily battle against their sinful nature. They are oriented toward achieving the Truth with all their thoughts, all their motives. We call them saints. Thus, saints sometimes get a response. They have clear visions; they have intuitions that let them grasp things that we can’t.

“But Muslims believe that every one of them is competent for ‘dialogue without an intermediary.’ They claim to be able to do this, despite being sinful and distracted by our passions, just by reading a prayer.”

“So they mumble something, and then believe they have heard the answer of the Almighty?” asked Eugène-Olivier.

“In the best of cases,” Father Lothaire said. “In a very good case, that might even be what happens. But don’t forget, there is someone else very interested in dialogue with untrained beings.”

“You mean the devil?”

“That’s understood. But it isn’t the whole problem. Contrary to what the Muslims claim, they do have people who are supposed to act as intermediaries between themselves and God. All those *imams*, *mullahs*, *sheiks* —why else do they exist?”

“So it makes no sense to say they are better than us because we have a clergy. So do they!”

Father Lothaire noted to himself that Eugène-Olivier used the words “we” and “us.”

“There’s no sense, and there’s no real clergy, either,” the priest said. “We can only compare a Muslim *imam* with a Protestant pastor or a Baptist preacher. Christianity, true Christianity, is a mystery religion. Islam is without mystery from the very beginning.”

“And what is mystery?”

“Magic, as children would say. The functions for which a Christian needs a priest simply do not exist in Islam.”

“Ah, the bread into the Body, the wine into the Blood.”

“That, first of all. You know, young Lévêque, it’s easy to deal with one wrong idea. But when several bits of nonsense are incorporated into one claim, you can imagine how hard it is to explain. The sentence, ‘Muslims speak with God without an intermediary,’ is wrong at several levels. But as rhetoric, it worked well when Muslims still made the effort to convince people with words. With repetition, stupidity can be stronger than any oath.”

“I never would have thought that it could be so interesting. I’ve always thought that I didn’t care what they think.”

The rays of light from the flashlight in Father Lothaire’s hands would grow shorter as they collided with close partitions, or longer as they came into a wider area. But in the underground, it is always stuffy and damp.

“The *qadi* I blew up believed that immediately after death he would begin making love with seventy-two *houris* .”

“I can’t guarantee it, but his expectations were probably confirmed.”

Eugène-Olivier laughed.

Father Lothaire added, “I’m not joking. Do you know what *houris* are?”

“Beautiful girls ‘upon whom neither dust nor dirt fall.’ ”

“Add to that, that they don’t menstruate, that they don’t get old, and that they can’t get pregnant. Where do they come from? Are they supposed to be what faithful Muslim women become after death? None of the reliable Islamic sources says that. It appears that *houris* from the beginning were created as *houris* . And that they are insatiable in sex.”

“So it’s a dirty fairy tale.”

“Maybe yes, and maybe no. The Middle Ages did not know Islam very well, but they left us a rather detailed description of the demons called *succubi* and *incubi* . The *succubus* is a demon in female form that seeks sexual relations with men. Note that it’s a demon in female form, not a woman. And sexual

relations with a demon always end in death...”

“Are you saying that the *houri* is a real thing? That it’s a *succubus*?” Perhaps Father Lothaire dabbled in nonsense after all.

“I’m saying that the devil frequently keeps his promises,” said the priest sharply. “He says, ‘You will be able to have sex with seventy-two raven-haired beauties.’ And man thinks, ‘How wonderful!’ It doesn’t occur to him to ask, ‘But will I like it?’ And when one of the twelve gates of hell opens, it’s too late. It’s too late to scream, when one of the black-eyed beauties grabs him and begins to enjoy him, and then turns him over to another. And when he runs out of strength, he must eat the special meat of the local bulls that greatly increases male stamina—and chew quickly, because the third beauty is already holding out her arms... And so on—constantly, eternally, sex with inhuman beings and nothing else. It’s useless to cry, to beg for mercy. The devil asks, ‘Is that what you wanted? Is that what you called your just reward? Well, here it is, enjoy it!’”

“And you really believe in that?” Eugène-Olivier tripped on something, but kept his balance.

“Everything we are encountering today was described long ago. There’s nothing new under the moon. Speaking of the moon, do you think it’s a coincidence that our calendar is solar and theirs is lunar? The moon is a dead light, unlike the life-giving sun. Throughout time, all devil-worshippers have revered the moon.”

“You’re saying Muslims worship the devil?” Eugène-Olivier whistled. The sound echoed unpleasantly in the dark.

“As a Christian priest, I can’t ignore what must make me cautious,” Father Lothaire replied seriously. “If they tell me that in Heaven, men are greeted by beings that sound like the description of *succubi*, I have to ask myself—is that Heaven? It sounds more like hell. If the chief symbol of a religion is the moon, how can I not remember that Satanism is inseparable from the cult of the moon?”

“I can’t imagine how it is possible to seriously believe in the devil, in hell, or even in Heaven, to be honest. In my opinion, Muslims are just fanatics or they have a screw loose. But you... Forgive me, your reverence, but I simply can’t lie.”

“Not at all... Now, where is that device? Aha! Now we’ll travel in style.” The flashlight settled on a cart with a long handle that looked somewhat like a child’s swing set.

“A handcar! This is luxury, your reverence. How would you have made this trip alone? On foot?”

“By no means.”

“You can operate a handcar by yourself?” asked Eugène-Olivier incredulously.

“It wouldn’t be the first time. When I was still in school, they dedicated a lot of attention to sports. A useful habit, I always say.”

They got in, and began working the handle between them. The car lurched into motion and began slowly picking up speed.

“What was that you were saying about the screws in my head?”

“I didn’t say that about *you* ...”

“What’s the difference, if you used a more carefully chosen expression for me than for the Muslims?”

“You’re right, Father Lothaire. Were you joking perhaps? I understand that you really love the Mass and I understand that while you’re alive, you won’t allow anyone to ban it. I can understand that Christianity is a very important part of our culture and that it is worth dying for... But all that about the devil, demons, angels, Heaven, hell... I thought that priests also agreed now that these are just symbols.”

“The generations of Catholic priests who considered the devil to be a metaphor remain in the past,” answered Father Lothaire. “It may be that some are burning in the same hell they considered to be a metaphor. Because of them, the visible Roman Church fell. They were the ones who said, ‘All people are going to God, it’s just that each of them is following his own path! We don’t need missionaries!’

“If Christ’s church had no awareness that it is the only vessel of Truth, it would not be His church. It would not be alive. It would be an eye without sight, a body without a soul. For centuries the visible Roman Church proclaimed ‘Only I am right!’ But in the late-nineteenth century, voices of liberalism in the Church stole in to whisper, ‘...But everyone is right in his own way.’

“At first they taught this and related absurdities secretly, corrupting seminarians with the idea that man—and in particular, enlightened, educated, modern men like themselves—could know better than the teachings and tradition of the church of Jesus Christ. It was actually an ancient lie, as all heresies are—in this case dating from centuries before Christ—the error of *Gnosticism*. Christian gnostics believed that men are not really saved by Christ but only by acquiring secret knowledge that only sophisticated men like

themselves possessed. In the 1960s, many of them took it upon themselves to “modernize” the Mass as devoutly prayed by Catholics for 1700 years, allegedly to make it simpler for the common man to understand. Common Catholics had no interest in this idea—only gnostics would.

“But they convinced the Church to simplify the Mass and replace the universal and unchanging Latin language with the everyday vernacular.

“Many of them encouraged the faithful to believe that like the Mass, the Truth itself could be changed—continually. The modern gnostic priests and bishops could not leave even the simplified Mass alone. They would alter the words and movements to suit their own beliefs and enthusiasms of the moment—to the point where, in many cases, it ceased to be the sacrifice of the Mass at all! They were also, by their visible improvisations, encouraging the people to look at the deposit of Faith that had come down to them from God Himself on a par with their daily whims and feelings. In their hands, for millions of Catholics, Mass became a slightly theatrical, humanistic talkfest. It was not Catholic, but neo-Catholic.

“And who would die for that? It’s one thing for you and your neighbors to offer your lives to defend the One True Faith. But would I die to defend my neighbors’ whims of the day? I don’t even know what they are.

“In school, I learned the Truth men died for: If the Holy Eucharist should fall to the floor, the priest must first go down on his knees and lick the stone where it fell. Then he must take a special chisel and reduce the surface the Eucharist touched into dust. And then he must gather this dust... In short, there is a lot he must do. All this will not seem like idiocy to him under only one condition: The priest must believe that he is not handling a wafer, but the Body of Christ. If he thinks they’re wafers, or something *like* the Body of Christ, or the *symbolic* body of Christ, he can simply scoop it up and drop it in his pocket, and then calmly walk on the same spot where it fell, as gnostic, neo-Catholic priests did for seventy years. Even more interesting—after a month, they threw the leftover, consecrated ‘wafers’ away. Imagine, the *leftover* body of Christ!

“Would anyone volunteer to die for a wafer he throws from the chalice into the trash? When the real enemy arrived, who considered only himself to be of the true faith and the Catholic liberals to be fools, no one wanted to die. Instead of them, the visible Catholic Church on earth died.”

Eugène-Olivier quietly, but firmly objected. “I would not say that no one wanted to die. My grandfather... He was... Our family have always been altar servers at Notre Dame. He was killed when the Wahhabis came to occupy the

church. He died for Notre Dame. The priest had run away.”

“So you are the grandson of a martyr? You are fortunate. He is praying for you.”

“But Grandfather was a, what did you call them? A Neo-Catholic. He attended the short Mass which was not in Latin, and he almost certainly accepted the Eucharist in his hand.”

“He is a martyr. The rest is not important. Ordinary people are not the ones to decide how to behave with respect to the Eucharist or what the Mass should be like. All the responsibility lies with the clergy. After all, the Lord gave your grandfather courage, and not the priest. Yet the number of those like your grandfather was small, very small. A careless attitude toward the Eucharist destroyed the faith of millions or billions. That, and failure to honor the fasts. It was too great a challenge for the souls of ordinary people.”

* * *

The handcar rushed through the darkness. The rays from the flashlight slid too quickly to be able to show anything clearly.

“Wait, Father Lothaire!” Something suddenly occurred to Eugène-Olivier. “How old are you?”

“I’m thirty-three.”

“How were you able to complete your seminary studies?”

The priest laughed.

“Oh, I managed to finish an entire year normally. Only because the seminary was not neo-Catholic. The rest were all closed two years before. I managed to find the Flavigny Seminary, a wonderful place. There was a monastery there going back to the time of Charles Martel. Imagine—I lived within walls that remembered a time when France was not yet called the ‘favorite daughter of the church,’ because she had yet to earn that title. Even the stones remembered, I felt. I was your age—when one’s inner ear hears these things very clearly.

“The walls of our seminary were actually in their second life: At the end of the twentieth century, no one needed an ancient monastery. These walls had been offered for sale, and were bought for the Society of St. Pius X, so that they would keep speaking to young men like me who were studying for the priesthood. Men in their first three years of study were housed in Flavigny and the older students at Ecône Seminary in Switzerland.”

Father Lothaire fell silent as he remembered when he returned home a few months after receiving his cassock. In the room where he had grown up—but

which now seemed alien to him—the unkempt teddy bear he had slept with in his childhood sat on the bed. His mother had dressed him in a new cassock with a clerical collar! Lothaire closed the door and then took the teddy bear in his arms: “Yes, brother, both of us are too old-fashioned for the times.”

How proud he had been of his first floor-length cassock—and how uncomfortable it was! It made it especially difficult to play football.

“Either it will be your only clothing or you will never feel comfortable in it!” old Abbot Florian, who had met Lefebvre himself, used to tell them.

The third-year men teased the younger ones that they would have to climb mountains in their cassocks during their trip to the Alps.

Life unfolded according to medieval custom. No cell phones. Internet only in the library. A narrow cell—reminiscent of a room in a bad hotel. It didn’t really have four walls. Lined up in a row, there were a desk, a chair, a bed, a small wardrobe, and a small sink. At the ends were “walls” just wide enough for the window on one side and the door on the other.

They were not allowed to keep food in their cells—not even coffee cans or tea bags. Philippe Quimbert, his colleague, had the good fortune to be under doctor’s orders to drink tea, which he was allowed to have any time—but he could not bring the teapot into his cell!

The cell was so small that two men in it would have gotten in each other’s way. But two men were not allowed to be in a cell at the same time in any case. The rules of monastic life were not written by fools.

There were wonderful books at the seminary. But at least one discipline could not be learned from books. It was *Practical Liturgics*—how to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Finding himself in the miniature hall for the first time, Father Lothaire thought he had entered a little closet chapel. But why was it necessary to lock it with seven locks so that, God forbid, an ordinary man could not enter? Why not? It simply contained an altar, a tabernacle, candles—everything necessary for the service.

The room was called Bluebeard’s Chamber. It was in fact a false altar. The chalice was not real. The tabernacle was empty. The chapel was a toy, a training device.

“Thurible higher, thurible lower! No, not there, first down! Too broad a sweep. Again!”

“*Oremus.*”

“No, again!”

“*Oremus.*”

“Again!”

“*Oremus.*”

And so on, twenty times.

Everything else could be learned later from books: theoretical liturgics and homiletics; dogmatic and moral theology; Latin, ancient Greek. But no book could refine the movement of hands and the swing of the thurible, or teach you to straighten your back and even your step.

How good it was, that he had had at least that one year at the seminary. It was like a soldier's first year, when all strength is directed toward the renunciation of one's own will. What monotony, what difficult prose filled the days of these keepers of the Holy Grail! Romanticism spends itself quickly. It was said that every year, fifteen to twenty students enrolled at Flavigny, and that every year five to ten graduated from Ecône.

The day began with Mass. Then a long rite with prayers of the Holy Fathers. Fifteen minutes before lunch, the rector would give the sign to stop reading. That meant the men could chat with a glass of red wine. But those fifteen minutes were not the only ones for chatting during the day. Immediately after lunch, an hour was dedicated to walking around together in the monastery garden. You could walk alone perhaps once or twice.

If you walked alone every day, the moderator soon summoned you: “A priest must be open toward others. This time is dedicated to socializing,” Abbot Florian would say.

Father Lothaire was reminded that the Abbot was killed five years ago in Picardie.

But after Compline, from nine o'clock in the evening onwards, there was no socializing. A “great silence” was in effect until morning. It was forbidden to speak. During Great Lent, this was frequently extended for a whole day. During the “great silence,” even those on duty in the kitchen communicated only by signals. You turned a potato in your hand, holding an invisible knife in your other hand, as in, “Where is it?” A nod of the head in the direction of a drawer: “It's there.”

It wasn't really a barracks. In a barracks, no one cares about your inner life or whether you are spending your breaks alone or with just one particular colleague—which was also considered not good at the seminary.

Lothaire turned out well. He was chosen from among a small number. There was one bitterness that poisoned his days: There were too few chosen. From five to ten priests per year—for all of Europe! And sometimes they had to be

shared with Asia, which always provoked discontent.

“At six in the morning I serve Mass in Saint-Quentin,” complained an old abbot. “Then I jump into my car and hurry to serve another Mass in Guise. From there, I rush to Laon, and it’s good if by the grace of God I manage to at least start liturgy before noon. In Laon, I have breakfast, even though, to be honest, getting from Guise to Laon without a cup of coffee is really difficult. But young people should not comfort their consciences that this slavish form of life means that their work is so much in demand. All this travel is not because there are too many of the faithful, but because there are too few. There are too few Catholics, and there are even fewer of us, who are their shepherds.”

What could one do? Lothaire was up to the challenge. He was ready for the many sufferings of which the abbot warned him. (What was it that they called him? Abbot Bailiff!—and many other names.) Lothaire was prepared for the fact that he would probably have to serve in an old barn and that on his way there he would pass a magnificent Baroque chapel turned into a tourist center with a museum and a souvenir shop or, even more painful, a Pseudo-Gothic or Neoclassical church “without architectural or historical value” that had been converted into a mosque “to meet the needs of the local population.” He had been prepared, and he was ready.

But no one was ready for what interrupted his studies.

Government troops surrounded Flavigny during Mass so that no one would detect them. But what would have changed if the seminary family had noticed before the soldiers spread out into the cells, the passages, the halls? They could have barricaded themselves and survived a few days under siege. But it wouldn’t have served any purpose. The press wouldn’t have reacted.

The faithful would have come, it’s true. They would have camped around them—with their children, with crosses, with icons. God forbid, someone would have been killed. Flavigny was liquidated by government decree, and the army that closed it was at that time two-thirds Muslim and one-third non-religious French. The latter viewed the seminary students dressed in cassocks as exotic savages, and they openly made fun of them.

While the professor patiently packed the liturgical items, trying to prevent them from falling into profane hands, one of the deacons sent Lothaire to find some empty boxes and rope. Remembering that these were stored in a closet on the second floor, Lothaire hurried up the steps. The door to Bluebeard’s chamber was wide open. There were two young soldiers—French, they were certainly French—in charge there. One sat on the floor drinking Coca-Cola from

the chalice; the empty bottle stood next to him. The other man was turning the tabernacle from the training altar over in his hands with curiosity.

Entering the hall, Lothaire could not refrain from laughing. These young men imagined they were destroying the chapel.

“What are you laughing at?” asked one of the soldiers in surprise, reluctantly moving his feet. “What’s so funny, abbot?”

“I’m not an abbot yet.” Lothaire pointed a fist (which as yet bore no ordination ring) toward the weak jaw of the soldier with satisfaction, “but you are a complete idiot.”

His year in Flavigny—thirteen months to be exact, had really been too short.

“We need to get off here and switch to another track,” said the priest. Eugène-Olivier was not the only one who knew his way around the underground.

Their journey through the darkness continued uneventfully. But Eugène-Olivier Lévêque had never felt so bad and so sad in his life. Perhaps it was because he had been doing something he had never done before: imagining that he was Muslim. Not a Muslim of the present day, but one of those *shahids* who were so numerous at the turn of the century, when this was their method of establishing rule over half of the world:

He and his band would invade a children’s kindergarten during some jolly feast day, such as a non-fasting Tuesday when children were enthusiastically drawing cornucopias for each other, dancing, and eating small cakes. Once the children were hostages, it would be published by the willing media that for every wounded *shahid*, they would kill three or five children, depending on the number they had managed to capture.

Then they would set conditions which, if unmet, they threatened would result in the killing of more children—for example, abolishing the law that prohibited the wearing of the chador.

To move the media-watchers from fear to panic, they would slaughter a child before the eyes of the other children—who were too afraid even to cry. Then they would set free another child hostage and send him out the door of the kindergarten holding a photo showing a close-up of the dead innocent’s body.

Concessions to the Muslim terrorists were always given, but it always turned out that concessions bought nothing. Every agreement painstakingly negotiated with the terrorists would be inoperative once all the hostages were freed or killed. The terrorists had just one goal—to intimidate, to break.

After the first two or three hostage-takings, our grandfathers and grandmothers would beg the government to stop placing the lives of their children at risk: Let the Muslim women go to school dressed any way they liked...

Think about this: It is for this that young Muslim men are ready to die. Some of them are high on energy drinks, but more or less conscious and ready. That one over there, splattered with the blood of a child, makes a phone call to the Emirates and says goodbye to his mother, tells her he is going to meet Allah. She blesses him and tells him she has already invited the guests to “his wedding with the raven-haired maidens of Heaven.” Finally, he falls among the bodies of his victims. And then? Is there anything after that?

When the raven-haired *succubi* come out to meet him, do they talk first, or cut to the chase? Do they even know how to talk? What would they talk *about* , since they aren’t human? It is only sex, only red mouth, only white hands—two white, ghostly white, moon-like hands, hands that squeeze... The hands aren’t living. Therefore, they are dead.

“We’re here,” said Father Lothaire.

CHAPTER 9

THE HOUSE OF THE CONVERTS

Through the window of the automobile, one could see the Cluny subway station.

“This used to be the Museum of the Middle Ages,” said Annette, barely audibly. “My grandmother took me there when I was very little, about four years old. There was a needlepoint there called *The Lady and the Unicorn*. I still remember it today. Later I think they burned it... You know what, we’re going to tell my household that you are my cousin from the ghetto and that your name is Nicole. I’ve always liked that name. If I had... Oh well, it’s not important.”

“My name is Jeanne.” How difficult it was to speak with someone when you couldn’t see her eyes. And how stuffy it was in the tent-dress. She’d had the opportunity to wear one before, but somehow, as soon as you take it off, you forget what a nasty experience it was. “I don’t think it’s necessary to use another name. We’re not in the ghetto.”

“And where do you live?” There was mistrust in the woman’s voice.

Jeanne shrugged her shoulders. “Nowhere,” she said, again forgetting that no one could see her.

“That’s impossible!”

“Oh, it’s quite possible. I haven’t lived anywhere for four years. There are quite a few good people who will let you spend the night, or with whom you can leave your things.”

Annette didn’t answer. Her reaction to Jeanne’s words could not be seen through the fabric of the chador.

The car passed through the gate of a fenced garden that surrounded a two-story house under a high, black roof. Many such houses were built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Jeanne reluctantly observed that she had slept through the blooming of the flowers on the chestnut trees—which now glowed like pink candles. It seemed that only yesterday the chestnuts were not yet in bloom.

“Go in, daughter,” Annette left the car in front of the door, like someone used to servants.

No one had called Jeanne “daughter” in a long time, especially not so sincerely.

They entered a very strange house. Jeanne had had the opportunity to see

darkened windows many times from the outside, but never from the inside. Before the Muslims came to Paris, high windows like these in their stone frames began from the floor and cheerfully filled the room with the sun's rays. What a view they opened to the small garden with all the candles of the chestnuts!

But inside, the stone ornaments around the windows had vanished long ago in some expensive renovation. It looked to Jeanne as if she had entered a basement. She was accustomed to living in rooms that were actually underground—but to deliberately shield oneself from the light! Even in the ghetto, glass sparkled cheerfully in the little windows. Housewives easily separated themselves from the view of others with curtains.

If the room resembled a basement, it was an *opulent* basement. Even the hallway had carpets, drapery, and an enormous number of Turkish designs rendered in metal. The stairs leading up were carved to match the doors and interior arches.

An old woman opened the door for them and immediately slid somewhere behind the velvet drapery.

“Madame Aset with a guest. Oh, what joy!” The old woman was fat, and her overtly sweet voice clashed with the lines of her face—the sharp, black brows, the threatening eyes like plums, the hooked nose and dark spots above her thin lips. She was, of course, not French. That would have been obvious even if she had spoken French and not the disgusting *lingua franca*.

“Bring the bags from the back seat,” said her mistress, pulling Jeanne into the room. “Yes, Zuraïda, this girl is the daughter of my cousin Bertha who lives, hmm, you know...”

“I hope Madame did not go to such a place!” The servant clapped her hands.

“Of course not,” the woman who introduced herself as Annette replied irritably, her voice as tense as a taut wire. “The girl was brought by a relative who has documents to move throughout Paris. But what are you waiting for, Zuraïda? Hurry up!”

The old woman cast a sharp look at Jeanne. What could she see except how tall she was? But no doubt she would find a moment to peek.

When they passed into a high, large room that apparently signaled the beginning of the women's half of the house, Annette (or Aset) casually removed her chador and threw it on the carpet. Before Jeanne could follow her example, the tinkling of small bells could be heard and a girl about fifteen ran

out from the interior.

“Mama, Mama, the girl has exactly the same kind of clothes that I asked you to buy for me!” she exclaimed, throwing herself at Annette. “You see, it’s a modern color. You see?”

“It’s not exactly the same *kind* —this rag is yours.” Jeanne slid out of the chador.

“This is my daughter Iman,” said Annette calmly. “Iman, our guest is called Jeanne. Take her to your room and have fun, and I will ask them to bring you something to eat.”

Iman barely nodded, completely confused. Without a word, she headed for one of two rooms connected by an arch.

The silence lasted for a while. Jeanne sat in a leather armchair. She had the strange feeling that she had the right to enter the house, that she had the right to know the truth about its inhabitants.

Iman did not sit, she merely graciously leaned one knee on the same kind of leather armchair. She looked at Jeanne with eyes wide open.

Jeanne stared back at her.

Unlike Jeanne, Iman was ideally built, although it would not have hurt her to lose about ten pounds. Squeezed into black pants, her buttocks looked inflated and her naked stomach was chubby. She wore something in pink silk that looked more like an extended bra than a short top. She had bracelets with bells on the wrists and hair clasps and ornamental pins in her hair lifted at the nape. Although she was a year or two younger than Jeanne, Iman was the same height, and would probably overtake her. The rooms resembled their mistress. At the head of the bed covered with a cherry-colored bedspread there was a pink satin pillow, useless by its construction, but highly decorative with ribbons and flounces.

There were pearls of all colors in translucent boxes in such quantities that it looked like pearl barley in the kitchen of some sorceress in a fairy tale. There were muslin and silk, mosaics and children’s toys. The room only lacked for dolls, but of course there couldn’t be any of those. Instead, there were a lot of sweets that, strictly speaking, didn’t belong in a bedroom. Jeanne’s parents had chided her for such things. Here, it seemed to be expected that at any moment one could reach for Turkish delight, halvah, candy, peanuts, pistachios, cookies, or fruit.

“What can I show you? asked Iman lavishly, stretching gracefully like a cat. “Do you want to see my jewelry?”

“Sure, let’s see it,” smiled Jeanne.

Iman immediately pulled up an enormous box, sat on the floor next to Jeanne and began to play with a key. How strange she looked to Jeanne! Blue eyes, like Gaël Moussoltin, a round chin like Madeleine Méchin. But so strange! Her movements were lazy. There was so much boredom in every gesture, in her voice.

“Father gave me these bracelets for my thirteenth birthday.” Iman had already raised the lid of her box, removed her trinkets with the bells and put on her wrist something very heavy with small, symmetrical etching. “I have two, see? Father ordered the pair in the eighth district along with some other things because in that boutique they take orders two months in advance. But I don’t want to wear both. Mama and I bought this pearl; it’s just from the Lafayette Gallery, but I like it so much! But the bracelets are something unique. I think I’ll put both of them on after all! Look, aren’t they wonderful!”

“Do you use them to build up your muscles? I thought weights were banned for you people?”

Jeanne again thought of Gaël. Unlike Madeleine and herself, Gaël Moussoltin was in love, and knew how to be beautiful.

“Gaël is a real *parisienne*,” Mademoiselle Teillé had sighed, patiently listening to her discourse on how “only one saucy detail is permitted in an outfit, either a décolletage with a long skirt, or a mini-skirt with a blouse buttoned to the throat. Or we call it something quite different, don’t we?” That diamonds “don’t come to life” in gold and that, in general, “gold is worse than silver.”

The Moussoltins didn’t have a lot of gold or diamonds left. But what an effect her solitary sapphire made—with its little gold prongs that could not even be seen from ten steps away, so that it looked as if the stone had merely paused on her finger to rest and would escape when it wanted to. From close up, the stone was like an eye with golden eyelashes looking at you.

“What are weights?” Iman frowned.

“They’re these heavy things you lift so your arms get strong,” sighed Jeanne.

“That’s a sport. Sports are *haraam*. ”

“That’s what I meant. Your bracelets are a substitute for sports.”

“You don’t like them?” Iman was surprised.

“I think they’re hideous.”

Iman closed her box, insulted. An unpleasant silence ensued.

“You want some candy?” Iman extended a shiny box to Jeanne.

“Thank you. I don’t like candy.”

“What kind of sweets do you like?” said Iman with a little bit more self-confidence, playing the role of the gracious hostess.

“I don’t know... I like caramels with Calvados.”

“Calvados,” said Iman, “That’s a place near La Manche. Do they make a candy?”

“Calvados is a brandy made of apples that used to be made there.”

“*Brandy?*” Iman looked up as if she had pricked herself with a needle. “You’ve tried brandy? Really? And they didn’t whip you?”

“In order to whip me, someone would have to catch me.” Jeanne was already slightly bored with this visit.

“Listen,” Iman rolled her eyes significantly. “I wasn’t born yesterday. I can see you’re from the ghetto. But surely you’re not a *kafir* ; you must be a convert? Is that right?”

“What do you think? Of course I’m not a *kafir*. It’s you who are a Saracen.”

Aset at that time was moving around in the kitchen without noticing the disapproving glances of the cook. She was lifting the lids of the pots and pans, peering into ovens and grills, trying to guess which of the dishes prepared for lunch might please the girl who had unexpectedly crossed their threshold.

She was aware that she had been exaggerating a little—Jeanne didn’t need shelter. One could tell from looking at her that she had somewhere to go in this enormous city, even without Annette. It was she who needed the girl—to spend at least a few hours in her home. She wanted to offer her something to eat and give her a present of some kind. It seemed foolish, but to Aset it seemed that if Jeanne ate at least a spoonful of what she offered her, it would salve her conscience a little, and help her banish the unbearable feeling of being lost.

This unbearable feeling had not left Aset since the moment she became so afraid of her poor friend Zeynab. She had always thought of Zeynab as an ambitious fool. But these were new times, and it was not Islam that invented the necessity of a woman supporting her husband by befriending the wives of his business partners. It had always been like that, those were the rules of the game. Her life included pleasant responsibilities such as running the house and educating the children—and unpleasant ones, such as socializing with a fool like Zeynab. But why had everything suddenly become so strange, why had she begun to feel a sense of horror, like a child, when the pile without a mouth next to her began to scream among shreds of glass and the shouting that came from

the street? Didn't it seem as if that were not Zeynab in her chador, but some kind of ghost—something unclean hidden beneath the fabric more horrible than the living dead?

She had felt slightly better only since this girl, Jeanne, appeared, and she wanted her to stay as long as possible.

“And who are the Saracens?” Iman couldn't be accused of being incurious.

“The followers of Mohammed. That's what you were called back in the times when Charles Martel completely destroyed you.”

“Charles Martel was a bandit, he was the worst of the *kafirs!*” Iman's nostrils flared with anger and suddenly she looked like Gaël Moussoltin, Madeleine Méchin and Geneviève Bussy all at the same time. “He's burning in hell! He was a filthy criminal!”

“He was your ancestor,” said Jeanne.

“That's not important! It's not important who one is by birth. What is important is that one confesses the true faith!”

“Then why do you all lick the heels of Arabs?”

“They're the descendants of the Prophets,” explained Iman, starting to get a little confused at the contradiction. “That is, some of the Arabs.”

“Fine,” sighed Jeanne. “And you and I are the descendants of those who defeated those descendants of the Prophet. But your ancestors would have taken a vow of holy celibacy if they had known they would have a descendant like you.”

“The truth is more important!”

“Of course. But how would you know the truth? You're not a girl—you're a doll that walks. They decorate you, they feed you, they pet you. They've poured a few short ideas into your head and told you not to move your arms. Now you obey your parents. Later they'll choose a husband for you. You'll have to accept what is offered. Then you'll obey your husband and bear his children. You'll get old and die without leaving the house. And then there will be nothing left for you anymore.”

“That's what you think!” Iman was turning red and pale with anger.

“Not at all!” Jeanne smiled. “Here's what I think: I think you have an immortal soul. Your soul was made for Heaven. But it's in danger now of going to hell because it is the soul of a traitress, the soul of a servant of Christ's persecutors. The idea of your soul disappearing into nothingness after you're dead—that's what *you* think.”

“What nonsense! Of course I don't believe that.”

“You’re a Muslim?”

“Yes, I’m a Muslim!”

“Well, that’s what you *should* think. And nothing else.”

“You *kafirs* don’t know anything!” protested Iman. “If I pray five times, if I go on pilgrimage, if...”

“Can you stop counting on your fingers?”

“...I will go to Heaven,” concluded Iman triumphantly.

“You’re a girl. Heaven is for men, according to Islam. A Muslim woman has no soul, like a dog, or a fish in your aquarium.”

“That’s not true! *Imam* Chapelier says—”

“Your *imam* Chapelier is making a fool out of you. He knows that the *Qu’ra* and the religious authorities don’t teach that women have souls.”

“How dare you talk that way about *imam* Chapelier!”

From a distant room the crying of a child could be heard.

“That’s Aziza, my sister,” explained Iman, sighing. “She’s almost two.”

Jeanne suddenly realized there was something strange in this house. Apparently, Iman had only one sister, and her father had only one wife. They didn’t need all those servants for three women. The luxurious, empty rooms seemed to say that they should be full of many women giving orders and women serving, who constantly vied among each other for male attention and for authority over other women. But the golden skeleton looked empty.

“You converts sold your souls to please the Arabs. But they will always look down on you.”

“And you *kafirs*, they say, have truly disgusting habits,” continued Iman. “Tell me, is it true that you make no distinction between clean and unclean hands?”

“When they are dirty, we do.”

“You mean, you eat and clean yourself with the same hand?” Iman was horrified.

The glasses with warm chocolate and cookies rattled on the serving tray in the hands of Aset, who had been standing a long time at the door, listening.

I must have gone mad! How could I have brought this strange, dangerous child home to my Iman? This girl is twisting and confusing her. It’s just what I didn’t want—for Iman to go through what I did growing up. Snooty looks from grand’mère, who never left the house after we converted, and called us “fools.” Yes, Iman believes in Allah, the way she believes in Little Red Riding Hood! But she’s a practical, intelligent

girl. When she grows up, she'll understand there's no Allah, but she'll respect what's expected of her. If you want to play the game, you follow the rules. The most important thing is the family, and the spiritual peace of Iman and Aziza.

The parents of this Jeanne were obviously eccentrics who would sacrifice the future of their own child for their idea of "the historical and religious values of the nation." When was the last time a Frenchman took religion seriously? This poor child has bought into the myth of Christ. She's no more normal than an Arab, in the opposite direction.

I better just interrupt them right now. This conversation is completely unnecessary, and Zuraida is eavesdropping. Change the subject, feed the children. And then the girl will go away, that's best... But it will be sad. Why do I think the house will be dead without her, like in a body without a soul?

"That's silly," Jeanne said. "Our hands are like our thoughts. We're always touching what's dirty and what's clean. Only an idiot can consider himself sterile in this sinful world just because he cleans himself with his left hand and eats with his right. If you touch dirt, you wash your hands. If you think something dirty, you wash your soul. Everything else is nonsense."

"Why are you always against everything?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't grow up in a glass garden. Why not ask why your servant, the old one, isn't French?"

"Zuraida? Of course she's not French. *Maman* says they don't like it if everyone in the house is French..."

"You girls must be hungry!" said Aset, coming in with the tray.

"It's hard to get hungry here! The rooms are like warehouses," answered Jeanne, grinning her broadest grin.

These converts were not to blame because they're just weak. At least some of the food in this house is normal. Hot chocolate with milk, not bad at all.

Apparently Jeanne was hungry after all. But her hand stopped at a sound: The crying of the child had long since mingled with a monotonous song in *lingua franca*:

If everything in the house is well,

If the zakat has been paid,

Rest peacefully and don't be afraid of the dark.

Toora, loora, loora, hush, now, don't you cry.

"That's Zuraida putting the baby to sleep," said Aset quickly, blushing.

“Please have some hot chocolate, Jeanne... What’s the matter?”

“Thank you very much, I’m quite full.” Jeanne suddenly stood up from the soft armchair. Her head spun slightly. *How could she have spent so much time in these stuffy rooms without windows—that smelled of overly sweet candy and incense? She couldn’t breathe!*

“I’m sorry, I just realized, I have to go.”

“Wait, daughter, where will you go at this time of day?... Did something offend you?”

“No, not at all!” Jeanne decisively moved toward the door. Aset headed after her.

Iman called after her, “You forgot to put on the chador!”

Aset took Jeanne aside: “Jeanne, you mustn’t walk around the city without a chador! That’s dangerous, very dangerous, you have to understand that!”

“I’ll survive somehow.”

“All right. I’ll drive you. Wait.” Aset put her hand on Jeanne’s shoulder and added with quiet intensity, “In God’s name, *don’t go like that into the street!*”

“Which god? *Allah?*” Jeanne said, and ducked out the door.

It turned out that the weather had changed—you couldn’t see anything through the darkened windows. The sky was covered with heavy autumn clouds. The first drops had already fallen on the path between the chestnuts when Jeanne dashed toward the gate.

“Jeanne! Jeanne! If you need anything, come here, do you hear me?”

Aset, who suddenly felt weak, had to grab the doorjamb for support. During the thirty-two years of her life, she had never felt such complete, absolute despair. The girl would not come back; she would never come back. The rain was now pouring. Good. When it rained, people looked at each other less.

Jeanne’s hair and jeans were instantly wet, but the fabric of her light jacket resisted several minutes before letting the water through.

No, one shouldn’t forgive traitors, not even if they have beautiful and good hands and warmly call you “daughter.” Even if they understand that they are traitors. And traitors should also not be forgiven, even if they have Madeleine’s eyes and Gael’s chin, and not one iota of awareness that they are traitors.

Jeanne ran through the rain to Lucile, to a tiny chamber that was not as stuffy as the entire house she had just left. To a shelter she received from one of her own, safe people.

Above Paris, on every side, the shrill call of the *muezzin* to prayer could be heard.

CHAPTER 10

AN UNDERGROUND CAMP

Within the concrete walls, a surface of water shimmered, alive like the black pupil of an enormous eye.

“We made a mistake!” shouted Eugène-Olivier, jumping from the handcart. “We can’t go any further; the platform is flooded.”

“Yes, occasionally underground waters flood the area,” said Father Lothaire. “But we’re going to drain them right now.”

“Drain them? How?”

“This is an artificial flooding. I knew the engineer who rigged it. We’re going to drain it, if I can just find the rope that pulls the stopper from the tub.”

Father Lothaire moved cautiously along the wall, scanning it carefully with the flashlight.

It was clear to Eugène-Olivier that the Wahhabis would never manage to deprive Parisians of safe shelters. There were so many of them that even he, who had been a fighter since the age of ten, hadn’t known about the 20th century atomic shelters—like the one where he’d met Father Lothaire.

The Saracens ceded a good third of the subway system to us out of laziness, but even without that, there are plenty of locations. Paris is connected to the underground at a thousand points, like a twisted labyrinth. No army can search it or control it. They must resign themselves to the existence of fighters in the catacombs.

But there is another way to exert control, and we in the catacombs of Paris, the small underground cities under the forests of Brittany, and the limestone caves are helpless against it: If the children of the Crescent can take absolute control of life in the sunlight, then, oh! What use are the weapon depots guarded by the skeletons of our ancestors if the secret meeting-places in the city have disappeared?

His thoughts were interrupted by the deafening sound of water flowing out.

The two men silently watched the underground “lake” gradually disappearing in the vortex.

Father Lothaire spurred them into motion. “We’ll have to get our feet wet unless we want to wait for two hours. But we have a place to get warm and dry just ahead.”

Splashing around in the wet, smelly dirt with disgust, Eugène-Olivier followed the priest. When they passed the platform, they found themselves in

front of a small passageway in which stairs could be seen leading up toward the street. When the station was working, these probably led to offices.

“The water usually closes the entrance,” said the priest. “Be careful, it’s slippery.”

An area of about 200 square feet at the top of the stairs had not been flooded. It was covered with linoleum and filled with crates and items wrapped in rags.

“This is the main church depot, among other things,” said Father Lothaire, beginning to rummage through something that looked like a small refrigerator.

“Your bomb shelter is a lot more comfortable, Father.”

“And a lot more accessible. The problem is that it’s too easy to find—although sometimes God helps. I just have one set of relics there and I’ve placed them in a portable stone tablet. Now we’re going to turn on the lights; here you can even turn on the reflectors. I wouldn’t mind some hot tea. What about you, young Lévêque?”

Eugène-Olivier eagerly agreed. He stopped at what looked like a small engine mounted on legs of steel tubing like a bug.

“Forgive me, but what kind of junk is this, Father?”

“I can tell you what it’s called, but it will mean nothing to you. You will find all sorts of relics in a place where urban life used to unfold. When we found those, they had already been gathering dust for seventy years. But they work. It’s called a generator.”

Father Lothaire smiled contentedly as he searched for something in the drawers. “It’s a weak local source of electricity that runs on diesel fuel. There are also some that work on gasoline. It could also use kerosene, if I could get some. Aha, here we go: diesel. Hold the light here, please.”

“That looks like a can that’s been banged with a hammer for a long time,” said Eugène-Olivier. “Your reverence, you apparently prove to sinners that miracles are possible. If that can helps you turn on any electrical lamp, let alone a heater, I will believe in miracles.”

“If it’s miracles you want...” murmured Father Lothaire, tipping the diesel canister and pouring fuel into the generator. “With the help of this can, as you so disrespectfully call it, we have to maintain the entire station—to light it and dry it. Quite a bit of work.”

“And how does it do that?”

“You’ll see.” Father Lothaire began to pull a rope on the generator with quick jerks. The engine began to snort, giving off an unpleasant smell, and then

settled into a moderately noisy rumble. The lights on the ceiling came on.

“Go see if there is light on the platform,” the priest called to him over the noise.

Eugène-Olivier ran down the stairs. The recently flooded, recently black and darkly repulsive platform, when lit by its dozens of electric sconces, looked almost pleasant.

“Light!”

“We used generators when I was a boy.” Father Lothaire pulled an electric heater toward the center of the room. “As I remember, we had the same kind in the castle.”

“Candles seem more fitting in a castle.”

“We had candles, too. At one o’clock in the morning, the generator was turned off. It had the abominable habit of going out in the middle of the most interesting place in the book. But I was forbidden to finish reading by candlelight.”

Father Lothaire smiled, wiping his dirty hands with a handkerchief. “They had cut off our electricity where it passed through the village. But we had lived in that castle for centuries without electricity. We just hooked up a generator, which our ancestors could not do. It wasn’t powerful enough to run a refrigerator, but we had cellars. We didn’t lack for anything.”

Father Lothaire filled the tea kettle with water from a plastic container. On an old-fashioned table, which must have once served as a desk, plates with cheese and biscuits appeared. Eugène-Olivier waited as patiently as he could as the priest said “*Oculi omnium in te sperant Domine...*” and so on over them for an entire minute. The biscuits with Camembert out of a can were very tasty and he would have gladly eaten them all, but he didn’t know if they were scarce.

Father Lothaire read his mind: “Please help yourself; we have enough food for everyone who will gather tomorrow. There are old military warehouses nearby that the Saracens never knew about. You and I will pick up a few cases from there in the morning.”

From the platform below, they heard footsteps on the stairs. It did not sound like Saracens.

“When the floor of the station is dry, we need to make as many benches as possible from these boards,” said Father Lothaire brightly. “I think we can rest the boards on empty canisters for legs... Oh, it’s you, Monsieur Lescure!”

“I’m not alone, your reverence,” answered the man who entered. Eugène-

Olivier immediately recognized him from the chapel by his white hair gathered in a ponytail.

He was followed by a small slip of a shadow. Eugène-Olivier, who had warmed himself in front of the heater, suddenly felt a cold shiver. Valerie! It was horrible to see how the soles of her bare, bleeding feet were black with mud.

“Grandpa Vincent promised me an apple candy if I hid with him here,” she said in her silvery little voice. “But I wouldn’t let him carry me across the mud in his arms. There’s too much dirt everywhere. One has to walk through it on one’s own feet and that’s what I did.”

“I don’t know how appropriate her presence here is, but I was afraid to leave her in the street,” the old man quietly told Father Lothaire. “They’re very afraid of her, but they hate her even more.”

Valerie came very close to Eugène-Olivier and he was surprised to discover something he hadn’t noticed before. The girl’s tangled hair, her unwashed, wrinkled T-shirt—all this should have borne at least a musty odor. But the only scent Valerie she off was a faint smell of flowers that are considered not to have a smell: tulips, water lilies. The damp smell of freshness.

“Hello, grandson of a martyr,” she said to him, opening her blue eyes wide. Red blood dripped from the wound on her hand, which she used to remove a curl from her face. Traces of dried blood could be seen up to her elbow.

Eugène-Olivier reminded himself that Jeanne would have brought some small gift for the girl. But he had nothing in his pockets: no chocolate, no candy, not even a piece of gum.

“You don’t react when your grandfather is mentioned. That means you still don’t understand.” Valerie pursed her lips. “Dummy.”

“Perhaps you’re right, Monsieur Lescure,” said Father Lothaire thoughtfully. “Eugène-Olivier, Monsieur Lescure performs the same service in our parish that your grandfather performed in Notre Dame Church. He is our altar server.”

“In everyday life, a secondhand book dealer,” the old man explained, smiling gently. “I have a shop in the *Défense* ghetto. It’s a cover for my teaching the Latin language to our young people. If you want to learn, come to the ghetto. Anyone there will tell you where to find me.”

“It’s unlikely our young friend will have time to learn much even if he begins at this very moment,” said Father Lothaire a little grimly.

“Take your candy, Valerie,” said the old man. Having distracted her, he

turned to Father Lothaire with concern in his faded blue eyes. “Your reverence, are things that bad? Since I walked in, you have been as tense as a wire.”

It was strange how Lescure saw this, said Eugène-Olivier to himself. To him, the priest seemed the same as ever. Except... except that he was a little more talkative. And what did they talk about for three hours with that Arab? He didn’t ask. Soldiers don’t ask.

“Worse,” said Father Lothaire with a smile. “The status quo is disappearing. Our only goal now is to add our corrections to its change.”

“I want a new rosary,” interrupted Valerie, mumbling a little because her mouth was full of candy. “The buttocks took mine and stomped on them. I chased them because I was angry. They ran away. But the rosary was broken; it can’t be fixed.”

“I’ll bring you a box of them, and you can choose,” the old man responded. His voice was hollow, like that of a man who is not thinking about what he is saying.

But he went and retrieved a large box and placed it before Valerie. She lifted the lid and sighed with wonder. She began to pull out new rosaries, one after another—made of light and dark wood, silk thread, colored glass, plastic, and pearls both large and small.

“I don’t want the ones that are red like coral, I don’t want black ones,” she muttered softly. “I don’t want wood ones, I want translucent ones like amber.”

“Will there be a lot of people tomorrow, Father?” asked the old man.

“About two hundred of ours and almost twice that from the Resistance Movement.”

“Excellent.”

So that’s why it was necessary to dry everything and make benches with boards and canisters! But why was it necessary for Resistance Movement fighters to meet with the church’s people?

Eugène-Olivier couldn’t fall asleep for a long time despite the goose-down sleeping bag they’d given him. Alpinists used to sleep in such bags directly on the ice.

The bag was warm and soft, but as soon as he closed his eyes, pictures kept appearing. *Houri-succubi* with red lips would approach him and try to catch him with their heavy breasts like pincers. His body flinched from their touch, and he awoke. The lulling sound of the generator had stopped a long time ago, and the underground was ruled by total silence, total darkness.

Then he was relieved to hear quiet voices. It was the priest and Valerie.

“Little girls should be asleep at this time,” said Father Lothaire with a smile in his voice, “so go to sleep, Valerie.”

“Tell me a story,” she said.

“All right, but not a long one, agreed?”

“But not a really short one, either.”

“Very well. My mother used to tell me this one: Once upon a time, there was an old king who lived in a forest with his knights...”

Living sounds, thought Eugène-Olivier. He felt his body relax. What was being said was not important. The important thing was that silence no longer shrouded him like black cotton. He began to doze off. A little later, he awoke again, and heard Father Lothaire say to Valerie, “And that is why today there are very few priests.”

“So few that you’re the only one for all of Paris?” she asked.

Father Lothaire replied. “How did you know that, Valerie? Until recently, there were two of us. Father Francisco was captured and martyred last winter. In all the ghettos of Paris, there are not more than three hundred Christians. For them, one pastor is sufficient, don’t worry. And if I am killed, our bishops will appoint a new priest from among the monks in the forests of Brittany or the students of the secret seminary. We won’t disappear, Valerie.” There was a brief silence.

“Thank you, Father,” she said, with a little yawn. “But your story is sad. Do you want me to tell you a happy one?”

“Please do.”

“Soon the Mother of God will have some consolation.”

After that, Eugène-Olivier could hear a rustling noise as if a mouse were moving, a sigh, and then breathing in sleep.

CHAPTER 11

THE HOUSE OF THE CONVERTS (CONTINUED)

“Dear, who was the girl from the ghetto that came to our house today? Haven’t I told you a hundred times that the old woman is a spy?”

“Forgive me, but you refuse to allow me to resolve these matters with her. I’ve wanted to do so a hundred times.”

“You think that another woman would be different? We’re converts! You know very well that any servant allowed to work for us will be a paid informant for the First Department.”

Aset shuddered. An office of the First or Religious Department existed in every large institution to enforce *sharia*. Satellite offices handled groups of smaller companies.

Kasim, who still had not removed his blue uniform as a captain of the Interior Army, stood before his wife. He was a handsome, thirty-seven year-old man, one of those who looked good with prematurely gray hair.

Gray hair can be flattering on a man, if his face is youthful and his figure trim, Aset decided when she first noticed the gray hairs on her husband’s head. Today, only soldiers were allowed to develop their muscles. Sports were banned. But who could forbid a soldier his professional training?

Among his lazy colleagues who were Arabs and Turks, Kasim was a model officer—always in good practice with his marksmanship, running and combat skills. For him, military training was a good substitute for the sports he had enjoyed as a boy—although he didn’t dare admit this to anyone. Likewise, the tactful Aset did not mention it. It was part of the game they both played, because the welfare, and perhaps the very existence of their family depended on it.

Once Kasim was promoted to the Ministry, his physical shape would be sacrificed for the good of his career. But this transfer was repeatedly put off. In Aset’s opinion, the First Department was to blame. A true believer with only one wife? That was very suspicious. Aset was very grateful to her husband for that, and she did not miss an opportunity to tactfully let him know it—even though, with the common sense of a *parisienne*, she knew that his reason for not taking a second wife was not only his great love for her. Where an occasional three-hour-long “marriage” with a prostitute was concerned, her husband might not be that different from the other officers. But men were by nature cautious with respect to marriage.

To bring some completely foreign creature into their house, to share a bed with her, to change his own habits in accordance with her habits—most converts were reluctant to do this. Worse, any two Frenchwomen would inevitably argue and intrigue against each other. There would be no peace, and a man places great value on peace around his home hearth. “An Englishman’s home is his castle,” goes the expression, but the same is true of any Frenchman.

The danger of such disregard for *sharia* was not merely difficulty in advancing in one’s career, but danger to one’s life. One had to know where the border lay. If a candidate seems to respect most of the rules and expectations, being overly faithful to one’s wife could be tolerated. Kasim would end up in the Ministry sooner or later. But two or three violations could make a situation dangerous.

The unwritten rules of the game that she and her husband lived from day to day were very complex.

“What do you mean, ‘lived’?” thought Aset angrily. “We still live them and we will continue to live them.” But she noticed she only thought about her Muslim world in the past tense, since her meeting with that uncompromising and naïve girl. How silly and dangerous!

“The girl wasn’t from the ghetto, dear.”

Kasim had always had the tendency to flush easily, and now his cheeks were burning. “At least you could avoid lying to me. You think Zuraida can’t tell the difference between a true believer and a *kafir* ? She said...”

“I’ve never lied to you and I’m not lying to you now,” said Annette with dignity. “I never said the girl was a true believer. And Zuraida is a goose.”

“Please explain it to me, then.”

Kasim was a little alarmed at his wife’s calm voice. He had come home nervous, partly because the question of his transfer to the Ministry had again been deferred. But tiny slights can be sometimes be even more annoying than serious problems. Today, that dog, Ibrahim Yasir Hassan, had brought a new Chinese laptop to work.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have the means to buy the products of our renowned Farhad Corporation on my salary,” Hassan said, feigning sorrow as he demonstrated the capabilities of the machine to his colleagues. “I have to make do with Chinese electronics. But the gadget isn’t bad, is it, gentlemen?” Kasim was of course infuriated. Why?

The owners of the Islamic company, Farhad, made their money by selling what were essentially Chinese computers in Islamic boxes. Kasim’s higher

position obliged him to buy the Farhad version of the same computer, which cost twice as much.

The family budget didn't suffer that much for his paying 1600 Islamic euros instead of 800. But it was insulting. Now he comes home and finds that Aset has brought home some *kafir* girl. Even if you do your best to play the game, the Islamic system can be a daily barrage of fears and irritations. He told himself that none of this was serious. But it had been a demanding day.

The solution in this world is that the woman would begin delicately easing the situation. The table was already set for lunch. Their beautiful older daughter would run in to hug her father. They would bring the baby to him to be kissed—she was so sweet, strong, and healthy... His passing anger, in fact, would just be a reflection of his contentment with family life, and his concern to defend it.

However, his wife's strange intonation boded the cold shadow of something different and very serious.

"Where could a *kafir* girl come from, if not from the ghetto?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, but she's probably with *Maquis*. I brought the girl here to hide her from the police."

"A girl from the Resistance Movement? *A member of Maquis here in our house?*" Kasim's whispered incredulously, with his voice almost trembling. "Aset, you're ill. You're babbling. I can't believe that you would do that."

"If I hadn't helped her, the girl would have fallen directly into the hands of the police. And you know what they do with *Maquisards*. Sweetheart, in another situation, it could have been our daughter."

"So, what are you doing—trying to turn fate around so that our daughter becomes a subject of police investigation as well? We're on a knife-edge here. I'm walking on eggs at work so my family can live safely and comfortably. Is my wife in the meanwhile digging a hole for us? I can't imagine that you helped a *kafir* girl from *Maquis*! Do you think she will thank you? Do you have any idea how much those fanatics hate us? More, I believe, than the true believers do!

"They could kill me, an officer of the interior army, at any moment—the same way they killed *qadi* Malik. The pen-pushers from the First Department will put off my transfer to the Ministry for at least another month because of that. But that's not the important thing. Today the *Maquisards* killed *imam* Abdulwahid. Do you understand that your so-called good act will not stop *Maquisards* from killing your husband?"

"I'm afraid you may be right," Aset said. "But I am convinced that the two

things have nothing to do with each other.”

The woman who stood before Kasim was wearing Aset’s raspberry-colored dressing gown, which was long, gathered at the waist and made of natural silk. She wore her familiar house shoes of crocodile skin that he himself had chosen for her as a birthday present. But she was a stranger. Moreover, she was far more attractive than his wife.

“You should get medical help,” Kasim finally said, truly angry, saving himself from the strange feeling. “You are acting like your abnormal grandmother who chose to spend ten years sitting in the house!”

“Since we’ve begun talking about our forefathers, you look absolutely nothing like your grandfather. I mean your paternal grandfather. He was also an officer, wasn’t he, sweetheart?”

He couldn’t have expected such a low blow from Aset, a reference to a carefully guarded family secret, a skeleton in the closet. It was too terrible to contemplate. No one in the family ever mentioned, even to himself, that Grandfather had been sentenced to five years in prison.

At the end of the century, when he was at the epicenter of military operations against the Serbs, he secretly let them know the coordinates where NATO planned to bomb them, and where their KLA enemy’s troops were located. Grandfather wasn’t even paid to be a spy. He was simply siding with the dirty *kafirs* in their battle against the true believers.

At that time, the true believers were not in power in Europe, so he was sent to an ordinary prison. But if those facts were to float to the surface now—well, the best career path Kasim could expect would be to spend the rest of his life in some horrible garrison in Picardie.

“Thank you for reminding me of that,” said Kasim in a dead voice. “Your husband has more reason than you to be ashamed of his forefathers.”

“Dear, hasn’t it occurred to you that your grandfather would be more ashamed of you today that you are of him? Did he perhaps betray his military obligations because he didn’t want his great-granddaughter to be named *Iman*?” She suddenly sobbed. “Maybe he would have wanted her to be called *Nicole*! Nicole, like I wanted to name her, but I always kept quiet!”

Running up to his wife, Kasim grabbed her by the shoulder with one hand and struck her across the face with the other—forcefully, but without anger, only to stop her hysteria.

Aset suddenly relaxed. She threw her arms around her husband’s neck and sobbed silently, hiding her face on his chest.

“Forgive me, sweetheart, forgive me; it’s difficult enough for you without me! Perhaps I really am ill. Perhaps this is something I inherited from my grandmother. I don’t know. I don’t know what is happening to me!”

“Calm down, sweetheart,” Kasim squeezed his wife in his embrace. “You must have had a terrible shock when you saw the murder of *qadi* Malik. The late *qadi*, truth to tell, was truly a repulsive man, although very necessary. But to see something like that up close—it’s terrible, especially for a woman. And that poor Zeynab was your friend. Of course, now she has to forget about socializing. But of course you feel sorry for her.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.” Aset wiped her tears. All they needed now was for the servants to notice. “I’m going to fix my face. Then I’ll tell them to bring out lunch.”

“Don’t rush, dear. Tell them to serve lunch... in fifteen minutes.” Kissing his wife’s cheek, Kasim left the room.

The old servant Ali, whom Kasim respected most because he never bothered to learn French, not even *lingua franca*—even though he had arrived in Paris when he was fifteen years old—was already waiting for him with his civilian clothes. Sending the lackey away with a tired wave of his hand, Kasim stood for a while holding a light-colored shirt that fell below the knees, a short red waistcoat, and pants.

Meanwhile, illiterate blacks were wearing the same T-shirts and jeans his father would have worn around the house. But what could he do? His position demanded it. Nevertheless, how he disliked to wear these stupid rags! Arab or Afghan, he couldn’t understand where the inane fashion originated. Then he asked himself why he called them “rags” and “stupid.” It was very comfortable clothing of good quality made of natural fibers.

Kasim wearily pressed his palm on his forehead: Psychosis wasn’t like the flu, after all. One didn’t get it from contact with someone who is infected. Or was it contagious in another sense? It must have taken her some time to come up with something like “Nicole”! Imagine naming his daughter Nicole! And perhaps the little one should have been Genevieve? What nonsense. Something weighed heavily on his soul, was it perhaps because Aset, who had always been very smart, so brusquely revealed the shame of his family? Or was he not well because his wife was not well? What was wrong with her, anyway?

He wasn’t even hungry. Kasim listened carefully, approached the door and turned the key in the lock. Another key, to the drawer of his desk, lay among the jewelry in a small case that opened with a code. At first glance, it looked

like another box with shirt buttons.

Here it was, the contents of a secret drawer. Kasim turned the glass tube with white powder in his hands. He was too cautious. After all, this was not *haraam*. Many people allowed themselves this pleasure occasionally, several of his superiors among them. He took a piece of yellow paper, rolled it into a cone, and poured in a little of the powder into it with a small measuring spoon. It wasn't *haraam*. He believed that he would never become addicted. He hoped he would never start using anything stronger.

Leaning back in a soft armchair, he inhaled the cocaine.

His hands and feet became like tufts of cotton—immobile, as if someone had extracted the bones from them. Somewhere in his brain, bubbles of happiness appeared that resembled the bubbles of champagne he had tried when he was twenty. But how could you compare champagne with this miraculous white power, creating this joyful blizzard in his head?

When Kasim entered the dining room, the whole family was sitting at the table. Little Aziza with her bib sat proudly in her highchair. Only Aset's red eyes betrayed her—she had put permanent lipstick on her mouth, powder on her face, and rouge on her cheekbones.

"Bismillah..."

When he started eating, Kasim understood that the effect of the narcotic had stopped quite quickly. Otherwise, he would have not noticed that everything was somehow going wrong. Contrary to her usual habit, Iman did not pout or ask for ice cream instead of lunch. She didn't giggle or pretend the oysters were going to bite her. She sat somewhat tiredly and ate what was put on her plate.

The thought flashed through his mind: She was already fourteen. In another year or two, three at most, they would have to part. He should start looking for a suitable party. A disgusting task, but one shouldn't stick one's head in the sand. Even ten years ago, marriages among converts were a normal thing, but now they were viewed disapprovingly. It would be difficult to marry Iman to some decent young Frenchman. And to think that *Sheik* Yusuf had already said several times that he would like to take her as his fourth wife! Kasim resisted, claiming his daughter was still too young—and hoping that within a few years, the old man would get a heart attack.

What if he didn't? What was Kasim supposed to do—turn over ownership of his daughter to Yusuf's oldest wife, an old woman, and abandon Iman to the intrigue of two other grown women? And most important of all—it was

hideous to even contemplate—hand her over to a lustful old man who was sick with every imaginable disease. If he refused to give her, the influential *sheik* could make all sorts of trouble for him. All that would be left of a humble soldier would be a blot.

All hopes rested on the old man kicking the bucket earlier. If he didn't, he would have to give her to him. It would be a great honor to give his own child to this descendant of the Prophet—even though everyone knew he enjoyed boys on the side.

Other, completely disgusting scenes rolled before his eyes: He would force her to do this and that. He wouldn't take pity on her, because for Arabs, cleanliness was a legal formality. All they cared about was receiving virginity for their own use. It would never occur to them to take into account the feelings of a young girl.

“Dear, what's the matter with you?”

Kasim realized he was sobbing.

“I'm sorry, I have a headache. It came all of a sudden.”

“I'll get you an aspirin!” Aset quickly left the dining room.

She still hadn't thought about it, thought Kasim, gazing after his wife. She was happily married and unconsciously projected her own life on the future of her daughter.

But Iman had grown up healthy and without complexes. What awaited Aziza? It was a good thing, of course, that members of *Maquis* had killed imam Abdulwahid, a radical supporter of the pharaonic circumcision of girls while they were still young. How many times that creep had submitted reports and published articles in the newspapers! In the Wahhabi government, there was still chaos on this topic.

In Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, they practiced three forms of female circumcision, including this most horrible one, whereas in Iran it was apparently never practiced. Since descendants of immigrants from all the countries of the true religion now inhabited Eurabia, there was no common rule among them for many things, including this.

Spiritual leaders like the late Abdulwahid aspired to the “unification of all rules”—and always in the most radical fashion. They called it “taking the best from everyone.” Thanks to *Maquis*, they would forget about “pharaonic circumcision” for the time being—but certainly not forever. It was stupid to close one's eyes to it. If only Aziza could grow up in the meanwhile! And if only *sheik* Yusuf could kick the bucket in time!

But what was happening today? Only three days ago, it was a completely ordinary day with all its minor discomforts. And then that insane hysteria of Aset's, then a warning sign related to cocaine, and now on top of all that, these awful, black thoughts.

"When you start to retreat, you can't stop." What a strange sentence! Who said it and when? But it was true!

What had he done, where had he gone wrong? All of his ancestors had been soldiers. He had wanted to become a soldier ever since he was nine—in this country, in this military bloc. While he was growing up, the religion changed. So what? Religion was a label, a detail. The country remained where it was, and so did the population, although it grew through waves of immigration. Even the enemy remained the same as before—the same old Russia. During his grandfather's lifetime, the Cold War with Russia had almost become a real war, and that was still possible today. Nothing had changed. He was simply doing his duty.

Yes, but what kind of future was he preparing for his daughters? He had been formed in a different world from theirs; so had Aset. But the children would be assimilated like a spoonful of coffee into boiling water. His grandchildren would be *them*.

When you start to withdraw, you can't stop.

In Aset's hands there was a dissolvable tablet that fizzed in a glass of water and a telephone receiver.

"You turned off your cell phone."

"Yes."

"That's why they're calling you on the house phone." Aset extended the receiver to him, covering the mouthpiece with her hand. "Apparently, you have to go back to work immediately."

CHAPTER 12

THE PATH OF THE SKELETONS

As it zoomed through the catacombs under Paris, the lights of the Harley seemed to pull a trail of human bones entwined in whitish spider webs out of the darkness.

Six million skeletons, as if someone had counted them all, sniffed at Jeanne angrily.

It felt impolite to speed by on a motorcycle through such a large cemetery. *You, ancestors, should not be angry. If I were in your place I'd be happy to see as good a bike as this. And generally speaking, I'm not a foreigner to you.*

Through such a gigantic ossuary as this one, one could only drive at low speeds. When Jeanne was a little girl, tourists were brought down here. There were better roads then. But in those tourist times, many branches of the catacombs had not been discovered. The archeologists of *Maquis* made an effort to find them later, for obvious reasons. The earlier maps of the catacombs had been sold in every kiosk, published in hundreds of albums and guidebooks—so today, the Saracens had all that information, and sooner or later, they would address the catacombs seriously. They didn't dare flood them; the surface was quite large, and they might end up sinking the streets with their own houses.

But they could begin gradually filling them with cement, introducing patrols. They might even pump in poison gas. That was why it was important that *Maquis* use tunnels discovered after the tourist epoch. Passages were dug in recent years leading from the ossuary to the sewage collectors, and from the collectors to the abandoned subway lines. And there were completely unknown places such as the one where she was headed now.

For the tenth time in forty minutes Jeanne had to speed up to pull the motorcycle up onto a narrow path. Even though it had been lightened up, the Harley was quite heavy for her. Suddenly, it became very light indeed as someone hoisted the back wheel into the air.

"I could hear from a distance that a little, arrogant pig named Saintville was riding up here! Let's get to a clearing and then I'll whoop your ass!"

"And why?"

Henri Larochejaquelein frequently spoke with Jeanne as if she were his little brother. At one time she liked that, but recently it got on her nerves, even

though she wasn't sure why.

"As if you didn't know."

"I don't."

Placing the rear wheel back on the ground, Larochejaquelein caught Jeanne by the collar and, too seriously for it to be considered a joke, smacked her on the backside with the palm of his hand.

"*Maman* once hurt her fingers like that," Jeanne said, breaking free. (The other hand wasn't holding her collar firmly enough.) "Two of her fingers were blue and swollen for a week. Are you in any pain?"

In the darkness, Larochejaquelein could be heard trying to stifle his laughter. It was obvious he was still angry, or he would have laughed out loud.

"I hope, you unbearable creature, that my hands are a little stronger than your *Maman's*."

"I'm very glad you didn't hurt yourself, Larochejaquelein."

Now he turned on his flashlight—which he had kept off to stay hidden from whoever was approaching. His camouflage clothing couldn't be seen in the dark, only his face and the flaxen curls that fell on his all-too-regular forehead.

"That's enough joking for now. What do you think you're doing? Who killed the *imam*, are you going to try to tell me it wasn't you?"

"So, we're allowed to kill *qadis* but not *imams*? " Ever since she could remember, Jeanne believed offense to be the best form of defense.

"The *qadi* was killed because of a decision made by smart people who knew how to assess the consequences—and when they said the time was right. I believe I don't need to explain further. Listen, Jeanne Saintville, I'm warning you as your commander: One more stunt like that and I'll deploy you to pick flowers in the forest near Fougères. What happened? Are you tired of being a soldier? The worst thing is that I don't even need to explain to you how stupid what you did is. You know that very well yourself, you just don't want to admit it."

"Yes, it was stupid, Larochejaquelein, truly stupid. He was too much of a monster."

"No one is denying that. The old man was a rare monstrosity. In addition to a sea of innocent blood, he is responsible for the destruction of the entire line of Amati violins. He organized a youth unit for such things from families on assistance called the Young *Murids* or something like that. He had so much energy for doing evil that you would swear the devil himself was spurring him on. But that doesn't justify you at all."

"I won't do it again."

"Do you promise?"

"Do you have to push me right up against the wall!"

"Up against *this* wall. Turn around."

Larochejaquelein shined his light on a cross, engraved into black stone—a Celtic cross. The little window beneath it was smaller than a man's head.

"*This is the cell of a prisoner,*" said Jeanne, suddenly whispering. "*Through this window they gave him only bread and water. Fifteen hundred years ago. I wonder who he was and why he was imprisoned here...*"

Larochejaquelein also began to speak softly. "At that time we were ruled by the Merovingian dynasty—hairy kings with magic blood. Do you remember why they never cut their hair?"

"Of course. Their hair was supposed to give them magical powers," Jeanne said, still staring at the window. Do you know how Chlothar treated the grandchildren of Chlodomer?"

"Remind me." Larochejaquelein wondered why he was letting her chatter about ancient times when there was so much to do *right now*.

"A servant brought Chrothild two items—a sword and a pair of scissors. And a message from her son: 'Dear *Maman*, what shall I do with my cousins—cut off their hair or their heads?'"

"Ah, yes!" said Larochejaquelein. "And Chrothild said, 'Tell my son that I would rather see my grandchildren dead than with their hair cut!'"

"What good was a Merovingian without his magical powers? Chlothar went for the heads. There are a lot of stories about hair from that time. Ildico strangled Attila with her hair so he would stop pestering her. They wouldn't let her into his sleeping chamber with a knife, so she strangled him with her hair. The hands of maidens were very strong then."

The light from Larochejaquelein's flashlight slid over Jeanne's head and her hair shone like a nimbus. "My favorite is St. Radegund."

I saw women whom they took away into slavery

Their hands were bound, their hair was mangled.

One stood barefoot in the blood of her husband

Another tripped over the body of her brother.

Each one wept for herself but I wept for them all.

For my dead parents and for those who yet live.

My tears have dried. My sighs have disappeared. Sorrow remains.

I listen to the wind—does it bring news?

*But my own shadows do not visit me.
A chasm stretches between me and those close to me.
Where are they? I ask the wind and clouds.
Would that a bird at least bring me word!
Ah, had I not taken my oath long ago!
I would hurry to them into the storm, through the waves.
Sailors would be afraid, but not I.
If the ship should wreck—I would float upon a board,
If there were no board, I would swim, I would swim.
“Amazing! You know that by heart!”*

Jeanne, made the sign of the cross over the black cross engraved in the wall. What if the person who prayed here saw her now?

“Let’s go on. You want me to give you a ride? It’ll take you a whole hour to walk.”

“The last thing I need is girls taking me for a ride,” Larochejaquelein shook his head as if shaking away the lure of the past.

“All right, then you drive.”

The proposal was made in a nonchalant tone, but she rarely allowed anyone to drive her bike.

Larochejaquelein paused. “You made a promise, right?”

“I made a promise,” Jeanne said, making a face.

Again the fragile bones and the walls behind them wove into a lacy arch. In places where one could see parts of tombstones, Roman letters could be read here and there. Larochejaquelein drove far more slowly than Jeanne. She breathed on his neck, dissatisfied.

A well-preserved plate with one broken corner came into view. It had a bas-relief showing a dove flying over a chalice.

“This marks the road to another depot,” said Larochejaquelein.

The journey took less than five minutes.

In front of a movable metallic door painted blue, Larochejaquelein turned on a floodlight that was obviously battery powered. The old depot was overflowing with stacked crates.

“I’ll never understand why the military needed to make underground depots in peacetime,” Larochejaquelein shrugged. “Now there’s no one to ask. Hey, Jeanne. In five hours, you’re not supposed to be here, but in the Rome station.”

“I’d like to stop in the *Défense* ghetto on the way. Monsieur Lescure promised me a good book by William of Tyre. Do you know Monsieur

Lescure?”

“Somewhat. I knew his son, Étienne. I wasn’t even seventeen when they killed him. His two older brothers were killed during the overthrow. There’s no reason for you to go to the ghetto now and run the risk of being captured. It’s good that you’re here. You can help me.”

“Of course I’ll help. But why am I not allowed to go to the ghetto? Don’t tell me they’re looking for me!”

“No, not you. You’ll know soon enough. Let’s take a look and see what we have here.”

They passed slowly next to the crates. Larochejaquelein carefully studied their little labels and their markings.

“What’s this? A mine-detector! Two... four... eight of them! Jars of strawberry jam would have been better. Remember, Saintville, *this* is how ammunition is labeled. Let’s go on. Automatic rifles! Okay, we have ten times more of them than we could possibly need! That goes first. Now what else? This!”

Taking a phosphorus marker from the pocket of his camouflage jacket, Larochejaquelein drew a lily on the crate. Next to it he wrote a Roman “one”—which was banned by the Wahhabis. (For their part, the partisans and those living in the catacombs had stopped using Arabic numbers a long time ago.)

“Today I’m like Cinderella who has to sort the mixed grains,” he laughed. “I’ll be sending our people to bring supplies from here, but darn few of them know anything about labels. If they have to open every crate, it will take them more than a day. By the way, remember that *this* is how weapons are marked.

“Upper row, general weapons, lower row, sniper rifles. You see that in the upper row you have the same signs as the automatic rifles over there. The only question is whether we’ll need them. I don’t think that we will. But they’re good to have. Fifty of them won’t get in our way.”

Larochejaquelein decorated the crate with the same lily but this time he wrote a Roman IV for “four” and then five Xs (for tens) in parentheses.

“That means take it fourth in order and I’ve indicated how many. What else? Now here is something we do need—shoulder-mounted rocket launchers!”

“Larochejaquelein, my dear, sweet, precious, most precious,” Jeanne clasped her small, hands with dimples instead of knuckles together as if in prayer. “Will you please tell me what’s going on? Why do we need so many

weapons at once?”

“I’m not sure myself,” Larochejaquelein couldn’t refrain from grinning. “Whatever it is, it’s going to happen, and in a few hours, both of us will know. Let’s see what else we have... Large-caliber machine guns can only be issued with a doctor’s prescription.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. That’s probably what we’ll need most of all. You want a chocolate bar with almonds?”

“Why not? With almonds or with peanuts?”

“I have both. Choose.”

Jeanne took the bar with almonds.

“I’ve wanted to ask you this for some time,” said Jeanne, after swallowing the last piece. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want. Is your name really Larochejaquelein?”

Henri de la Rochejaquelein was a young hero of the War of the Vendée—an uprising of peasants and nobles against the French Republic and its campaign to exterminate the Church in France’s northwest coastal region by the River Vendée.

“My name is really Henri,” laughed Larochejaquelein. “I’m listed in the Europol database as Larochejaquelein. It was my nickname as a boy. There were three of us friends. My hero was Henri de la Rochejaquelein. The others liked Georges Cadoudal and François de Charette. Of the three of us, I’m the only one still alive.”

Larochejaquelein fell silent. He didn’t like to talk about the death of the boy who idolized Cadoudal. The three of them pretended to be the heroes of various cartoons, old ones, from *Star Wars* —which still existed then. Barbed wire and concrete walls are no obstacle for boys, who have a knack for getting through where adults cannot pass. Armed with precious markers and paints, they crossed by night into the *sharia* zone to draw on the walls and fences, to draw on the darkened windows.

They drew soldiers with laser swords and princesses in incredible costumes. In defiance of *sharia*, they drew *living beings*. The graffiti artists competed among themselves to see who could draw the most, but they could prove nothing. Early in the morning, workmen would destroy all traces of “the devil’s work.” The boys had to take each other’s word. No one lied.

A tally of points was kept and everything honestly evaluated. For instance, for a public square covered in drawings, there was the complexity of the

drawing, and also the risk factor. The winner was considered the champion for the month. Then the competition would start again.

Noël, who liked Cadoudal best, was caught drawing a portrait of green-headed Yoda on the door of a police car. Driven to fury by such boldness, they attacked the boy with their nightsticks. They beat him a long time, knowing how to kill slowly. They beat him into a pulp. For some reason, they turned his body over to his parents instead of bringing it directly to the morgue. Henri saw his friend's body.

Larochejaquelein's bitterness and sense of guilt remained with him, although he couldn't explain why he felt guilty. Perhaps because his friend had been caught instead of him. Even the fact that five years later, the policemen who had beat Noel had been hunted down by the partisans did not reduce his bitterness.

"All right," said Larochejaquelein getting up. "Back to work."

"Mes amis, si j'avance, suivez-moi!"

Si je recule, tuez-moi!"

Si je meurs, vengez-moi!"

("My friends, if I advance, follow me!

If I retreat, kill me!

If I die, avenge me!")

—Henri de la Rochejaquelein (1772-1794)

CHAPTER 13

A CONFERENCE UNDER GROUND

There was not enough electricity. They had to turn off every second light on the platform. As a result, the area looked striped.

People came one at a time or in small groups until the platform was actually crowded. To Eugène-Olivier, they looked like the commuters that must have stood here every morning twenty-five years ago, waiting for the subway to work. The crowd did not resemble the passengers on the platforms in Paris today. It did not include women dressed in tents, or men in fezes or green turbans. Instead, there were the fresh faces of young girls and the smoothly shaved cheeks of men.

Ever since the Wahhabis came to power, the only Frenchmen who wore beards were the collaborationists. Suddenly, everyone remembered that even Charlemagne shaved.

Everyone on the platform now was French—not formerly, but really. Among them was a gracious black woman in a long, pleated skirt who wrapped her slender shoulders in a black shawl. Around her neck—too heavy for her neck, really—was a cross. Not an ancient one, but an old one, probably something she had inherited from her grandmother. Eugène-Olivier knew her from the *Panthéon* ghetto and he remembered her well: There were not that many black people in the ghetto, except for practitioners of voodoo, who could be recognized on sight. He had not known she was a Christian, or even that Christians existed in Paris.

The young woman smiled to him as she carefully made her way in between the benches to meet her friends.

“That’s Michelle,” said someone behind Eugène-Olivier. “She’s getting ready to take her vows as a Carmelite.”

There was one Carmelite convent remaining in the Pyrenees. Her ancestors were Catholics in Gabon when Monsignor Lefebvre was a missionary there.

Eugène-Olivier’s heart began to beat wildly. Jeanne appeared next to him—radiant, apparently contented with life, with herself, or with both.

“Hi,” said Eugène-Olivier. He could feel himself starting to blush. How many times in recent days had he imagined meeting Jeanne again? And now he didn’t know what to do with himself. “I couldn’t imagine I would see you here,” he found himself saying, which sounded silly as the words left his mouth.

Jeanne teased him, “Now, how could all the honorable people be getting together without me? Am I an exception?”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said. “I mean, not that you’re an exception, I simply didn’t think that you might be here, too...” He couldn’t sink into the earth, because they were already underground. Lord, what an idiot he was! Where were all those interesting subjects for conversing with Jeanne that he had rehearsed to himself a hundred times in his mind?

“Do you maybe know what is going on here today?” she murmured.

What a relief! At least she wasn’t angry.

“I don’t think anyone knows for sure. Not even Sevazmios, Brisseville, or Larochejaquelein.”

Eugène-Olivier knew that all three commanders of the Paris sections of *Maquis* must be somewhere on this platform, but he saw only Philippe André Brisseville—who, even in the bright light of day, was pale due to a lung ailment. He looked fifty years old instead of thirty-five.

Once the Wahhabis, in an effort to find Brisseville in one of his numerous hidden shelters, released a poison gas that caused great pain. But there was a bottle of mineral water in the shelter. Brisseville used it to gradually soak a handkerchief to protect his mouth and nose. This let him contain his cries of pain and not reveal his position. But he remained an invalid, and could not live for a month without triamcinolone, which he administered to himself in large doses.

Dark haired and thin, he was studying something on the screen of his palm-top.

“Oh, look!” said Jeanne, nudging Eugène-Olivier. “What is Sophia Sevazmios *doing*, hanging out with that creep?”

Following her gaze, Eugène-Olivier saw Sevazmios on the high staircase that once led to the city. There was no question about it. A few steps below her stood Ahmad ibn Salih.

“What is he doing here, anyway?” she added. “He might not leave the same way he came.”

“Yes, he’s no ordinary creep,” said Eugène-Olivier. Sophia was talking with the Arab. There was a smile on her lips, the kind it was impossible to confuse with anything else—a friendly, open, approving smile. She might have a thousand reasons for talking with him, even for allowing him to appear here. But she couldn’t have a single reason to smile at him as if he were one of her own. Little candles seemed to be going on in her eyes. What on earth was

going on?

Sophia took out a cigarette from her pack.

Slobodan was saying to her, "It's hard to cast off a mask that's grown onto your face, not as much on the outside as on the inside. Very hard, Sophia." In a simple linen jacket and soft collarless shirt, he now no longer looked like an Arab. But the reason was not the absence of his rich Arab clothing. The expression on his face changed his physiognomy in a strange way. "Nevertheless, I wanted to ask you something... I don't even know where to begin."

"You already began splendidly with being able to pronounce my name," said Sophia Sevazmios with a smile. "That's nice to hear for a change. Let's switch to Russian. In Russian the questions flow as if they were accompanied by vodka."

"I prefer juniper brandy," Slobodan spoke Russian without an accent, but in a somewhat flat voice. "I haven't spoken Russian in a hundred years, not even in my dreams. Sophia, how did you end up here?"

"Here in the subway? Here in Paris?"

"Yes, Sonya. The Europeans called those who deprived you of your childhood "rebels," and "freedom fighters." They didn't want to believe those courageous fighters against pregnant women and children were terrorists. They gave them asylum. They helped those snakes slither all over the world."

Eugène-Olivier was not the only one who was confused. Many members of *Maquis* cast long looks at Sophia Sevazmios speaking in some incomprehensible tongue with an Arab.

"Things were pretty bad in Russia, too," said Sophia. "I don't know if you remember. There was a lawyer named Kuznyetsov. Once, when I was a child, I met with him just after my imprisonment, but I didn't know much then. At the beginning of 1995, there was an attack on those schoolchildren in Grozny. That traitor went in among the barricaded Russian soldiers being sent into Chechnya to hunt down the terrorists. He shouted, 'I am the attorney Adam Kuznyetsov. I give you my word—surrender your weapons and I will take you away from here! Why would you want to fight this war, why would you want to be occupiers, to die in an unjust war?'"

"Imagine, Slobo, who he was saying this to. Nineteen-year-old boys, but even their age is not the most important thing. You or I would not have fallen for it at sixteen. They were green, completely green—without life experience, without an ideology. They had finished school as the empire was collapsing.

Even if some of them actually studied instead of twiddling their thumbs, what could they have read about Yermolov, who put down the Caucasus without sentimentality because he understood his enemy. Where would they have found him in the textbooks of perestroika? And so they believed him and turned in their weapons—and he turned them over to the terrorists. How could they not trust the nice man?

“The most horrible thing is that even a few months later, such a trick would not have succeeded. They became soldiers with incredible speed. There was still no national consciousness. Some joined the army when they understood that the Cross signifies something— like the boy martyr who was held hostage with me for a few days. Some joined to claim revenge for their friends. He wouldn’t have succeeded, even a month later!”

“They killed them all?” Slobodan asked—then quickly regretted adding wood to the black fire that burned in Sophia’s eyes.

“If only they had!” said the woman painfully. “If only they had, Slobo! Lord, the things they did with them! They raped them, they cut off their ears, their noses, they gouged out their eyes, they cut off their genitalia. And all this was accompanied by sniggering, following the model of an Afghani game of football using a live ram.”

“I know how they usually work,” a spasm of pain crossed Slobodan’s face. “I was born in Kosovo.”

“No one knows how most of these young men died. But they gave some of them back to the feds later on—as part of a campaign to frighten them. Some died quickly from the torture they endured. Others lived for many years in various psychiatric clinics.”

“All those perversions were paid for by Europe, Sophie. And by the USA, too, of course. Some believed in it, some didn’t care. During the Kosovo war, our side captured three US soldiers. Oh, what a commotion there was! America was decorated with yellow ribbons! And our men sent them back their so-called heroes. Do you know what I would have done?”

“Sophia shrugged her shoulders. “Would have given each of them a piece of lead to wear as a memento?”

“No, you’re wrong.” Slobodan laughed. “I wouldn’t have killed them; they’re not Albanians. I would have spared no expense, given them full security, and forced them to clear the ruins from the NATO bombings. I would have forced them to pull every burned body of a Serbian child from the ruins with their own hands. And then let them go. At least one or two would have

come to their senses. Maybe they would have had something to say to their countrymen.”

“In Europe there were some who spoke up.”

“You could count them on your fingers. Sophia, I read about you in a book about the Dudzhahov case. The ransom paid to free you went directly into his pocket. I know that you tried here in Europe, first in Stockholm, then in London, you tried as a teenager to get them to listen to you. And I read many other things. Tell me, can you forgive the Europeans for being the sponsors of Islamic evil in Chechnya, just so they could destroy Russia?”

“I’m afraid that would be impossible,” said Sophia with a smile.

“But you have forgiven them.”

“Forgiven them?” asked Sophia. “I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about it. I’m here because this is where I am needed.”

“You’re a fantastic woman, Sophia. I couldn’t do it, I don’t forgive the Europeans, I don’t forgive them a single day. I don’t get excited over their troubles. They brought them on themselves.”

“Just don’t tell me you’re going to leave before the storm, Slobo.”

“I’ll stay. But not because of them. It’s simply that I’ve pretended too long. I have a crazy wish to take an automatic rifle and point it at the Muslims. You can’t imagine how many times I’ve wanted to kill someone during the years I’ve been undercover.”

“While I lived in the lap of luxury, denying myself nothing, right? What am I going to do now?”

They laughed like a young couple, looking deeply into each other’s eyes.

“Don’t blame yourself. You did more than practice marksmanship. Didn’t you and your husband manage to change the informational landscape? He managed to do quite a lot!”

“That began long before we met,” said Sophia with a smile. “My husband’s best friend, who intended to devote his life to the works of Euripides at the Faculty of Philology during his first year, was a countryman of yours, Veselin Janković. Being Orthodox, Leonid knew a lot of things that Europeans had never heard. Their friendship completely opened his eyes. While they were still in secondary school, they spent their holidays in Europe, and not only in the fashionable spots.

“Veselin had become irritated by the fact that among his many English, French and German friends, as soon as the Balkans were mentioned, all these highly individualistic intellectual became the same, like chicks from an

incubator. A miserable lot of liberal stereotypes and ignorance of the facts. At first, Leonid spent nights in sports camps and discos talking about the clash of civilizations. Then he came to understand that he couldn't convince them. And he didn't like that at all. That's how he got the idea of his own publishing house, Elektra. It published only documentary literature."

"I remember those books very well—on poor-quality paper with soft covers. With a logotype of a maiden with loose hair. Those editions frequently fell into my hands."

"Yes, in eight years, many things were printed. The decision was immediately made to publish in several European languages, not just Greek. The editions were banned the first year in France and the second year in Great Britain and Germany. Spanish editions of Elektra books only began to appear after they were... preventively banned. But the damage wasn't great. Whoever needed them came to Athens to buy them. The employees in the publishing house called it 'book tourism.'

"But who would work in such a company? Who brought manuscripts there? Documents, analyses? How did those writers get their documentation? Soon Elektra became a magnet. Things took on a life of their own. Leonid set up first one, and then another fund. He began to send physicians where they were needed. And in time, official activity was superseded by... *un* official activity."

"Two sides of the same coin."

"Yes. On the one hand, without Elektra's publishing activity, there wouldn't have been such a concentration of brilliant minds in the same place. The liberals guessed at the contours of the company's work without going to the effort of proving anything. To be honest, they weren't all that wrong. I met Leonid after all that was already working."

Sophia smiled with only her eyes, remembering how, barely managing to wrap a towel around her head, she ran out of the bathtub to open the door. It was fine, it was just the young woman she was expecting. They had agreed to meet at 2:00, and she must be running ten minutes early.

But instead of a young woman, there was a young man at her door.

"Sophia Greenberg?" he smiled, showing his white teeth, as if he hadn't noticed the towel and the bathrobe.

"Stop right there!" Sophia jumped backward. Her pistol was in the bedroom in a case.

"You were expecting Milana Mladić," he said, still standing at the door. "And I was expecting her to meet with you today. But instead, she's having a baby. It's a

good thing she called before she went to the hospital forty minutes ago. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Leonid Sevazmios, the chief slave of the Elektra publishing house.

"Come in." The towel fell on her shoulders and she shook her wet locks of hair.

She didn't really care for the way he was dressed. Moreover, he was tanned, with brown eyes and dark hair. Sonya had always preferred blond-haired men, or at least brown- or red-haired ones, although she wasn't sure whether that was a matter of taste or an unconscious act of self-protection. And he was too cheerful for her taste.

No, she didn't like Leonid Sevazmios at first sight. Nevertheless, everything she knew about him, she had to admit, was to his advantage. And honesty at that time was a keyword for Sophia, almost a fetish.

"I'll be out in a second!" she called from the bathroom, jumping into some denim overalls. "Would you like some tea?"

"No!" called the guest from the other room. "I only drink dried Lapsang Souchong from the Nubai Company, and you don't have any! You probably have some kind of Pickwick tea in bags. I don't want any coffee, either, because you don't know how to prepare it properly. In general, women prepare awful coffee."

"As I recall, I didn't offer to prepare any coffee." Sonya pulled a CD burned earlier from a drawer. "Here you have everything you need. There's my statement, which they did not allow me to make during the trial. There's the rejection of my US visa application. Some relatives of my father's wanted to put me in a clinic there for psychological rehabilitation, but the US administration thought it undesirable to have a thirteen-year-old child victim of Chechen separatists in the country. There's testimony from the authorities regarding how they crippled me."

She uttered the last sentence casually, as she always did, in order to avoid a reaction of pity.

"This material is red-hot right now," he said, becoming serious. "Have you read the *bacchanalia* passing through the newspapers? Especially the English ones? 'After ten years, the hand of the Kremlin reaches Chechen rebels.' There are even better phrases, I can send them to you by email."

"I've read them all."

"I should have known you would keep up. Good, this book about their exploits should be a good first board for their coffin. We'll try to get it as soon

as possible, despite what Milana's baby has done to us. But you know what, Sophia... I'll let you know when the book comes out. They're already conducting an investigation, and they will find anyone that had a personal account to settle with the dead man. It would be better if you weren't in Europe at the time. They're idiots, just idiots."

"But if they find me, they won't be idiots at all. I'm the one who killed him."

Later, Sonya simply could not understand why, for the first and last time in her life, she acted so stupidly. She knew very well that even tried-and-tested people who deserve absolute confidence should be told only what was necessary. She certainly didn't have absolute confidence in him. In fact, Leonid's reckless appearance contradicted the serious facts she knew about him. Why did she tell him that—premonition? No, she didn't believe in superstition.

An uncomfortable silence ensued. He looked at her calmly and persistently, his light brown eyes with honey-colored tones gradually becoming darker.

"To quote from one of our Russian books," he finally said, 'O Queen, why was it necessary for you to suffer personally?' I read it in French translation, by the way, they told me it was the best."

"I can't stand Bulgakov," bristled Sonya. "In his works, you have a bunch of retirees instead of fighters. The country needs saving and they're sitting at home and sighing, 'Ah, how nice it is to sit at home and drink tea next to a shaded lamp!'"

"Pickwick from a bag. By the way, I would really love it if you would offer me a glass of mineral water. Carbonated would be best. I can't stand the social propriety of saying, 'Oh, I only drink non-carbonated water!'"

"Listen, I'm tempted to dump your glass of carbonated water on your head," laughed Sonya.

"That's fine, it will put us on an even footing," answered Leonid seriously. "By the way, you must have very good hair. Only women with good hair don't use a hair dryer. The others have nothing to lose. Although I'm just assuming, what I see on top of your head right now looks more like a rat's tail. So, are you going to leave?"

"Agnes Blacktomb could recognize me. Therefore, I have no reason to stay in Europe. I'm going to go and work on my tan on the Dead Sea."

"Lord, how crazy you are! Please don't be angry, but couldn't you have shot him without a witness?"

“But she had to be the witness. I condemned her to that. Instead of the court in Strasbourg. Somebody has to carry out judgments.”

“Nonsense! You condemned her to be a witness! Normal people do such things without a witness. Bad people kill the witnesses, too. It never occurred to me that a third variant was possible that was so stupid.”

“She got what she deserved. She didn’t deserve the benefit of dying.”

“Where are the airports in this silly book?” Leonid was flipping through the telephone book, putting the receiver on his ear with his other hand. He looked up. “What are you doing standing there? Go pack! I’m taking you to the airport—if not to the Dead Sea, then to some place like Australia! Or perhaps to Katmandu, the world capital of the youth hippie movement of the 1960’s. Do you have money?”

Suddenly everything became very easy for Sonya, as if she had been pulling a heavy load for a long time and someone had suddenly jumped in and grabbed one of the handles.

“Will you be able to add my documents to this book of ours by yourself?” she asked, although she really wanted to know something completely different: “Do you think this book will get me killed?”

“We’ll always be in touch by email.” He put down the receiver and touched her hand with unexpected caution. “Everything will be fine with the book, Sophia.”

“Elektra continued to exist after Leonid’s death. Although it was progressively more difficult for it to publish books. Under pressure from the Muslim diaspora, the government came up with more and more obstacles. Alright, Sloba, we may have the opportunity to continue this conversation later. You see that the people are gathered.”

CHAPTER 14

A PLAN

It became obvious that there were not enough of the improvised benches that Eugène-Olivier and Father Lothaire had prepared the day before. Many people were sitting on the stairs, like Sophia.

“Hey, hey! Paul! Paul Guermi!” shouted Jeanne, pushing her way through the crowd to her motorcycle mechanic.

Eugène-Olivier felt strangely insulted. Jeanne disappeared right at the moment when he felt so bad because of Sophia Sevazmios’ strange behavior. What was that Arab doing here?

“Hi, I just wanted to thank you.” Jeanne managed to make her way to Guermi, although with great difficulty. “I asked you to change the plates but you also tightened the nuts.”

“It was nothing,” answered Guermi happily. He had paid dearly to come to this *Maquis* meeting, which would completely change his life. But whatever happened, happened; he had no regrets. “You drive like a maniac. It’s important that your motorcycle is well-maintained.”

“So true!” Jeanne disappeared, sliding out under someone’s elbow.

In the middle of the platform, where the light was the strongest, several people were setting up something that looked like a podium. Sophia was standing with her strange friend. Brisseville and Father Lothaire approached her from different sides.

Some of the members of *Maquis*, especially the younger ones, looked at Father Lothaire with no less confusion than Ahmad ibn Salih. This time, the priest was not disguised as a workman, but in formal dress: black, floor-length cassock, white collar, and biretta with a black tassel.

“It’s starting!”

Eugène-Olivier was radiant; Jeanne was again standing next to him.

“Quiet, please. May I have complete quiet, please.” Larochejaquelein, whom Eugène-Olivier had not seen before, climbed to the very top of the podium. “There are more than five hundred of us here. If we can’t hear, then we’ve gathered here for nothing. There’s no microphone.”

For a moment the crowd clamored even more loudly than before, as if a wind had blown through it. However, soon there was absolute silence.

“First, to avoid confusion!” Sophia raised her hand. “There are no Arabs here. This man is our ally from Russia, Slobodan Knezhevich.”

“He’s still a creep,” Jeanne whispered in Eugène-Olivier’s ear. Her eyes were completely round. “From Russia! Isn’t that where they keep Saracens in reservations?”

“I don’t know about reservations,” whispered Eugène-Olivier. “But they’re not in power there because for the creeps, Russia is *Dar al-Harb* or, as the newspapers say, a *kafir* -state.

He felt a little better. He was no Ahmad and no Salih, just your normal, average Russian spy. But... why had he been so angry with him for breaking into his apartment?

“Today, we also have people from the Christian parishes here,” continued Larochejaquelein. “They are led by the Reverend Father Lothaire. Forgive me for simplifying, but if I understood properly, you make all the final decisions?”

“Temporarily,” answered the priest. “Only temporarily. Next summer a new Paris bishop will be elected. But if I understood correctly, we no longer have time to wait for his appointment.”

“Not even a day more. It may be a matter of hours,” said Larochejaquelein. “Basically, we have reliable information that there will be changes in Paris. They are equally important for us and for those who live in the catacombs.”

Larochejaquelein was silent for a moment. Eugène-Olivier was convinced that he would now say the most important thing, perhaps something quite terrible. Larochejaquelein next words were these:

“The government has decided to destroy the ghettos.”

The silence they had carefully maintained turned into an uproar and engulfed the crowd. No further explanations were necessary, everything was quite clear.

“Silence, friends!” It was difficult for Brisseville to raise his voice. So he used something that resembled a hammer to pound on the podium.

“Is it true? Is it true?” The sentence thudded in Eugène-Olivier temples. A strange coldness in his chest responded, “It’s true.”

“Since we have nothing to lose, we may have something to win,” said Brisseville. “The time has come to show then that they are not the only masters of this city.”

Someone raised his hand: “If this is a rebellion, does it make any sense?” Eugène-Olivier only knew the speaker by sight. “Brisseville, I’m not saying I’m opposed, I don’t think anyone is opposed. Without the ghettos, the underground cannot survive in Paris. The only thing I don’t understand is what we possibly have to win, except our deaths?”

“Perhaps, when the chaos starts, we’ll manage to lead the people from the ghettos out of the city through underground passages,” said Larochejaquelein. “The rebellion will incite the infidels to slaughter everyone. Five units will be organized for the evacuation. In the meanwhile, the others—”

“But where? Where are we going to engage them?” someone shouted.

“In Paris there is only one location that we can hold to some extent with minimal casualties,” Larochejaquelein’s strong voice rose above the crowd. “Just one place, seemingly made for this purpose. It is the easiest to occupy. We won’t have to fight for every house. And none of the Saracens will be under our feet. There are almost no residential buildings, only fortifications. If we act at night, it will be enough for us to kill the guards. I am talking about L’Île de la Cité.”

“And all we will have to defend is nine small barricades,” exclaimed Lescure like a boy. “But the Cité station itself is a weak link. It’s not abandoned, unfortunately, but operational. Some of our soldiers will have to go down in the tunnels to secure the withdrawal.”

“We thought of that,” Henri Larochejaquelein replied, interrupting the old man from the catacombs. “We have sufficient forces for the evacuation of the ghettos. The Saracens will divert their entire army from the ghettos to protect l’Île de la Cité—to protect several stations nearby...”

“Until when?” exclaimed Father Lothaire. “You’ll all be killed for no reason, friends.”

“Are you against a rebellion, venerable Father? You don’t think we should leave the people in the ghetto to die like sheep, do you? You Christians can die for your faith. But there are very few Christians in the ghettos!” Even in the weak light, one could see that Larochejaquelein’s face had gone completely white. “We *Maquisards* could leave Paris this moment if we wanted to! But those who aren’t Christians, and aren’t *Maquisards* —ordinary Frenchmen from the ghettos, their mothers, wives, children—why must they die?”

“I’m not proposing that they be abandoned to the mercy of the Saracens,” responded Father Lothaire. “I have another plan.”

“What is it?”

“You should leave immediately. You just said that you could. Take those children and young girls who are so drawn to weapons to the villages, toward the borders, abroad—the further, the better... And leave the ghetto to us. To us Christians. I remember that I myself recently said that it was impossible to evacuate the ghetto because it is against human nature to believe in catastrophe.

But if we go from house to house before the killers, God will give us the power to convince them—His all-powerful strength, not our own paltry one. Just leave us the evacuators.”

To Eugène-Olivier, it seemed as if someone had colored all the human faces in two different colors, like the lights of a traffic signal: Those whose faces clearly said “yes” were indisputably the faces of the people from the catacombs. Those whose faces lit up with an unequivocal “no” belonged to the soldiers of the Resistance Movement.

“Look around you, Reverend Father.” Larochejaquelein apparently saw the same thing. “Your plan would be a good one if we, too, were not Parisians.”

Father Lothaire slowly looked at the faces that surrounded him. His face gradually grew gloomier.

Sophia, who had remained silent the whole time, jumped up onto the podium next to Larochejaquelein and said, “In a sense His Reverence is right. Our plan isn’t good.”

“But it’s your plan, Sophie!” Brisseville coughed, his confusion greater than his need to breathe. “Aren’t you the one who developed it?”

“I am. But now I see it has shortcomings.”

“And you’re proposing that we withdraw it?”

“Why?” Sophia shook her head, as if she didn’t understand that there were two hundred and fifty confused pairs of eyes looking at her. “I propose that we improve it. When we do that, it also will be better than Father Lothaire’s plan.”

“Sophie, it’s not the time to speak in riddles.”

“In order to demoralize them, it’s not enough to rebel,” Sophia declared in her resonant smoker’s voice. “There must be a small, but decisive victory of the Cross versus the crescent. Your Reverence, what do you think about serving some sort of Mass in Notre Dame Cathedral?”

“‘Some sort of Mass’ is the word for it, Sophie.” The warm smile in Father Lothaire’s voice was at odds with his momentarily overcast face. “You understand that’s impossible.”

“It’s possible.”

“In order to celebrate Mass, the church needs to be re-consecrated. That could be accomplished. But the rebellion will not last long. And what then, Sophie? Condemn the church to yet another humiliation when it is inevitably turned back into a mosque after the Saracens recapture it?”

“My dear Father Lothaire, it’s not inevitable. Now, everybody try to

understand what I'm about to say. We can calculate how long we will hold the Île de la Cité. We can calculate in advance how many people we are going to sacrifice and when we are going to withdraw. Even though we don't want to withdraw, we'll have to. And then they'll think they've put down the rebellion."

"But Sophie, does that make sense?" called out Larochejaquelein. "That's what you yourself said, do you remember? A rebellion can't end on a happy note. We knew from the start that a rebellion would be a shock to them. There is no way we can achieve more than that. With all due respect to those of you from the catacombs, what does that have to do with the Cross and with Mass?"

"Slow down, Henri. I finally understand what's been running through my mind for days: The rebellion can be a success if our task is not to maintain it for a specific time, but for enough time to *do* something. Something that can't be undone. Then we can withdraw. If the Cité is the heart of Paris, then Notre Dame is the heart of the Cité. The whole mission needs to be refocused on Notre Dame. Do you, Your Reverence, agree to serve a Mass—after which the Saracens will not be able to desecrate the church?"

Father Lothaire stood up. "Sophie, you've gone completely mad. But insanity is probably contagious. I agree, although there are some conditions."

"So Sophie, now you've understood!" Valerie slipped out of the darkness onto the lit piece of dirty concrete and suddenly embraced Sophia with both arms, squeezing her tightly in gratitude, as any child would do when she'd been given a new toy.

Eugène-Olivier and Jeanne looked at each other with confusion and a little bit of fear. On Lescure's face, one could see that he had begun to understand. The black woman, Michelle, felt with her hand along her neck seeking her cross—without taking her eyes off Valerie.

"Do you remember how the *Maquisards* fought the Nazis— *les Boches*?" Sophia's question fell into the dead silence. "Frenchmen, you are peasants by nature. If you can't get your land back from your enemy, it is better to pour salt on it. If he has occupied your house, set it on fire, so he can't rule your property."

"*Oh!*" said Jeanne, sitting down. Her whisper seemed like a cry to Eugène-Olivier. "*So that's why we needed plastic explosives!*" he said to himself. "*She planned all this earlier!*"

For a change, Eugène-Olivier stopped thinking about Jeanne. The small boat of the Île de la Cité, which had floated in the Seine for millennia, stood in

place, connected to the city by bridges. Only six barricades would be needed, as Lescure had said. Barricades on bridges. You couldn't find a better place to hold, until the moment when the second boat, a boat within a boat—Notre Dame—flew up into the air.

Wasn't that better than leaving it to forever remain the Al Fraconi Mosque?

Sophia Sevazmios was right. She was right a thousand times over—it was just one Mass, but it would be worth as much as all of Paris.

Strange, that he had never felt this pain before. Was it his heart? In his whole life, he had never felt it hurt like this.

"The explosion of the church will serve as a signal to withdraw!" exclaimed Larochejaquelein, as if he had read Eugène-Olivier's mind.

The words had finally been said out loud.

* * *

Strangely, no one disagreed. It was as if the shadows of their ancestors had emerged from the ancient ossuaries and crypts into the modern underground of the metro:

We build churches, but not for our enemies. We build them for the glory, and not for the derision of Christ, they murmured. You thought for too long that the church was an architectural monument. Which is the very reason you will never be the equals of our architects. Clean the throne of God at least in this manner, if you are not able to do so differently, O descendants—if our blood is in your veins, if you are a bone among the bones of this land.

"Notre Dame has stood for centuries," added a *Maquisard* of about forty cautiously. "It's not a twentieth century high-rise. What kind of explosion do we need so that nothing is left? Even if we have enough material in our depots, how much time do we need to bring it, to set it? If walls are left standing, there's no point in even beginning."

"We need 30 to 60 pounds of C4, no more," said an old man from the catacombs. "It depends on the power of the explosive. Don't forget, friends, we're talking about a Gothic structure. How can I explain? Bulletproof glass truly repels bullets, but there are places on it where it is enough to merely touch it and everything collapses into dust. If our architects hadn't mastered this skill, the Gothic style would never have reached for the Heavens."

"We would need to know where those places are, both on the glass and on the walls," said Larochejaquelein, frowning doubtfully.

"Monsieur Peyran will show them to us," answered Sophia cheerfully.

“He’s an architect. Do you have the plans of Notre Dame, Monsieur Peyran?”

“Of course, Madame Sevazmios. The most detailed architectural drawings,” said the old man.

“We need four hours to take the Île de Cité,” Sophia said. “We need five hours to plant explosives in the church and for the Mass. Withdrawal will be in several phases, because as one group is coming, the others will have to cover them. We’ll hold the island for at least twelve hours.”

Larochejaquelein’s gaze swept the dozens of faces turned toward him, and he announced, “The Seine will run red with blood, and it will rise. If anyone here doesn’t consider himself crazy enough to take part, he should leave Paris immediately. No one has the right to condemn him.”

No one got up to leave. Father Lothaire, who had stepped away from the podium, was speaking quietly with a dozen men who approached him.

“The others will receive orders from their unit commanders,” Larochejaquelein said. “Commanders, please stay for consultations.”

“Just one more question,” cried Father Lothaire from above in the crowd. “Our volunteers still have not been assigned to units.”

“But you’re from the catacombs, you don’t take up weapons,” said Philippe André Brisseville, confused.

“For a Mass in Notre Dame Cathedral, we will take up weapons,” answered Father Lothaire.

CHAPTER 15

THE BARRICADES

He barely managed to park: First, the wheels went up onto the sidewalk. In his second attempt, he scratched the door of a laundry truck. That wasn't good. The driver would remember that a fancy Ferrari had scratched him.

Kasim glanced around stealthily: There was no one in the truck or nearby. For good measure, he staggered as if drugged. (For members of the true faith, you couldn't say that they staggered as if *drunk* .) Kasim closed the door, forgetting his purse, CD player, and expensive umbrella on the seat.

Sliding into a courtyard passage covered with drying linens, Kasim, bending down to avoid the wet laundry, crossed into the next street. He needed to choose a place from which his car wouldn't be seen.

And he really should have removed the things from the seat. He didn't care if they were stolen but if they were, he would have to report it, and if he reported it, he would be asked an inconvenient question—where he had been? He really had no reason to be here in Marais. They would connect the awkward facts.

Oh, to hell with it. Why was he afraid of his own shadow?

Kasim decisively looked around. A small shop like many in similarly poor neighborhoods caught his attention. It was a general-store-pharmacy-bakery with small items for the household. Everything necessary.

As you might expect, the only person in the store was the owner, a fat woman in a black chador who was counting packages of school markers on the counter.

"Forgive me, *hanuma* ," he said in Turkish. In neighborhoods such as these, they did not even know *lingua franca*, and they prayed only in Arabic. "My cell phone is out of order. May use your telephone?" In order to be more convincing, he pulled out his cell phone, which he had turned off, and showed it with a frown.

The owner bustled about, excited by the chance to do a favor for the handsome senior officer—and yet a little miffed that he had not come in to buy something. Soon, she came out of the inner rooms with a telephone.

He dialed, and waited a long time. Eight rings. That did not bother Kasim, because he remembered that at the other end, there was a similar shop also filled with a mixture of smells too thick for such a small space. Cloves, cinnamon, thyme, and the rubbery smell of cheap detergent, the horrible smell

of an accidentally broken vial of smelling salts, and coffee grounds fought for dominance with *eau de toilette* and plain old dust.

“Hello.” An old voice could be heard, unexpectedly loudly.

He could speak French in peace and no one would notice. No one would dare to ask which language an officer of the Interior Army ought to speak. Telephones in the ghetto were not tapped. No official was curious about the thoughts of cattle about to be slaughtered. But the telephones of state officials were a completely different story.

“Forgive me, Monsieur. I’m a friend of your upstairs neighbor, Monsieur Antoine Thibault. Would you be so kind as to call him?”

“Just a moment.” He could hear the unsure steps thudding up the squeaky stairs.

The wait was long, very long. Surely it would be enough for him to enter the next room to find himself in the house next door. A voice came on.

“This is Thibault.”

Kasim could not speak right away.

“...*Allo?*”

“Antoine...” Kasim’s mouth had become dry. “This is a relative on your mother’s side.”

He did not dare say who he was. But it should be unnecessary. Antoine would understand, even if he didn’t recognize the voice. Perhaps he would not recognize it. When was the last time they had talked? Iman had been a year old.

There was no response for a long time.

“A little unexpected, no?” There was a somber irony in his cousin’s voice.

“Antoine, I can’t talk for long...” stammered Kasim. “Please tell me whether you have a card to leave the city.”

“I didn’t get one this year. Why?”

“You should go visit your family in Compiègne. If you don’t have money, I’ll send you some.”

Yes, I can do that. No one traces the transfer of small amounts of money. And a trip to Compiègne for four, for which a family from the ghetto had to scrimp and save for half a year, was a very small sum. How was it even possible to live as they did—in two connected rooms above a shop, without their own telephone, with a small shower in the corner of the kitchen? Linoleum worn out from thousands of steps, tiles falling off, unmatched furniture from the twentieth century...

“Tell me, dear cousin, why this sudden and touching concern for my summer

vacation?”

“Toto, don’t be sarcastic!” Kasim wiped the sweat from his forehead. Was the shop owner looking at him too closely? There was no way to tell, through those rags she wore... No, she was not. She waddled off again into the residential part, from which he could smell couscous. “Believe me, I’m not talking off the top of my head. Do you hear me? I don’t have a lot of time!”

“I understand. I don’t need money. I have a little saved. I wanted to buy an old Ford. So you’re telling me I should not buy the car and I should go to Compiègne instead?”

“You have to go. You *have* to. As soon as you can prepare your documents.”

“Or I may find myself in an awkward situation?”

And not only you, thought Kasim with a kind of mute sorrow. But he didn’t dare say that. If the inhabitants of the ghetto all headed out of Paris, an investigation would be launched to find out where they got their information. They would search, and they would undoubtedly find.

“Yes, you may find yourself in an awkward situation.”

“All right then, in three weeks we’ll be in Compiègne.”

“Not in three weeks. As soon as you can prepare your documents.”

“Very well,” Antoine said with a frown in his voice. “But our officials have all gone mad here. Imagine, today they announced new rules: For every lousy document, you have to wait almost a month! Even worse, the old cards aren’t valid from today. Everything has to be done over! But if necessary, I can give them a few francs and they’ll do it faster. Should I do that?”

“Mmm, no. There’s no reason to.”

“Alright then. And how long should we stay there?”

“As long as possible. I can’t tell you more—forgive me.”

“All right, Babar,” Antoine’s voice became warmer. “And how is your family?”

“Thank you, my wife and daughters are well. That’s all. I can’t talk more.” Kasim cut off the connection and threw the receiver onto the wood counter as if it had burned his hand.

He left the store, forgetting that he had intended to buy something to thank his hostess. So much risk. All for nothing.

He had feared his own shadow for nothing. He had come up with some precautions for nothing. He waged a battle with himself for nothing, reminding himself that he was a sixth-generation soldier... for nothing.

They were already at work, those devilish green helmets. The plan to

liquidate the ghetto had barely been drawn up. Not twenty-four hours had passed since he had learned of it, and those Abdulwahids had already pulled the necessary levers.

The devil take them, the devil take them all! What would change if he only managed to save Antoine and his wife and children? Nothing—although for Kasim, it was very important. How much better he would feel if he at least managed to save Antoine... Not even because of their shared childhood—although that was a reason, too—but because Antoine was the only man he could warn...

As a practical matter, the policy was absolutely correct. The ghetto was essential to the existence of *Maquis*. If the word *Maquis* had once meant a scrub tree, then the roots of that scrub were in the ghetto. As a soldier, he couldn't disobey, and of course, he would carry out his orders.

But how many young people were there in the ghetto who were still infected with the silly prejudices of their parents? Those prejudices were no longer as strong. Their children in turn could become a normal part of society. The more generations that passed, the further from fanaticism they would become. Many were not ready today, but tomorrow they would grow tired of rotting and barely eking out a living.

But there would be no tomorrow. Whoever did not convert in the coming days would be sentenced to death. *Antoine, why did you allow this to happen? You have sons! How many people will die because prejudices still run strong, and the higher-ups will no longer wait for them to become slowly diluted?*

The Maquisards, the Maquisards were to blame for everything! If it were not for them and their murders of eminent Paris figures, the ghetto would have gotten smaller with each passing year, and no one would have to destroy it!

When had he gotten behind the wheel? He had been driving for some time, but he didn't even remember getting into the car.

He was going somewhere, staring at his windshield as if it were the screen of a forbidden television. There was a film on the screen. Two boys were running home through a green meadow—tired of playing, hungry. Here they were in the dining room. The rays of the sun streaming through the high windows were reflected from the polished hardwood floor. The balcony doors were open. Near every opening, there was a narrow crystal vase with a rose, the crystal refracting the sun... And Aunt Odile in a white summer dress, looking so much like his mother.

“Dear, I warned you!” Uncle Dominique made a dissatisfied face, making a gesture to hold back the plate that had almost touched the tablecloth in front of the boy. On the white porcelain with a blue border, among the pieces of roasted potato sprinkled with parsley, was a golden pork chop with semi-translucent edges.

“Oh, I forgot!” a shadow fell across his aunt’s face. “Forgive me, my dear,” she said to her nephew. “I’ll bring you something else.”

The aunt quickly removed the plate from under his nose. Why did he have to eat veal cutlets when everyone else was eating pork chops? He sat, insulted, and watched Toto eating. At the same moment, a cutlet appeared and he started chewing automatically and absent-mindedly.

“You know that Léon gave us specific instructions with the child. You need to be more careful.”

“Yes, I know. But is it really something that important?” Aunt Odile looked at the children, who were busy eating. Actually, his cousin was too hungry to pay attention to what the adults were saying for about ten minutes, but he... The prepared veal cutlet was pulled from a cardboard box of the type that are stocked in one’s freezer and then rapidly heated in a microwave oven. It wasn’t very tasty. He foggily remembered that the conversation of his aunt and uncle had something to do with him, if he could only recall what they said.

“All too important,” said his uncle quietly. “Our Léon has always been a talented careerist. I can’t say that he’s not capable.”

“But it’s such nonsense...”

“You’re wrong. It is very serious, Odile—as serious as the fact that this will be our last summer in this house. What can I say? Unlike me, Léon doesn’t want to pay a penalty now for a “family reunification” law from 1976 that flooded the country with Muslims. I do understand. It’s humiliating for grandchildren to be charged for the debts of their grandfathers.”

“I think it’s better to lose our summer house than to take part in such a farce.”

“I’m afraid our losses will not stop there, Odile. This time, I’m no less far-sighted than Léon. When you start to withdraw, you can’t stop.”

Kasim suddenly braked, barely stopping in time for the light. *So that’s where that sentence came from! How powerful childhood memories could be!*

So where did your far-sightedness take you, Uncle Dominique? Your grandchildren live in misery, denied everything that Antoine and I had as children! They have no summer house, no Internet, no polo, no cricket, no

tennis!

But my children, let alone my grandchildren, also have no polo, no tennis, and there is no money on earth that can buy them the right to play computer games.

When you start to withdraw, you can't stop.

At least the grandchildren of my father will not die this week.

They won't die. But the great-grandchildren of my father will not be his great-grandchildren. They will not even be my grandchildren. They will be foreigners.

So no one won. It was all pointless. No cocaine could help. He was a soldier, and he had to carry out his orders.

Kasim understood that he was driving on the Champs d'Élysées, right by the spot where *qadi* Malik was killed. The passage where the explosion occurred was closed. The sidewalk in front of it was sealed off with a net. Turkish workers were lazily collecting the remnants of broken tiles. All they needed to do was put in new glass and tiles, but they hadn't even begun.

He had to phone Aset, as he had promised he would. She was nervous, as before. Last night, it was as if she felt they were calling him with orders to carry out some reprehensible act. She did not ask anything, but she had that tense, strange look of the guilty...

Kasim swore through his teeth. His cell phone, which he had turned off to seem more convincing, had been off for more than half an hour. He had to control himself. Absent-mindedness was a very bad personal quality.

The phone rang the moment he turned it on. It was from work. Why were they calling him so frequently all of a sudden? They couldn't let him finish his lunch in peace. He was on his way to work, after all, even though he hadn't been called. It was a recorded message:

"All officers are ordered to immediately assume positions! Disregard usual deployments. Battle readiness! Urgent!"

It must not apply to him. They had sent a text like that through the general network. What else could it possibly be?

Disconnecting, Kasim dialed the number of his colleague Ali Habib.

"What are these corrections of Plan 11-22? My battery wasn't working and I just heard. I'm turning off Champs d'Élysées right now."

"Apparently Plan 11-22 isn't in effect anymore!"

He was relieved, whatever had happened, the liquidation of the ghettos had been deferred. He couldn't believe it!

“So what’s going on?”

“Some kind of nonsense. A military operation in the city.”

“Talk about nonsense. Don’t tell me the Russians have attacked Paris?”

Kasim was already speeding down Rivoli Street. *Now it would be better to turn onto the New Bridge*, he thought. He slowed down, because there was a crowd of people walking in the street instead of on the sidewalk.

A dark-skinned policeman shouted at him: “The road is closed! The road is closed! Go back!”

Kasim extended his plastic card to him without a word.

“You still can’t pass over the New Bridge, sir!” the policeman said, saluting.

“What’s going on?” barked Kasim.

“Mon capitaine can see for himself, sir!”

Kasim had never seen an accident like it in his life. A big bus of the type that drove students to classes in *madrasahs* outside the city lay sprawled on the bridge, not even on its side, but with its wheels straight up in the air. There was an empty truck on the left side. How had they managed to collide like that, and completely block off the bridge? It was impossible.

“Cunning swine, they’re not there, they’re not in the vehicles,” fumed the black man.

“And who are *they*?”

“You haven’t heard, sir? It’s the *Maquisards* .”

* * *

“This is called a *peribolos* .” Larochejaquelein leaned on a bag of cement, pulled out a crumpled pack of Gauloises and began looking for at least one cigarette. “It’s super to line up everything with a gas tank like that. If they start to advance through this mess of cars, you know what’s going to happen. And we’re as safe here as if we were under Christ’s wing. If we unintentionally puncture a gas tank, it’s not important—we’ll get a wall of fire. The most important thing is the empty space between the two barricades. They’re bringing in engineering units now to move the bus...”

Jeanne laughed. Honestly, she was impatient to see what would happen when the Saracens finally tried.

“Larochejaquelein,” asked Eugène-Olivier, “wouldn’t it have been easier to just destroy the bridges?” The question had been on the tip of his tongue for several hours, and he finally had the chance to ask it.

“Think about it, Lévêque.” Larochejaquelein contentedly pulled a cigarette from the pack—it was a little wrinkled, but not broken. “By leaving the bridges in place, we’re the ones who define where they’re going to go. As long as the bridges are intact, they won’t attack us from the water. But if we force them, they’ll be the ones to decide how to attack us. That’s one reason. There’s also another one.”

“They don’t need to know how what explosives we have!”

“Yes. The less serious things look to them now, the longer we’ll be able to hold out.”

Eugène-Olivier nodded. The bag of cement he was leaning on seemed incredibly soft. His eyes were closing. The lull before the new phase of the battle was playing with him. He hadn’t slept all last night.

The attack on the Île de la Cité began before dawn. Since six the evening before, armed units had slowly gathered in the underground around the metro station. In the station itself, the evening crowd of Muslim passengers had gone into the metro as usual, hurried to grab seats in the cars, and sat rustling their evening newspapers and their bags of chips—never guessing that gathering around them quietly was the soul of a humiliated people.

There were almost no passengers getting *off* at *Cité*. Most people got *on* the metro there to get to *Cluny*, *Concorde*, *Maubert-Mutualité*, and so on, the residential neighborhoods. By about 8 p.m., the river of people passing through the underground started to dry up, dividing into rivulets, and finally into individuals running late and no longer in a hurry to make it home in time for dinner. At about ten, the blacks in orange overalls were bringing out the platform cleaning machines as the last passengers were getting onto their trains.

Automobiles, mostly expensive ones, took their sleepy owners over the New Bridge, the Little Bridge, the Iron Bridge—which was once called St. Louis Bridge. Those who lived in Champs d’Élysées and in Versailles also hurried home.

At about midnight, as the serene May night enfolded the city, the Cité station closed. The island was empty— from the park in bloom on the east side— where they say there was once a memorial to the French killed by the Fascists—to the Palace of Justice on the west side. There were still windows with lights on here and there in the Palace of Justice, in the Conciergerie, and in the long, concrete building that housed the French division of Europol. That had been built on the spot where the stained-glass miracle of Sainte-Chapelle once

stood—before being leveled by the Wahhabis.

The scattered yellow flashes from those few windows made the dark silhouettes of the buildings look even darker. In Notre Dame's former vestry, which now served as the *imam*'s apartment, there was also a light.

A black named Mustafa (in his language, the name sounded different) was lazily pulling plastic bags from trash cans and throwing them into a wheeled bin, which he was pulling behind him. There was a satisfied smile on his wide lips. Every few minutes, he touched the upper pocket of his overalls. In that pocket there was an old pen. Today he had angered his boss by trying to sign a receipt slip with an unsharpened lead pencil.

"What kind of people are you!" fumed his boss. "Here's a pen, you fool; keep it!" This was a crowning achievement. Mustafa had been waiting for this pen for four months, not a day less. The respected Sharif-ali was so stingy, he wouldn't give anyone so much as a box of matches.

This evening Mustafa planned to go to Marais to a well-known fortune-teller. He would give her the present he had received from his boss. After that, the boss would have no choice—he would have to increase Mustafa's salary to thirty euros, no less, and even give his daughter in marriage. Let him just try to cross Baron Subotka—who, they say, was created by the woman whose name was better left unsaid. Baron Subotka was easy to pick out in a crowd. He wore a black suit with a narrow black tie and black eyeglasses. He smoked and he liked to joke around. He ate for three men—in the blink of an eye, he could wolf down ten pita breads with mutton and the same number of portions of *couscous*. Whatever fool did not honor Fridays, Baron Subotka would laugh on the day of that man's death. The fruit tree in the backyard is not growing there by chance, and the empty clay pots on the shelves in the room are not there for decoration!

They said that in old times, when the Catholics came, it was even worse. Their priests in the colonies punished and destroyed for such things... But where were they now? The black people were more intelligent than everyone else, and in the end they would outlive everyone else.

If Mustafa didn't honor Baron Subotka, he would have been afraid to work in the metro. There were all sorts of stories about abandoned stations. It was said that they intersected with underground graves with white bones, unsuitable for fortune telling. These bones were guarded by white spirits who served the dead who once ruled the city. The white spirits appeared in the old branches on the metro, wandering through them as they liked. Baron Subotka had always

protected Mustafa, and would protect him from all the white spirits.

Dropping a bag into the container, Mustafa straightened up. What was that noise coming from the tunnel? *Aaaaaaaah!*

The white spirit had long, silver, wavy hair that fell down its back and it held an automatic rifle in its hands. What was a spirit doing with a rifle? Something was not right! Spirits could not stomp their feet—but he could hear a muffled clattering coming from the tunnel. Another spirit, also with an automatic rifle, and another, and another...

Mustafa threw down his bag and fell on the concrete, painfully scraping his hands and making them bleed. He jumped up and ran toward the staircase, screaming at the top of his voice...

If he hadn't started making so much noise, they would have allowed him, a cleaner who was not to blame for anything, to walk away. But they couldn't allow a living siren to run out into the street like that at the beginning of an operation. A single shot was heard.

Mustafa didn't even have time to get angry with Baron Subotka.

Eugène-Olivier put his pistol back in its holster.

Upon exiting the metro, the units of the advance guard separated into two groups. One made for the Palace of Justice and the Conciergerie as the other half ran in formation to cut off the bridges.

The unit of defensive guards led by Brisseville was also divided. Heavy weapons had to be brought to the Cité platform—the weapons whose existence had to be kept secret. They needed to create an underground line of defense in tunnels at three stations: Châtelet, Saint Michel and Pont-Neuf.

They had at most four hours at their disposal to do this. Brisseville bit open his adrenalin vial to help his breathing. In World War II, their great-grandfathers had injected adrenalin.

Several spacious rooms on the second floor of the Palace of Justice, on the front side, were brightly lit, although there was no one in the reception area. *Sheik* Said al Masriv, walking alone through the offices, had already knocked over a stool and a pot with a miniature tree. There was no one to pick them up, and he was reluctant to call his driver from downstairs. Consequently bits of ceramic kept finding their way under his feet and he had already managed to scratch himself with them. The spilled earth was smeared all over his shoes and on the plush carpet.

Usually he walked thoughtfully—slowly, as if he were sleepy—in accordance with his corpulent body. Excitement made him clumsy.

There were a dozen papers scattered on his desk. The computer monitor flickered. The *Sheik* had not prepared a document by himself for many years, but the report he had to compose now could not be entrusted to even his most trusted aide.

An invasion: an incredible, impossible intervention. The agent from Moscow had advised that the network of saboteurs who had been so carefully prepared had been discovered, invalidated, and pulled up by the roots. After advising this, he stopped reporting. Twenty-four hours had passed since then. *Sheik* Said neglected sleep, food and prayer trying to verify this claim once more. Was it possible that it was true? It bore a strong resemblance to the truth.

A resignation, in the best case: that would be something better for him to submit himself. But how was it possible? It was incomprehensible. *Was there anything in the drawer for blood pressure? Or at least for tachycardia? He couldn't call a physician. Why give them material for rumors in advance. But if only he could find a little tablet...* There was something here—no, it was for digestion, for gastritis.

It was always like that, whenever he didn't need something, it would always appear from somewhere!

The door opened silently. The *Sheik* simply felt a draft of air—the well-greased hinges did not make a sound.

He certainly didn't expect the person who entered, but he wasn't surprised. The director of the atomic laboratory was hardly a stranger.

"You've come to pay me a visit, *effendi* ? Who informed you?"

"What difference does it make?" answered Ahmad ibn Salih loftily.

That was true. So he knew everything. *Sheik* Said, suddenly feeling tired, lay down on a sofa.

"I think that it would be better for you to think about who informed Moscow," Ahmad ibn Salih stood at the door, not hurrying to close it. In fact, he was holding it open.

"What?" *Sheik* Said choked and began coughing. "It's already known who leaked the information?"

"Such comprehensive and thorough leaks of information don't just happen." Ahmad ibn Salih's lips curved into a spiteful smile. "It could only have been a direct and intentional betrayal. Differently put, it could only be the work of a spy who managed to deeply penetrate the system. Very deeply. So deeply that you know him personally."

"Who is it?" The *Sheik* 's heart was beating in his temples. His career was

finished, in any case, but at least he would have some consolation if the son of the devil was punished. Oh, he would bite through his windpipe with his own teeth—if he could. “He’s still alive? He hasn’t managed to kill himself? *Effend*, in the name of Allah, tell me he’s still alive!”

“Alive as alive can be and feeling quite well, actually.”

“You’ve consoled me as much as possible in this situation, may Allah bless you for it. But please tell me, who is he?”

“Me.”

Slobodan suddenly felt as light as a feather. He felt that he could do anything—to swim at the bottom of the ocean without worrying about breathing, to marvel at the algae and coral, to fly like a bird above the city, to pass through cliffs.

For so many years he had forbidden himself to even fantasize about the moment he would cast the truth into their faces. Ahmad ibn Salih still held the door. *Sheik* Said felt as if he were delirious, as if he were losing his mind. Consequently, the news did not surprise him.

But then an older woman dressed like a *kafir* walked into the office after the scientist. This was impossible, it simply didn’t happen that a *kafir* woman in black jeans with hair that was not only uncovered, but fell loose down her back should suddenly walk into the office of a senior state official.

“You didn’t hear well, you son of a bitch,” she said nonchalantly and cheerfully. “Not only is he a Russian spy, he’s also a Serb. And now guess who I am. Here’s a clue: What lullaby do they sing to put your grandchildren to sleep?”

Trying to wake up, the *Sheik* moved toward the alarm button. The delirium continued—no one tried to stop him. Or maybe—the thought crossed his mind—the security alarm was not working any more?

No, everything was fine, everything was fine with the alarm. The red button blinked, indicating the signal had been sent.

He stood there, repeatedly pushing the button as the two of them watched him.

“There’s no one there to answer to your signal,” explained the woman. “The security guards are already cuddling with black-eyed *houris* .”

“Sevazmios!”

“Finally. I asked our friend from Russia to show me who came up with the plan for poisoning our water supplies. I’m looking at you and I just can’t believe how it’s possible for such trash to provoke such enormous,

irreparable misfortunes. When a mountain gives birth to a mouse, that's logically comprehensible. But when the opposite occurs, my mind just can't grasp it. I'm afraid that all the misfortunes of humanity in the last hundred and fifty years have occurred because mice like you kept coming up with mountains. Luckily, before me I have a mouse who didn't manage to give birth to his mountain."

"How ...how did you manage to get in here, *kafirs* ? Where is security? Where are the police?" The *Sheik* 's desperate desire to understand something, anything, suppressed even his fear.

"It's just that the ninth crusade has begun outside," said Sophia, flashing a smile, motioning to Slobodan with her hand. "We've prepared for it a long time, but now there will be no more Euroislam and soon there will be no more Islam, period. All right, Slobo, finish him off. As you can see, it's not as grand a feeling as you might expect."

Sheik Said, whose eyes saw nothing—as if they were made of glass—didn't even try to save himself. Perhaps he wasn't even aware he was in danger. He just quietly and rhythmically rocked back and forth.

Slobodan took out his pistol.

The strangest thing was that between them, there was none of the intimacy that hatred engenders. To the *sheik*, it seemed as if they could walk through each other—each moving in the space of his own dream. But Slobodan's dream was shiny and light. The dream of *Sheik* Said was a nightmare that caused him to break out in cold sweat.

When the *Sheik* 's body fell with the back of his head on the floor—between the overturned stool and the broken pieces of pottery—Slobodan looked with a strange disappointment at the disfigured face with a hole above the left brow. It did not resemble his fantasy of so many years. He felt a slight revulsion—as though he had touched a cockroach with his bare hand—and an icy coldness in his heart.

"Sonya, don't you think you exaggerated?" Slobodan now spoke Russian without an accent, his fluency finally returning after so many years. "Perhaps you played up the colors just a bit?"

"Haven't you ever played poker? A little bit of bluffing sometimes helps to put the dot on the 'i'. The Palace of Justice is ours, but there is still shooting at the Conciergerie. Do you hear it?"

The noise of gunfire in the dark seemed far away—no louder than crickets on a summer night. Modern, double-glazed windows are very good at

neutralizing sound.

CHAPTER 15

THE BARRICADES (CONTINUED)

“It will be terribly damaging if they begin attacking from planes.” The May morning was fresh. Jeanne raised the collar of her light jacket. Her cheeks and the tip of her nose were ruddy, and her grayish-blue eyes were very sleepy. She persisted, “What if they attack Notre Dame?”

“They won’t,” said Eugène-Olivier. “There are so many of their buildings here in the Cité that if they bomb, they’re bound to hit at least one of them. There’s the Palace of Justice and the Conciergerie... They won’t even use artillery until they find out we have it. For a handful of rebels, it’s not worth losing the buildings. But they’ll get us out in twenty-four hours. If they knew the most important thing, nothing would stop them from using their bombs. But they have no way of finding out before it’s too late.”

“It’s good that Notre Dame will become Notre Dame once again,” said Jeanne radiantly. “I think that if a church were a man, it would want to die on a day like today. If I were in its place, it’s what I would want.”

They were walking in front of the Palace of Justice in broad daylight, in the mid-early morning—walking nonchalantly with Kalashnikovs in their hands through the very center of French Islam, with the wind tousling Jeanne’s fine hair.

Just for this moment I’d be willing to die a dozen deaths, thought Eugène-Olivier. Was it worth feeling sorry for the church? She was right. At this moment, its stones couldn’t be completely lifeless.

There was a pile of crates with Stingers next to the Europol building. Among the *Maquisards* milling around, Eugène-Olivier finally saw a few familiar faces. Maurice Lauder had lost his mother last year when the *imam* called on them to accept the true faith. That was when he joined *Maquis*. He survived that day by a miracle; he was in the hospital having his appendix out. His younger brother disappeared—Eugène-Olivier didn’t know the details. Everyone here had his losses, and it was impolite to ask. He waved, but Maurice didn’t notice—he was getting orders from his commanding officer.

“It’s beautiful, like summer at the seaside,” said Jeanne quietly. “What do you think? Are we going to sunbathe in peace like this for a while?”

Eugène-Olivier did not answer her right away. Finally, he said, “At least a couple of hours. They’re not doing anything right now. They’re in shock. I believe they’ve simply blocked off the approaches to the bridges and are

sitting in meetings. At all levels.”

“Mass has to start before noon, and it’s 8:30 now. Perhaps many of us will not be killed after all. Perhaps we’ll be able to stop and enjoy the Mass. Oh, if only the Saracens didn’t begin their attack until 1:00!”

How easy it was, simply to walk beside her and talk to her. And how silly it was to try to invent topics for conversation, when all one had to do was look around. He could have gone on like this for a hundred years. But Georges Pernoud, who outranked him, was walking toward them.

“And what are you doing, Lévêque?”

“Larochejaquelein ordered me to patrol the second line on the barricades.”

“We’re taking half our people off the barricades, haven’t you heard? The surviving Muslims have lodged in the church itself, in the *imam*’s apartment. They’re shooting at the entrances.”

“Pigs!”

“No kidding. Go report to Roger Bertaud. They’re to the right of the main entrance. And you, Saintville, stay on the barricades. Here, take this cell phone; you know how to use it?” He tossed it.

Jeanne caught it. “It’s nice,” she said. “You took it from a Muslim?”

“Yes. Apparently it doesn’t have a pink code. But just in case, don’t turn it off. If they start to close in, call Larochejaquelein. I’ve put his number in for you.”

“Great.” Jeanne threw her new toy up in the air and caught it as she ran, hurrying toward the New Bridge.

“Listen, you! Remember, no showing off!” Pernoud shouted after her. “There’s always trouble with that one.”

Eugène-Olivier nodded grimly, thinking that with trouble like Jeanne, one didn’t really need happiness.

* * *

“*Do something!* Why can’t those barricades be removed? Who approved them, anyway? Launch an air attack, bring in the navy, do something—the *kafirs* are attacking!”

“We’re doing everything we can, esteemed Mosvar Ali,” said Kasim. “But you don’t want to be accidentally killed as a result of our hasty actions, do you?”

“I don’t want to be killed, period. I’m not just anybody, I’m the *imam* of the A Franconi Mosque! Officer, are you aware of what will happen if you fail to

protect me?”

“Call us if anything changes,” said Kasim, and put down the receiver with relief. The *imam*’s high voice continued to ring in his head.

The Interior Army’s command headquarters had been hastily set up in a center for the distribution of Islamic literature. (Out of habit, many converts still called it by its former name—Shakespeare & Company Bookstore.) It was close by the Little Bridge leading to Notre Dame. But even so, there was little that could be done for the esteemed *imam*. No matter how much he raged, he would not fare well.

Two young captains, taking advantage of a break between meetings, drank coffee from a thermos, sitting without any particular reverence with their posteriors on cardboard boxes that were filled with edifying Islamic literature. No religious guards would be showing up—they had probably heard that Mosvar Ali was trapped in the building.

Although the situation in general was bad, it was good to feel command in one’s own hands, Kasim decided. An orderly moved discretely near the door, sometimes taking a cigarette out of his pocket, sometimes putting it back, glancing the officers fearfully. Kasim had read the newcomer’s file last night. His name was Abdullah—a sniveling convert. He had been Abdulwahid’s driver, and now they had brought him here. All that was left of his boss’s head was smaller than a matchbox. The rest of Abdullah’s family was probably in the grave. Now he’d been moved from a cozy place into hell. But shit floats. Even if there were an attack, he would probably survive.

At least now they’ve forgotten about the ghetto. Maybe I saved Antoine. If this incredible rebellion had not taken place today, Antoine would probably be dead, like the family of this coward Abdullah.

Antoine doesn’t hate me, it was obvious from his voice that he hadn’t begun to hate me. As they were transporting Abdullah’s mother to the morgue and him to the sharia zone—probably separating them in front of their house—it’s unlikely the family forgave him as Antoine would forgive me, if they rounded him up. The situation is entirely different. When I accepted Islam at the age of twelve, people weren’t being hauled off and disappeared. Toto’s parents had just begun to go bankrupt...

Why do they kill the entire unconverted part of the family? Do they want only the scoundrels to convert, the ones who don’t mind betraying their parents, brothers, and sisters?

If they didn’t do that, normal young people would convert, simply

because they saw a difference in their prospects. Today, normal young people no longer become Muslim. Instead, we get creatures like this Abdullah. Things get worse and worse.

“Why are you glued to the door?” barked Kasim to Abdullah. “Go buy me some cigarettes. The brand doesn’t matter, just hurry. Do you hear me?”

* * *

In despair, *imam* Mosvar Ali listened to the signal from the telephone receiver. It sounded terrible, but still he didn’t want to hang up. It would be like cutting off the last thread connecting him to the normal, orderly world.

But he couldn’t stand forever there like a pillar with a receiver in his hand, especially when he was being irritatingly watched by police and the religious guard who had fled into the mosque. He could see himself in their eyes now as in a mirror. Putting down the receiver without a word, turned on the heels of his house slippers and left the receiving area.

Finding himself in his office, the *imam* sank wearily onto a couch. The soft leather pillow yielded pleasantly, receiving his heavy body in its embrace. How much concern for his comfort had been invested in the decoration of this room! How hard the women had worked, arguing with the designers, negotiating with the workers and the suppliers! Who could have guessed that these prestigious apartments in the very center of the city could become as lethal as a mousetrap, once the bridges were closed?

How he had fought to come here from the old mosque! How much effort he had invested—so he could find himself in this terrible position today. If everything ended well, he would find a way of showing that he remembered! But would it end well?

Mosvar Ali crossed to the women’s half. On his way he saw his third wife, Hatidza, who was playing on the carpet with one-year-old Aslanbek. When she saw her husband, her expression, which generally looked frightened when she was in public, took on the withering look she usually favored him with. It got on Mosvar Ali’s nerves, even on a much better day than today. With his wife, the *imam* frequently admitted to himself, he had no luck. Neither satisfaction nor gain. The child she bore, it must be admitted, was large, healthy and even male to boot, but even without Aslanbek, he already had five sons.

Everything he had heard in his youth about the sexual capabilities of Scandinavian women had turned out to be nonsense. What a shame. A man in his youth married for the first and second times in order to secure his position.

Later, he could do something for his personal pleasure. Mosvar Ali wanted not only a fifteen year-old virgin, but a skilled one. The youngest wife always receives the most gifts—isn't she responsible for conscientiously earning them? And ultimately, isn't it in her best interest to satisfy her husband? But this one was a piece of wood in bed. You would think she was about to scream.

Tumbling around his mother-fortress, the boy tripped, but did not hurt himself or cry. He simply continued his journey on all fours.

A strange thought drew the gaze of the *imam* to Aslanbek's small, light-colored head. *We have lived too carelessly, and now we have nothing with which to defend ourselves in time of need. The ancestors would immediately know where to find hostages. The best were little ones like this. Better yet to have several of them, one to kill before the eyes of the kafirs, and the others to trade.*

Aslanbek looked like a kafir child, especially from afar; there was nothing distinguishing him as one of the true faith. What if he ordered the police to tell the kafirs that he had hostages—children from the ghetto—and then he showed them Aslanbek? And demanded that they release the imam and his family? In that case, he would have to leave his son in their hands. How would they react to that? If he were in their place, and someone made a fool of him like that using a hostage, he would certainly crush the child's head against the nearest wall. Or something worse. One could never know these things in advance.

He had to think logically. A sixth son from a wife from a non-influential family. Even if it was necessary to risk his life, it was the same as losing a pawn for a king in a game of chess. Children were the sacred property of their fathers, after all. Was he a coward, afraid to demonstrate his will when necessary? His ancestors would spit in his face for acting like that!

His ancestors... As never before, the thoughts of the imam returned to the past. His family had risen high in the past half-century; after all, they were not descendants of the Prophet, but mere Chechens. And how miserable they had been, among the last associates of Basayev. They rose in status by giving five daughters to a shahidki training camp at the beginning of the century. They weren't paid that much money, but it became the basis for their wealth. Then they found themselves on the right side of the green curtain after the Islamic victory because they had followed their human "capital" by moving to the shahid-controlled area.

There, as relatives of righteous young women, they established ties with Arab families. Yes, they rose high. If it were not for those women martyrs, he, Mosvar Ali, would be sitting in Chechnya now with the renegades who allowed their daughters to work on television and in theaters like whores, and lived among infidels! Or he would be a poor worker here in the Euroislamic countries. His obvious course of action now was to save himself as his family had done...

“Listen to me, you old goat!”

Shocked, the *imam* looked at the woman. Picking up a heavy antique nutcracker, she plucked the child from the carpet with one hand and jumped back from her husband, waving the tool menacingly with the other hand.

“If you so much as get near my child, I’ll kill you! With Allah as my witness, I’ll kill you!”

“You’ve gone mad, woman! Who are you talking to? And how can you say that the child is yours? What do you own here, anyway?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t understand me, you monster!” Hatidza said, as she continued to wave her pathetic weapon. “What were you thinking about while you were looking at my son? What evil act are you planning? I can read your filthy mind like an open book!”

“What are you ranting about, madwoman?” raged Mosvar Ali—caught red-handed and humiliated. “Just you wait! You’ll pay for this as soon as they kill the *kafirs* !”

“Maybe the *kafirs* will kill you first. May Allah bless them if they do!”

Despite the woman’s unprecedented daring, his anger suddenly vanished.

I could, of course I could. If I survive, I will settle accounts with this crazy Danish woman. He could snatch the child from her—not him personally, of course, since she would scratch and bite like a tiger. But his assistants could overpower her. However, that was too excruciating and it would take a long time. And where would he get another child? He couldn’t very well go get it from the ghetto...

Wait, he could! Mosvar Ali smacked himself on the forehead. It was so simple!

He headed back to the office, to the closest telephone. By drawing his attention to his youngest son, Allah had shown him the best possible option! They should send buses to the closest ghetto; they should bring back a hundred—no, several hundred—all the children they found there! They should line them up on the bank around the Cité and start killing them! The

Maquisards had a lot of relatives in the ghettos. They would immediately release the imam and his family and then... It didn't matter what would happen then, as far as he was concerned. He would already be in his house outside the city, in Vieux Moulin on the lakeshore!

Mosvar Ali quickly pressed redial to get the same number he had recently called. The same unpleasant captain picked up the receiver, but that didn't matter.

"Officer! Listen to me carefully!"

"I'm listening. Are there any changes?"

"That's not the point. You have to go quickly, do you hear me, quickly..." The line went dead. The *imam* slammed down the receiver. He had lost his connection when every second was precious!

There was no dial tone.

"Hey, Ibrahim, go and bring my radio telephone right away! I think it's somewhere in my office!"

When the young assistant returned with the unit in his hand, he looked frightened.

"Apparently the connections have been cut, sir. The *Maquisards* ..."

"Cattle! Children of the devil! Somebody give me your cell phone. That's not such a hard thing to think of, is it?"

"We're just the City police, esteemed sir," replied a young man in uniform shyly. "We only have one phone for five men; it's not a cheap device."

"So what?" Precious seconds were melting like ice cream in the sun. "There are more than fifteen of you here right now."

"That's correct, sir, but none of us has a cell phone."

Mosvar Ali noted that the policeman was looking at him with something like insufficient respect. They were driving him crazy!

"Ibrahim, go find my cell phone; it's also in the office. Hurry!"

"Sir, you ordered me to take it for repairs yesterday and I did. They didn't have a part they needed, so they kept it. They promised to bring it back today before nine."

Imam Mosvar Ali got down heavily on the floor. Covering his face with his hands, he began to whine.

* * *

The rebel headquarters was located in the Europol building. Brisseville had brought two young men, Malezieux and Garaud, to delete all the information

from the computers. This was not strictly necessary, but no one objected. “What’s good for the Russian is death for the German,” nodded Sophia Sevazmios approvingly. In her hand she held neither a cigarette nor a pistol but just an ordinary paper cup with tea. This looked almost unnatural.

“Hello, Larochejaquelein speaking!” Henri lifted the receiver. “Yes, Laval, what’s new?”

Pierre Laval was heading the group evacuating the largest ghetto—*Panthéon*.

“Things couldn’t be better on this side; there are only five of their men left in the whole ghetto! The people know what’s happening; so far we’ve lowered more than four hundred people underground. The only problem is that the women are carrying a lot of souvenirs—photographs, books, their great-grandmother’s dishes. It’s understandable, but...”

The “but” is yet to come, thought Larochejaquelein: temporarily placing more than ten thousand people underground and then evacuating them out of Paris in small groups. But this was good, it was very good.

“How are things in *Austerlitz*?”

“Apparently, everything there is going well, too. All right, I’m hanging up. This line is protected, but still... Goodbye!”

“It’s ten after nine,” said Father Lothaire. “Sophie, how much time do we need to plant the explosives?”

“If we have five people working, we can do it in an hour. But we’ll need more than two hours to get the Saracens out. They’re firmly lodged, the sons of bitches.”

“And we’ll need at least an hour to determine the condition of the altar for consecration...”

“We still don’t have a reason for concern.” Sophia stood up suddenly and lifted the window sash up to the matte opaque glass: A young chestnut seemed bent over, under the burden of its hot pink flowers. “So far, we haven’t lost anyone. In normal times, we’ve had far worse days. We can hold the island for a maximum of twenty-four hours, but they don’t know that. We have to make them think that’s our minimum. What do you say, Henri?”

“I think that anyone trying to take the church will have a hard time. They’ve sealed up the windows with whatever they could find, they’re not easy to open, and outside the walls, it’s all empty space—you could play football there. They cut down the trees and planted their stupid flowers. Many people will be killed, but who could have predicted that we didn’t really need to occupy the

Palace of Justice and Europol first—just take the church!”

“So are we going to tear our hair out because of that? Do we all agree that we’ll take it before morning with minimal losses?”

“There will certainly be losses, even if they are small.” Larochejaquelein said, knitting his brow. “And I don’t like the fact that one of those pigs, the one on the roof, has a sniper rifle.”

And what kind of sniper rifle is it?” Brisseville coughed seriously.

“I can’t guarantee it,” said Larochejaquelein, “But I think they have an SB-04 sniper rifle with infrared. An excellent weapon, produced in Russia in the 2010’s. But what’s a *flique* doing with a weapon like that?”

“It doesn’t have to be a policeman,” Sophia said. “And we could kill everyone who headed from Europol toward the church. But there’s no reason to doubt that 10 or 20 well-armed men are hiding in the Cité, and that we don’t know where they are because they won’t reveal their positions before attacking us.”

“That’s so simple,” said Brisseville, continuing to cough, spitting blood into his handkerchief.

“But all right,” said Sophie. “So what if they have a sniper rifle with infrared? Nighttime losses cannot be compared with daytime ones. Would you like some tea then, your reverence?”

“Thank you, Sophie,” said Father Lothaire, laughing.

“Even though it smells like fish cured in kerosene,” added Larochejaquelein.

Sophia took out another cup and began to pour tea prepared in an electric teapot. “This is real Lapsang Souchong; I found half a bag in a pocket.”

Father Lothaire, accepted a cup with satisfaction. “Lévêque, tell Bertaud we’re going to liberate the church at night.”

“Yes, your reverence.”

Eugène-Olivier left with a load of sleeping bags.

* * *

“So, we are going to work on our tans until this evening,” said Roger Bertaud, opening a pineapple juice. “With cold drinks, like on the Cote d’Azur. The only thing I’d like to know is what’s going to happen first. Are we going to attack the church—or are they going to attack the Cité? In any case, we have nothing to do. We can pull our rocking chairs over here.”

“Not here.” Eugène-Olivier couldn’t get the image of a sniper with a night

scope out of his head. “That creep is somewhere above. Do you know where?”

“Somewhere in the gallery in the middle, just over the rose window.”

They could move along the walls from the apsid, but would the creep see them when they got to the door? Eugène-Olivier wished he knew. They didn’t dare get close to the stone, either; they’d have to break down the door and someone could get hurt. What could he think of to get rid of him?

He hadn’t seen Notre Dame close-up for a long time: two towers rising to the Heavens; the circle of the gigantic rosette; three doors with the painted-over traces of destroyed images. He even remembered their names: The one on the left was the Portal of the Virgin; the one in the center was the Portal of the Final Judgment; and on the right, the Portal of St. Anne. There was no one he could ask why the doors had names, and why those names and not others. But wait. Of course he did. Father Lothaire!

Endure a little longer, Notre Dame; there is the intolerable suffering of long illness, as the ancients would say, but afterward it will be simple and easy; death will come to set you free.

“Oh, look, Lévêque, look up!” Roger shouted, crouching down on his knees. “The hero is Larochejaquelein, the great conductor! It’s all happening as he predicted. It’s as if they were reading from his score!”

In the cloudless sky, helicopters circled like dragonflies, still very small, but growing rapidly.

“Air attack!” Roger explained as they hid behind a parapet outside Notre Dame. “The creeps are flying in!”

* * *

“Air attack!” Ibrahim shouted as he ran into the small office within Notre Dame where Mosvar Ali was hiding. “We have military helicopters coming our way! The air attack is about to begin.”

“What?” Mosvar Ali jumped up in his couch. “How do you know it’s an air attack, you fool? What if they start bombing directly on top of us! How do you know, tell me!”

“That’s what the officer said!” said Ibrahim. “There’ll be an air attack!”

Finally, they were doing something! They could have thought of it earlier. Thank Allah, now all he needed to do was sit here, closed in and safe, for an hour or two more—in short, until they kill all the *Maquisards*. Mosvar Ali breathed in with relief. Apparently he had lost at least 10 pounds today, even though he hadn’t been to the sauna.

Maurice Loder took a Stinger out of the crate, while Paul Guermi waited his turn. Slobodan, who didn't think he was needed at headquarters right away, casually stepped up next, as if he'd been on active duty for the past ten years.

An enormous dragonfly in the sky with a black and green belly jumped like a frog. The next moment, it wasn't there. It disappeared from the air. It was even difficult to tie the disappearance of the gigantic insect with the modest explosion that followed.

"What's the matter, creeps, you didn't think we'd be packing heat?" whispered Jeanne happily. The helicopters disintegrated as if a vortex had been created, drawing their parts down into the water around La Cité.

"I hope the shrapnel won't harm anyone," said Father Lothaire to himself.

"There will be another Time Out," said Brisseville ironically to Larochejaquelein. "Even if they've prepared an attack, now they'll think again. They'll decide they need some better toys."

CHAPTER 16

THE LULL

“Little Valerie was right to be angry with us,” said Father Lothaire, walking in his black cassock with Sophia and de Lescure among the young chestnuts that shone with their pink candles. “It took us too long to resolve a dilemma where the answer, to a child’s mind, was obvious. If you can’t defend holy shrines, it’s better to destroy them than leave them to be defiled by others.”

“We’ve been fools, it’s true,” said Sophia with a laugh.

“Well, Sophie, are you in the mood to walk a bit through the Cité with Monsieur de Lescure and me?” asked Father Lothaire. “We’d like to talk to you about something. If you remember, I said from the first I would have some conditions.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“The problem is that Notre Dame is too big and too sacred a holy shrine.”

“You’re stating the obvious.” Sophia’s voice became cautious.

“It’s for a reason.”

“Father, I have this stupid sense of foreboding...”

“We have to destroy Notre Dame.”

Everyone had known what he was going to say, but they all fell silent.

Finally, Sophia said, “And now you’re going to say that if Notre Dame is destroyed, you won’t be able to go on living?”

Then she turned her head away.

“Of course I’ll be able to...” began Father Lothaire. “Don’t ascribe such nonsense to me. St. Peter betrayed the Savior three times, he renounced him thrice—and he went on living! Notre Dame is not the Savior. It’s only one of thousands of beautiful expressions of His teaching in our sinful world. Can I compare my burden with the burden of the Apostles?”

“What’s your point then, your reverence?... You don’t want to leave the church, is that it?”

“That’s right.” Father Lothaire hung his head like a stubborn child.

“How pointless! You are contradicting yourself.”

“Yes, Sophie. I understood immediately, before you even described your proposal, that it was worth taking back the cathedral for a single liturgy. But I immediately felt something else. Knowing that the church will blow, I won’t be able to leave it. I simply won’t be able to. My feet won’t obey me. God will grant that I succeed in serving the liturgy. That the people who hear the Mass will leave the Cité through underground corridors. But I will stay and pray. I

will pray until the end.”

“You’re a Christian! Suicide is forbidden for you!” retorted Sophia.

“Perhaps I’m wrong. Perhaps my will is too weak. But I hope the Lord will not consider my remaining to pray in a church about to be destroyed as a suicide. God is merciful toward our weaknesses—perhaps He will not give me the opportunity to leave.

“If I am condemning my soul to hell because of sentimental weakness, it is my error and I will suffer for it. Sophia, there are more beautiful cathedrals than Notre Dame in France. It is massive. It is obsessed with the legacy of the Romanesque, but without the rough simplicity. The cathedral in Reims is even uglier. But it is in these two churches that one feels this nation breathe, this nation that was once the favorite daughter of the Church. Sophia, Notre Dame cannot be abandoned in its time of trouble. If I can’t help the church, then at least I can stay with it to the end.”

“And a soldier does not abandon his officer,” said de Lescure quietly. Sophia understood that he was continuing his dispute with Father Lothaire—de Lescure was determined to stay as well. “The place of the altar server is next to the priest, to the end. The soul of our nation has always been feudal. There are many things I cannot do because I am too old. But this, I can do.”

“It would seem I’m the youngest one here,” said Sophia with a laugh. “Father, I will be responsible for the explosion. So tell me, is it a sin to blow up Notre Dame?”

“It both is, and is not.”

“If it’s not a sin, then there’s no problem. But if it is a sin, it must be a big one, right? Too big a sin to put on the back of a young man like Lévêque who still needs to live. I will plant the explosives. I’ll only take a few assistants with me for the physical part. All the moral responsibility will fall on me.

“By the way, gentlemen, I notice that you’ve resolved the moral questions for yourselves in the best possible way—and that you’re leaving me to fend for myself with your God. How gallant! Father Lothaire, everything you are saying about not leaving the church to die alone is equally valid for me. Perhaps even more valid than for you.”

“Sophia, has anyone ever told you that you are a monster?” Father Lothaire asked.

“Yes, the subject has come up... Father, you know what?” Sophia’s eyes flashed and Father Lothaire was surprised to notice that they looked black. “Won’t you be neglecting your sacred duty if you stay? You should fear God. I

see a boy of thirty in front of me.”

“Thirty-three, if you don’t mind.”

“ *Pffft* . I was born before the Internet. In comparison with you, I am as old as Troy! Monsieur de Lescure, are you and I wrong for expecting youth to live?”

The book dealer laughed with a weak, old-man’s laugh. “No, Madame Sevazmios, but my quibble is not related to the trifling number of years Father has lived. It’s that his flock will be left without its shepherd.”

“Thank God, I am not the only priest in France!” Father Lothaire replied.

“My friends, each of us just wants to convince the others.” De Lescure said, smiling a smile that could be called “thin” because of his age.

In fact, thought Sophia, the smile of an old man is thin because his lips have grown thinner. For both of us, the defects of age have transformed into signs of wisdom. But there is insight indeed, hiding behind those blue eyes, under the gray, bushy eyebrows.

“Let’s put the extra cards back in our sleeves,” said de Lescure. “You are a little girl, Sophia. The Internet! I was born when every computer took up a whole room. Let’s allow everyone to do as his conscience dictates. For our Father Lothaire, there is something like a captain’s debt to his ship; for me, an altar server’s debt to an officer-priest. And you, Sophia—please don’t be angry, but since the beginning of this story, you have played the archetypal role of Death. Death cannot live; it wouldn’t be logical.”

Sophie laughed. “The advantage of our many years is that we managed to read all the books we wanted to before they were destroyed... Look, Monsieur Lescure, at how our dear Father Lothaire is conflicted! He grew up when the Muslims usurped the image of death. ‘You love life,’ they said, ‘and we love death.’ That was a lie, too. They don’t love death—they only love the absence of life: Lifelessness, dissolution, rottenness. But I remember the generation of my parents, who used to say, ‘He who loves life, considers death to be another good; while he who doesn’t love life is afraid of death.’ A Christian should not fear death—is that not so, your sad reverence?”

“No, Sophie, he should not.” By his changing expressions and quick-moving eyes, they could see that Father Lothaire was thinking quickly. “All right then. I agree with Monsieur Lescure with respect to you, Sophie. But again I have a condition... or a wish. I remember very well that you are Orthodox, rather than Catholic. But *in extremis* I can administer Communion to person in your sad spiritual state. Our churches do not contradict each other

with respect to the Real Presence and Apostolic succession. What is your decision?"

"I will receive Communion at that Mass. And I'll confess my sins beforehand, although my entire confession, as in that novel by your classic writer, can be reduced to three words."

Quatre-vingt treize by Victor Hugo, thought de Lescure. It's a profane novel, but the scene is not bad at all. How did it go?

"Let each of you repent aloud for your sins," said Grand-Francoeur. "Gentlemen, speak."

The Marquis replied, "I have killed."

"I have killed," repeated Hoisnard.

"I have killed," said Guinoiseau.

"I have killed," said Brin d'Amour.

"I have killed," said Chatenay.

"I have killed," said Imânus.

Grand-Francoeur made the sign of the cross with the crucifix before them and said, "In the name of the Holy Trinity, I absolve you of your sins. May your souls go in peace."

"Amen!" replied six voices in unison.

The Marquis stood up. "And now it is time to die," said he.

"And to kill," added Imânus.

My memory is rather good, mused de Lescure. But why talk about books at this point? Like some third-generation Roman born in Gaul, I am digging through literary scrolls in a villa with heated mosaic floors where the water pipes are murmuring—as the filthy Franks with their axes are attacking all around me. This is not the first time our world has become barbaric, and it is perhaps not the moment for old poetry. We must carefully follow how the new epoch is coming to life around us.

"You've flown away to distant empires, Monsieur de Lescure," said Father Lothaire, smiling. De Lescure slowly nodded to his companions.

* * *

The sniper was in a well-protected position, Eugène-Olivier observed. He was obviously too good not to have thought this through. But there was plenty of time. On the opposite bank of the Seine there was not enough room for a needle to fall between all the blue uniforms. The air rumbled with the sound of heavy equipment. Yet the Muslims seemed in no hurry to attack again.

“We’ve gained time,” said Jeanne. “Listen, have you seen Valerie?”

“No. Did it occur to you that this may be the last time we see Paris by the light of day?”

“If that’s God’s will.”

“That’s not what I mean,” replied Eugène-Olivier impatiently. “Everything is changing. The people are leaving the ghetto, thank God, and the underground can’t survive without the ghetto. Tomorrow morning, if we’re still alive, we’ll be in the catacombs. We may have to live for a month or two without seeing the light of day. Then we’ll move to the Vendée forest, but they’ll start to persecute the peasants there, too. The forest cities are large. They’ve existed since the time of the Whites, who did not entirely dig them out themselves. Nevertheless, it’s just a pause on the road to Euroislam.

“Yes,” Jeanne clenched her small fists, “It’s the Exodus.”

“The what?”

“Oh, how illiterate you are!”

“Wait, that’s from the Bible?”

“Yes. Exodus. In this case, it’s not simply leaving slavery, but our native land.”

“Maybe we’ll come back one day. Riding on tanks.” Eugène-Olivier really wanted to console Jeanne, and apparently he had found the right words. The girl’s face became radiant.

“Russian tanks?” she then asked, with some doubt.

“Sophia Sevazmios is Russian,” Eugène-Olivier reminded her.

“Then I think we’ll get along with them. I don’t like the fact that no one seems to have seen Valerie. I’m going to look for her.”

That was Jeanne. A moment ago she was here, now she was gone. Eugène-Olivier squinted, looking for the shadow of the man hiding up in the gallery—the creep with the hot sniper rifle. If he came out on the roof, they’d have no problem taking him out. He wouldn’t even see us.

Father Lothaire and de Lescure were sitting on a bench in front of the Conciergerie. The old bookseller was praying with an old rosary strung with white porcelain pearls. The priest merely watched the determined Paris sparrows picking at a piece of roll lying in the path.

“I’ve already started worrying: A day has only twenty-four hours,” said de Lescure, kissing the cross and placing the rosary in his pocket. “Do you remember how many faithful came to Confession last night? Nevertheless, everyone managed to confess.”

“Everyone,” Father Lothaire’s gaze did not leave the multicolored path, “except one whom I can hardly help.”

“That’s true, you cannot. Everything is happening too quickly, like an old video recording being played too fast. I understand how difficult it is for you, Lothaire. But perhaps you can tell me what burdens your soul? I cannot forgive your sins, but perhaps your soul will be more at peace.”

“You are a very good man. But on the last day of my life—in any case, I hope it will be the last, because I don’t want to risk committing another unpardonable sin—to transfer my own difficult thoughts onto the back of someone close to me... it seems unkind.”

“Your reverence, look how many absurdities you’ve managed to utter in a single sentence! For years, you have kept in your heart the bitterest secrets of all the faithful in our parish. Why shouldn’t one of us carry a small part of your burden?”

As before, Father Lothaire did not look at de Lescure, but directly in front of him, although the sparrows had left long ago after eating the last crumb. Inseparable from the uniform of his profession, he seemed soldier-like.

It seemed so long ago, thought Eugène-Olivier, when he was entrusted with the visit to Ahmad ibn Salih (actually Knezhevich). He was chosen, not only for his computer knowledge, but for his climbing skills. These old stones could also be climbed. It was better from the east, since the creep was lodged in the gallery.

It was almost like jumping into cold water as a child—except in this case, it was best not to close one’s eyes. Eugène-Olivier drew near, hiding behind the last bush and preparing to jump out into the clear space.

They’ve taken out the trees and statues—the whole east side is a lawn with flowers, as if they had spread one of their stupid rugs in place of the trees. The real masters of Paris, the kings, were not afraid of the people or the narrow streets. Bonaparte was the first to begin clearing large spaces so that no assassin could stalk him. The Muslims continued what he began. They can only copy what someone else has already done.

Leaving history aside, here was a question for the present: whether to remove the running shoes. It would be easier to climb without them. But he couldn’t hang them around his neck; he would have to throw them away. And then walk around barefoot until morning? Never mind, whatever happens, happens. Here we go!

Eugène-Olivier zigzagged, stopped, ran again. Bullets began bouncing off

the cobblestones. Thank God they weren't bursts from a machine gun! After all, policemen didn't walk around town carrying machine guns! He had to climb to the diagonal arch. *Lord, don't let them guess where I'm heading!*

The military forces were getting prepared. Not the police and not the Interior Army, but the real army. An enormous force against a handful of *Maquisards*, thought Kasim listlessly. The order to attack still hadn't come.

Excellent, a thick column hid him. And they weren't looking down, so they couldn't discern his goal. Eugène-Olivier climbed as if he were strolling across a stone bridge. He had only one wish: to stand on his feet and walk where he could, and for things to go normally. But that was wishful thinking. Climbing up was always much easier than going down. In any case, he wouldn't have to go down the same way. Oh, how far below the cobblestones looked!

* * *

His feet were terribly swollen. Carefully lowering his rifle, Wali Farad stood up to stretch his legs. It was insulting that he had nothing to do right now, and even worse that he had missed the Maquisard when he saw him.

Now they were not climbing, they were waiting for night. But it didn't matter—they couldn't know about his special sniper rifle. It would be a lot of fun. His colleagues had laughed at him when he asked his father to give him an SB-04 for his eighteenth birthday. What was a young policeman going to do with an expensive rifle with an infrared sight? He didn't even have the right to patrol with it. But he kept it in his office. So who had been right? It was coming in very handy now!

Wali Farad's childishly plump face wore a happy expression. A satisfied smile slid across his lips. He had the beginnings of a moustache that still could not seriously be shaved. He accepted the categorical plans of his father: no work in the ghetto, no work on uncovering *Maquisards* until he completed the appropriate education. To get the necessary training, he had to spend a year as an ordinary patrolman.

However, Wali Farad's plans were far greater than fighting the *Maquisards* in France. He dreamed of fighting in the *Dar-al-Harb* —the *ghazwa* had not been stopped forever, had it? Imagine, a bomb! That meant getting the bomb from the infidels and then waging war and waging war...

Ever since he could remember, Wali Farad had longed to fight the infidels. When he was thirteen he formed a small "brigade" with his friends. The boys

tested their innovation in the Austerlitz ghetto. They only managed to pull it off five times, but what a good time they had!

It was Wali Falid's idea: Late at night they would besiege someone's house and start to grunt in front of the doors and windows. That was normal—weren't *kafirs* pigs? Then they would break into the house. They prepared for this in advance—taking into account what was forbidden and what was not. Their satisfaction was their priority; the *kafirs* had no right to live in this world anyway! They broke all the dishes, tore the linens, abused the women—mostly their peers, since they were a little afraid of the older ones. But ripping a pajama off a girl who was screaming and scratching was a real pleasure. They didn't have the courage to rape them, so they hid their fear with jokes.

The adult *kafirs* would catch them by the arms, push them, and threaten them but there were no open fights. Everyone knew that they weren't going to kill or rape anyone, but it was nevertheless a great pleasure to run around a *kafir* house with everyone screaming and running away.

Their game was quickly discovered and their parents interrogated them. Wali Fahid understood that his father had placed great hopes in him and that he feared that the *kafirs* might kill him.

He took out a chocolate bar he found in his pocket.

Thank you, honorable builders, dear masons, for sparing neither time nor effort to decorate the church with stone ornaments—each one a precious hand- or foothold. It was too horrible to contemplate what would have resulted had you been dyed-in-the-wool Classicists!

Twice, Eugène-Olivier almost took a tumble, but he didn't have time to become frightened. The first time, he found something to stand on; the second, something to grab onto. It was not for nothing that he had been conquering suburban ruins since childhood.

The palms of his hands were scraped, leaving bloody marks on the stones. It was good that he hadn't removed his shoes after all—it would be horrible if his feet were now in the same condition as his hands.

There were few people who would have dared climb on the roof of the church today... I'll brag about it later.

Brisseville put down his binoculars. Even without them, it was obvious that something serious was occurring on the other side of the barricade. They had brought heavy equipment for clearing wrecks: bulldozers, excavators. But that had been expected. A fire truck—smart. Although it was unlikely to help.

"Any minute now," said an unknown young man who was lying next to

Jeanne, watching spellbound as the bulldozers approached the front lines.

“Nice day,” she said with a smile. “But why are we saving our bullets?”

The bulldozer was leaning lightly on the barricade of overturned automobiles. Jeanne could see the face of the black man in the clear cabin. His eyes and face were full of fear. They probably didn’t make bulldozers with bulletproof glass.

The gigantic shovel pushed the overturned Citroën that lay with its wheels in the air.

Jeanne had time to open her mouth halfway, as the car seemed to hop into the air. Then she heard the explosion. And another. The mines went off, one after the other. They had been invisibly set in a line that stretched across the far side of the barricade. Next, the cars’ gas tanks caught fire.

Behind the wall of flame, one could no longer see the damage, but judging from the noise, the grating, the whooping and wild cries—it was wonderful.

Only a few seconds later, the same thing occurred on the other bank of the Seine—except that Jeanne could not hear it as well. And then on the west side, too.

“Great, that was really great!” Jeanne found herself laughing through tears of joy. “Can you believe that they all had orders to attack at the same time?”

“By the way, my name is Arthur,” the young man extended his hand.

“Jeanne.”

“Are there any injured among you?” This time, the black woman Michelle had a light-pink silk dress with a silver, maple-leaf motif. It didn’t really go with the enormous medical bag she was carrying on her shoulder.

“We’re all in one piece for now,” answered Jeanne. “Listen, maybe you could put on some decent clothes. I want to cry when I look at you hobbling around in those heels!”

“But what if I die today for Our Lord Jesus Christ?” Michelle asked brightly.

“What does that have to do with it?”

“On a holiday like that, one should wear one’s nicest clothes.”

“Is that why you were always so beautifully dressed in the ghetto?” asked Jeanne.

“In the ghetto, that holiday can occur any day. All right, I’m going on. May Our Lady keep you close!”

Jeanne could only admit to herself that she was still a long way away from such joy.

“So what if they have a few Stingers—but where did they get the mines? Machine guns, sniper rifles, those can be explained! What else do they have, what and from where?”

The general’s voice over the radio sounded like a bird of prey in a cage.

“I don’t believe the gear is from Russia,” answered Kasim wearily. “And I suggest that now is probably not the right time to initiate a court proceeding, *mon générale* —but my theory is that somewhere, a depot is much poorer today.”

“The situation of the depots is currently being checked. We have to know what else the *kafirs* have to welcome us with. What happened with *imam* Mosv Ali? He didn’t call back?”

“No, *mon générale* .”

“Good.” The general calmed down a little. “There will be a lot of commotion, but I have no intention of sacrificing a mountain of soldiers to save him.”

Kasim coughed. The general was not only a Frenchman, but a fourth-generation Parisian from a rich family. He would never have allowed himself this remark if he’d been speaking with an Arab.

“Do we have many casualties?”

“It’s difficult to calculate right now. We certainly have some losses in equipment and men.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“To withdraw to a safe distance. The engineering units are planning how to remove the barricades without losses. It’s dangerous to send in deminers, since they’d have to work under rifle fire. The sooner all the barricades explode, the sooner they’ll all burn to the ground. That will give the *Maquisards* just a few more hours.”

* * *

“We’ll get a few more hours,” said Larochejaquelein to Sophia. “That’s good. In our situation, it’s sufficient... Sophie, I’ve heard a very silly rumor—”

“We’re not going to discuss that, Henri. We have other things to do right now. What kind of regiment have they sent? It’s 50 percent bigger than we calculated. We’re going to take heavy losses in front as soon as the barricades finish burning.”

When the fireworks broke out below, Eugène-Olivier was sitting against a stone lattice, trying to figure out if he had seriously injured his wrist. The first

phase had begun and the attack was not far off. He had to hurry. The wound was nothing, his hand was working normally. It was just a little pain.

The stench of burning tires overcame the pleasant scent of the trees and the damp air from the river. In the air, greasy particles of soot hung densely, like incense at the devil's wedding. They dirtied the pink flowers of the chestnuts and the pink dress of Michelle, who was bending over someone sitting on the cobblestones.

* * *

The closer he got to the gallery, the more slowly Eugène-Olivier moved. Now he no longer feared that he would fall; but he was very afraid that he would be noisy. Quietly, more quietly, even more slowly.

Luckily, the policeman was snoozing as he sat on the floor of the gallery. The rifle stood beside him. Eugène-Olivier crawled, trying not to breathe. He bent over. He extended his hand, very carefully grabbing the end of the barrel. Now he needed to pull, to pull straight up, like a cat pulling a fish out of an aquarium. A little bit more and he would be able to grasp it more firmly in his other hand. The rifle was too heavy to pull up with just the ends of his fingers.

"Ah!" he cried silently. A sharp pain in his right wrist did not make him release his booty, but the butt made a noise of betrayal on the stone.

"A-a-ah!" The young policeman, blurry-eyed from sleep, jumped up and pulled on the butt with all his strength. Knowing he couldn't hold onto the contested weapon, Eugène-Olivier followed it into the gallery—falling directly on top of the policeman.

The rifle fell on the floor, useless to both. The pistol in Eugène-Olivier's holster was also useless, and the policeman couldn't reach his own gun. They gripped each other, rolling and choking each other against the stone.

"*Kafir*, pig, livestock!" hissed the policeman.

Eugène-Olivier fought silently. His knowledge was far more professional and he had no intention of wasting his breath.

The young man was strong, well built, well fed, and at least 20 pounds heavier than Eugène-Olivier. He understood his advantage.

"I'll choke you, dirty *kafir*! I won't waste a cartridge on you. I'll cut your throat myself! You'll smile for me from ear to ear!" He was obviously irritated that Eugène-Olivier was not answering.

Slowly, barely perceptibly, Eugène-Olivier began to push his own forehead toward his chest, digging his chin into the vulnerable backs of the hands

squeezing at his throat. He pressed down even more—and then suddenly raised his head into the Muslim's face.

The blow to the chin was not that powerful, but for a moment the body of the policeman was paralyzed with pain, and his muscles relaxed a little. Eugène-Olivier reached down and grabbed the Muslim around the knees. Holding the upper legs together with all his strength, he drove himself to a standing position and pivoted toward the balustrade, swinging the head and shoulders toward the top edge and starting to shove the rest of the body after it...

“NO!” The policeman's head was already hanging in empty space, and he desperately tried to scramble and pitch his weight back over the balustrade. “My father will boil you alive, he'll impale you on a stick, you don't know, you animal, who my father is...”

Eugène-Olivier straightened his own legs with a grunt as he shoved the Muslim's hips up over the edge with all his strength.

The body slipped away so suddenly that Eugène-Olivier's momentum slammed him with a jolt against the balustrade.

The policeman's scream echoed in the emptiness. The body turned during the fall and looked strangely wooden, as if already dead.

Sparks jumped in front of Eugène-Olivier's eyes and his temples pounded wildly. On the floor was a small, expensive cell phone that *imam* Mosvar Ali didn't know about. It was ringing.

The devil take it, let it ring.

But he needed to know whether the people below understood what had just happened here. *Maybe they saw.* Eugène-Olivier answered the phone after all.

“Hello?”

“Wali Farad? Is everything alright there? Hey, who is this? Is everything all right in the mosque? Call my son! Call my son!”

“He can't come right now. He's busy.”

Eugène-Olivier turned off the phone and looked down. Wali Farad was no longer busy. His arms and legs spread, he lay motionless on the cobblestones and looked very small.

Black clouds of smoke were rising into the air from all the bridges now. The peaceful, silver water of the Seine glistened. In the old days, a bell used to hang here. An enormous bell. But even without the bell, it was wonderful to look out on the endless row of roofs. How high you are, Notre Dame. The wind tousled his hair. Here, up above, one could breathe with full lungs.

Eugène-Olivier carefully picked up the rifle. A superb weapon. He finally had time to examine it. The attack on Notre Dame would not begin before twilight. That meant he had to sit here for a few more hours. At twilight he would descend down the same circular staircase he had heard about in his childhood. And then he would open the door of the Portal of Judgment Day for his people. He could, of course, open any of them. But he had already decided to open that one. Because Judgment Day had, in a sense, already begun.

CHAPTER 17

AN ATTACK WITHIN AN ATTACK

Fire was still licking at the blackened remains of the automobiles, but the smoke screen was less dense. After a few hours, they could see through it, and saw the army troops preparing their attack. They could see endless Kalashnikovs and helmets glittering in the sun.

“And we don’t even have bulletproof vests,” thought Larochejaquelein bitterly. In the military depot, there were towelettes moistened with cologne, but no bulletproof vests.

“Now they’re going to swarm us,” said Sophia. “Everyone here is smart; everyone understands who we need to take out first?”

“The officers,” quickly answered a young man.

“That’s right. Without commanders, an army turns into cattle... All right. Henri, I’m relinquishing command to you, although I’ll stay for a while to shoot like an ordinary soldier. In an hour, darkness will set in. We need to prepare to eject the police from Notre Dame.”

Larochejaquelein silently nodded before he peered through the riflescope. The first shot was heard. The first shot is always the pebble that launches an avalanche. The avalanche began.

* * *

Abdullah did everything he could to push his way into the back rows, behind the bodies of the others. Only a few weeks ago he could not have imagined what his recently arranged life would turn into! Today, there was no philanthropist who could snatch him from the masses rushing head-on into machine gun fire!

“Charge, advance forward!” came the order. But to the left, Abdullah saw the open door of the strafed cabin of the excavator. It looked like the skull of a whale or a walrus. No one would peer in there now!

Looking left and right, he slipped into the cabin at just the right moment. Swearing and panting, the next soldier ran by him, jumping onto the asphalt in Abdullah’s place, while Abdullah waited in the cabin.

New attackers tripped over the bodies of those who had been killed. The greatest crowd of them was around the barricade, which was burning out.

Should I send in an excavator and push away the barricade? Kasim asked himself. A lot of men would die until they conquered it. But somehow he was

reluctant to issue the order.

* * *

Thank God we have so much ammunition, thought Larochejaquelein. But why are there so many of them? Did they call out the army from all over France?

There were now wounded. The women dragged them into the catacombs and administered first aid.

Michelle was hurrying, sniffing as she walked and wiping her tears with the palm of her hand. The fingers of both her hands were swollen, and they hurt. For more than an hour, she had tended Philippe André Brisseville, whose lungs could not endure the smoke and the soot. How he had suffered, poor Monsieur Brisseville! Until he exhaled his last, unimaginably difficult breath—which turned his lips purple and made the engorged veins in his forehead go black—she had held his clenched hands in her own.

Michelle herself did not suffer for an instant. Her heels seemed to catch on something. She fell to her knees and then onto her back.

Fourteen year-old Arthur leaped to help her. “Perhaps there is something in her bag,” he said tersely to Jeanne as he searched it. “Do you know anything about medicine?”

“There’s nothing for me to know.” Jeanne carefully leaned Michelle’s curly head on the root of a plane tree. “Don’t worry about her. For her, it’s a feast day.”

The army’s first attack had failed. The *Maquisards* were already shooting at backs. None of the Muslim officers had survived.

“We’ve gained a few more hours.” Larochejaquelein wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand, which made him look like a Mardi Gras dancer.

“Saintville-piglet, stop throwing the reflection from your mirror my way, it’s better that you screw it in where it belongs. That’s where it’s needed. You know what, Maurice—send someone to bring cans of dog food from the depot. It wouldn’t be bad to line them up on that burning steel.”

“All right, Larochejaquelein,” said Maurice. Translating the order, he called, “Arthur, bring more mines from the depot, about five crates.”

Looking after the young man as he was leaving, Maurice decided not to lose time. It was difficult to plant mines on the black skeletons of the automobiles. Every wire was visible. He had to find a better place.

Maurice took his Kalashnikov just in case and headed across the barrier of

sandbags. Here on the bridge, all the dead were Muslim.

Approaching the new pile of destroyed metal, Maurice strained to hear. There was some noise from inside, blue material moving in the depths. Someone was trying to get out, obviously, toward the riverbank.

“Listen!” Maurice said in *lingua franca*. “Now you’re going to come out, but not on that side. On *this* side. And don’t try to make a single move I won’t like. From in there, you can’t see me, but I can turn you into a pulp.”

Abdullah came out slowly, very slowly, trying to put off the inevitable. He was afraid the *Maquisard* would trick him. Finally, his boots touched the asphalt, and his secure shelter was behind him.

Maurice had to turn him over to command headquarters for interrogation, although he would have liked to simply shoot him. In the old days, if he remembered correctly, this prisoner would be called a “squealer.” A necessary thing.

“M-M-Maurice!” The voice of the “squealer” trembled sadly, then joyfully.

Loder’s face turned gray in a split second. Trembling with his whole body, he stared at his prisoner.

“I was a driver, Maurice,” explained Abdullah gladly. “A driver! And then suddenly they pushed me into the army, and they sent me here. I didn’t want to go. You know me—I never would have chosen something like this myself, Maurice!”

“I know. You value your own skin too much.” Loder’s voice was lifeless. “But your skin will have to pay. They drove our mother to the cemetery when you joined the pigs.”

“But what could I do? She refused, she refused! She refused to accept Islam! Maurice, you can’t kill me, you’re my brother!”

“There are different kinds of brothers. Did it occur to you that Abel should have killed Cain?”

“Don’t, Maurice. Maurice, don’t! We’re brothers!”

“Brothers...” Maurice’s gray face was terrible, but he spoke slowly and calmly, as if he were thinking through a philosophical problem. “Perhaps Cain and Abel don’t have anything to do with this... I never had a brother named Abdullah. No, we’re not brothers.”

“Don’t kill me!”

“I won’t. If you were my brother, I would kill you. But since you’re not, I won’t. I’ll take you where you need to go. Just don’t be too happy about that. In the end, it’s unlikely that anyone will grant you a reprieve. But it’s better that

things follow their due course. I don't care. Let's go!" Maurice pushed the prisoner with his Kalashnikov.

* * *

With the trophy rifle on his shoulder, Eugène-Olivier descended the winding stone steps into what seemed like an abyss. Grandfather Patrice must have passed here hundreds of times, he thought, a little enviously. And did Grandfather know how to ring the bells? In his place, he could not have resisted learning.

* * *

"They're attacking, they're going to attack us!" In the last few hours, *imam* Mosvar Ali had lost his voice. "They're attacking, the *Maquisards* are attacking, the *kafirs* are attacking! And those children of the devil there, in the headquarters, in our own government, have done nothing yet!"

"But our side is also attacking, most respected Mosvar Ali," a young man from the religious guard dared to correct him. "Do you hear that there is a battle being fought over there?"

"Attacking? They gave up as soon as night began to fall. Since then, there hasn't been a single shot fired! And that's exactly when the *kafirs* turned to attack us!" It was good that the *imam* of the Al Franconi Mosque was not disposed to listen to words of consolation.

* * *

"I'd like to know where that sniper disappeared to, the one with the infrared rifle," exclaimed Paul Guermi cheerfully.

Bullets were bouncing off the cobblestones, and the danger from ricochet was far greater than that of actually being shot. The enemy was shooting blind in the dark.

"What's the matter, are you complaining?"

"Not especially!" Paul didn't even know whom he was answering but it didn't matter.

"I'm going toward the façade alone!" Roger Moulinier pulled a grenade from his pocket. "I'm going to open the door for you in a dignified manner, more dignified than an English butler!"

Roger arrived at the end of the staircase. Now everything depended on just one thing—luck. The latches on the door were old, cast in bronze. The oak panels were so thick that he would have to open the door with an explosion.

Roger Moulinier placed the grenade on the door and dived to the side.

The explosion was felt inside. Mosvar Ali, convulsed on the couch in the guest room, watched with horror as a pile of books being used to block the window toppled over. It seemed that only moments ago, it had served as a shield for a policeman with a rifle. But now there were far fewer rifles and policemen in the mosque than windows.

The books did not fall by themselves. Immediately afterwards a *Maquisard* appeared in the window. He paid no attention to the *imam* ; he turned to pull up the colleague behind him—the man whose shoulders he had been standing on. And look, *Maquisards* were already jumping onto the floor of the residence!

Here and there shots could be heard.

Hearing an explosion, Eugène-Olivier jumped back from the stairs. The door of the Portal of Final Judgment fell toward him.

“Lévêque! How did you get here?” Roger Moulinier was standing in the door.

“Look at this!” Eugène-Olivier showed him the trophy.

“I was wondering where the sniper was!” As Roger pulled up his Kalashnikov, a group of five policemen fled into the side gallery.

Notre Dame filled with *Maquisards*, but things went much more slowly than they should have. There were too many convenient places to hide that were difficult to search. The Muslims hid on the second, “women’s” floor, in the *imam*’s apartment, in the altar section, in the crypt.

It was easiest to deal with those who revealed their position by shooting—those were taken care of in seconds. But in order for the Mass to be successfully held, the whole space had to be combed. Individual screams and shots were heard for a long time, between pauses as long as half an hour.

“It’s the first time I’m standing here freely,” Father Lothaire smiled at Sophia.

“You’re getting ahead of yourself, your reverence. Don’t forget that we have no one who can replace you.”

“The most dangerous thing is when a man knows he’s irreplaceable, while around him, others are risking their lives. Don’t worry about me, Sophie. I think the Lord wants this Mass. If that’s the case, He’ll protect me.”

“You know, they say one should count on God, but keep the powder dry.”

“Protestant hypocrisy—a mask for a lack of faith.”

The conflict finally ended: The *Maquisards* led the last six hold-outs from the inner hallway. They were three men—the *imam* and two young men without

beards—and three women in chadors, one of whom carried a child in her arms.

“We didn’t want to kill these, Sophie. I know your opinion, but perhaps we should make an exception,” said a young *Maquisard* whom Father Lothaire did not know.

“You wouldn’t dare kill me, *kafirs* !” *Imam* Mosvar Ali appeared to have suddenly collected his courage. “I am the *imam* of Al Franconi Mosque...”

“You’re wrong in both respects,” said Sophia, pulling a pistol from her pocket and pressing the barrel to the *imam*’s temple. She held it there a while, watching his confidence fade into horror.

“Who are you talking to, son of a bitch? I’m Sophia Sevazmios. No need to fall to your knees. Although I see they’ve buckled on their own. All right, look, I’m putting away the pistol. You can try standing on your feet again assuming, of course, that you want to. So, son of a bitch, you’ve understood your first mistake. We certainly would dare to kill you. But you made another mistake. You’re not the *imam* of Al Franconi Mosque.”

“Yes, I am the *imam* , the *imam* of Al Franconi Mosque, these are my witnesses! I’m the one! Who would dare to falsely present himself as a man—”

“Shut up and listen.” Sophia raised the pistol. “You’re not the *imam* of Al Franconi Mosque because from this day forward, Al Franconi Mosque no longer exists. You’re just an unemployed *imam* of no consequence.”

“What? But *how*?” The *imam* gaped as if he saw a skeleton dancing in front of him—although he was in fact looking at Father Lothaire in his black cassock.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Sophia. “From this day forward and forever, this is once more the Church of Notre Dame.”

“That’s where you are wrong, woman!” insisted the *imam*. Strangely, Mosvar Ali had grown tired of being afraid at the very moment when he had most to fear. “You’re very wrong! You might stay here for a week or even a month! But all around you is France under *sharia* law! Do you really think they’ll let your hornet’s nest stay here? Really, women have no brains—and those who listen to women, even less!... And this building will again become the Al Franconi Mosque. There is no other way possible!”

“But of course there is.” Sophia pushed her pistol into her pocket. “Notre Dame will never be a mosque again. How we are going to ensure that, it’s too soon for you to know. And that’s why, unless your mind explodes trying to figure it out, it’s not your time to die. We’re letting you go.”

“You’re releasing me?” The *imam* suddenly turned green, swaying on knees

that had again grown weak.

“Yes, you and your whole entourage. You’ll have an escort as far as the barricade and they will release you. You will bring them interesting news. That there will never be a mosque here again. That Holy Mass is being offered here. That the crescent has been defeated. Defeated by the Cross.”

Sophia waved her hand. Three *Maquisards* took the prisoners toward the exit. The *imam* walked with a stagger. On one side he was supported by one of the women, on the other, by one of his sons.

“Go, you’re free!” Eugène-Olivier urged the woman with the child, pointing the way for her to follow the others. She obviously didn’t understand *lingua franca*, or was too frightened to move. “No one will touch you. You can go with the others.”

“Listen, *kafirs* ...” The woman spoke with a strange accent. “Can I stay? You won’t kill us? I have heard that you do not kill women and children. I hear this, not from one man, but from many. I do not know anything else about you, *kafirs* . did not go to school, I do not know how to read. But I can work for you. I know how to do various tasks that are done by servants. I swear I am a good housewife.”

“But why?” Eugène-Olivier managed to mumble in his confusion. “You’re the *imam* ’s youngest wife, aren’t you?”

The woman’s entire body trembled.

“Yes...”

“You know what, daughter?” said Sophia in an unexpectedly gentle voice. “For a start, take off that rag.”

The young woman jumped in fright and sighed out loud; then suddenly, as if she were afraid Sophia would reconsider, she tore off the chador. It turned out she was not only young, but very young, slender, with blue eyes, light-colored lashes, and almost colorless hair.

“Now why did you have to hide such a beautiful face? What is your story? But tell it quickly, we don’t have time to waste.”

“I’m certain that my life cannot be worse with the *kafirs* than with those of the true faith. They gave me to the *imam* because my parents wanted a family relationship with an influential man. But he ...You see, Madame, this is my son! You see that he has light-colored hair... My husband wanted... He wanted—”

“He wanted to present him as a child from the ghetto?” Sophia suggested. “He wanted to sacrifice him in order to save himself?”

The young woman barely nodded, clutching the child to her breast more

firmly.

“It’s an old game.” Sophia appeared not to notice the looks exchanged by her associates. “Yes, of course, no one will force you to go after him. Lévêque, take her to the metro. Put her in one of the groups for evacuation. Right away, please.”

“Let’s go!” said Eugène-Olivier to the young woman. He knew that he must not catch her by the hand, lest he scare her to death. “Come on, don’t shake like that. So what? You gave your husband *talak* .”

“A wife cannot give her husband *talak* ; only the husband can do that.”

“But you’ve done it anyway!” Eugène-Olivier said, chuckling. “We have to hurry. Do you want me to carry the boy?... Oooo! He’s not so light!... Don’t cry. *Maman* didn’t go anywhere—she’s right next to us. After this, you can consider yourself baptized, *petit bonhomme* .”

The *Maquisards* slowly left the church, returning to their positions. There were only six or seven young people and de Lescure left. Sophia had not noticed de Lescure when he entered.

“There is no reason to turn this back into a bishop’s throne.” Father Lothaire’s voice could be heard. “There is no bishop here today, anyway! Simply take it out of here, as far as you can—so it’s not in the way during the procession. Richard, Denis, take those idiotic microphones and shove them... May God forgive me... De Lescure, do we have enough charcoal?”

“Why insult me, your reverence? Did I ask you if you forgot the chalice at home? Thank God, the old altar is almost intact. It was used by some neo-Catholics as a flower stand. Here they simply made it a bookshelf! They probably did not know what it was, or they would have destroyed it.”

Another voice asked, “Your reverence, what shall we do with this? Come and look!”

Meanwhile, Sophia could not deny herself the pleasure of climbing up the circular stairs to see the panorama of Paris. The view really justified the effort, as they always said in the tourist guides of her youth. It took her breath away even now, when the city was still wrapped in darkness—although the night was beginning to fade. Summer nights in Paris are short. In the black skies, one could already discern the silhouettes of buildings and Paris streets, resembling the beds of dry rivers, soon to be filled with rivers of people.

But there already seemed to be a lot of people in the streets for such an early hour. Sophia leaned on the balustrade and strained her eyes into the distance.

Last night, the Muslims had dug in with a large army. But compared to *this*, it had been tiny! Let it be as it may! What else can they do to us?

They were afraid, the sons of bitches. They were afraid to use artillery, but didn't mind using cannon fodder. That's how they want to defeat us, and to do so as soon as possible. She understood them now. They were nervous, jumpy, threatening...

Something glittered at her feet. Good, someone had dropped his cell phone. She had wanted one several times in the past twenty-four hours, but she hadn't had the opportunity. If she hadn't found this one, she would have had to run down the stairs.

"I'm glad that it's you, Sophie!" Larochejaquelein answered immediately. "What is your situation?"

"I'm not calling to tell you about our business, but about yours. Henri, it's time for you to take out the machine guns, missile launchers, artillery; there's no point in hiding our arsenal any longer."

"Sophie, they'll answer with cannons."

"They won't. They didn't even think to bring them."

"You know that for sure?"

"Where do you think I am now, Henri? On the roof of Notre Dame."

"From that, I conclude that everything there is fine."

"Yes, more than fine." Sophia brushed aside a lock of hair that the breeze had blown into her face. "I think the church is already taken care of, to the extent that is possible. We need no more than three hours for everything. Henri, we are counting on the fact that they don't know how little time we need. I don't know if we'll be able to talk again. In two and a half hours you'll have to give the sign to withdraw."

"All right. In two and a half hours we'll begin to move the defensive line."

"No, start to move it in two hours. Henri, it's going to be a mess."

"We'll hold the bridges. Don't worry, Sophie."

"I know. And one more thing, Henri..."

"Yes?" His voice over the telephone became tense.

"Don't remember me for the bad things."

Sophia hung up.

* * *

The worst thing was that in such a short time they couldn't do anything with the Muslim foot-washing basins. It was good that they were upstairs, hidden

from view, where the organ once stood.

“For true Gregorian chant, an organ is not necessary,” Father Lothaire told de Lescure. “As I recall, organs were invented much later.”

“Like the round notes you don’t know how to read?” De Lescure asked, unpacking boxes of candles.

“Why would I need them, when everything is so clear with square notes?” answered Father Lothaire. “And why do you need five lines? No, don’t even try to explain it to me, I won’t understand. Did you have a chance to admire the city, Sophie? We’re going to begin soon.”

“A moment!” Sophia raised her hand. There was something in her voice that made everyone stop—like the moment in *Sleeping Beauty* when the Princess pricks her finger on the spindle and time stops in the kingdom. The cook’s helper stops with his hand extended toward the hen, the cook with his ladle above the hearth, the servant beating the carpet. The hand of de Lescure with a candle just taken out of the box stopped in mid-air. Yves Montoux paused at the door with a pile of small prayer rugs he was taking out to throw away.

“In a few minutes, the enemy will begin to attack the bridges,” continued Sophia. “The ensuing battle will make yesterday’s look like a fender bender. I know, I know very well, that many people would like to be at Mass today, at the Mass in Notre Dame, at the Mass that testifies to our victory. Another pair of hands may not mean much on the barricades. But... Father Lothaire, what is the minimum number of people you need to serve the Mass?”

“I need the altar server. And it would be good if at least one member of the laity were present. That is the *minimum minimorum* .”

“We also need someone who will blow everything up. I will manage that without assistants. Today I will receive Communion and that is why I will be at the service; I will thus represent two people. Furthermore, an extra pair of hands will not significantly influence the course of the fight. I have no right to demand anything, and I am not demanding anything. Everyone must decide for himself whether he has a right to attend Mass at a moment when others may be dying. Everyone must decide for himself, and everyone will decide alone. Please begin, your reverence.”

Thomas Bourdelle’s eyes filled with tears.

Yves Montoux gritted his teeth.

“I’m going back to the barricades. Three here is enough.”

“I’m going, too.”

“Me, too, of course. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Roger,” said Sophia, “Take one man and hurry to the depot in the metro. We didn’t dare risk bringing the plastic explosives here in advance. But now we have to bring them quickly. The person on duty in the depot knows how much to give you. Try to come back in half an hour.”

“*D’accord!*”

* * *

After handing the *imam*’s former wife to the evacuation command, Eugène-Olivier hurried to get out of the metro. Shooting had broken out on the bridges. Now it could be heard all around; apparently, the order had been given to use machine guns. He had to hurry. On the stairs he met Roger Moulinier, who was descending with another boy.

“Hi! Has Mass started?”

“Not yet. Imagine, it will be a Requiem Mass!” exclaimed the freckled boy.

“I’d like to attend,” said Eugène-Olivier, “But how?... I have to go to the Little Bridge. I wanted to wait for Father Lothaire to come down into the metro. Does anyone know when he’s coming out of the church?”

The others looked at each other strangely.

“Don’t talk nonsense, Lévêque, withdraw when you’re ordered,” said Roger.

“And Father Lothaire?” Eugène-Olivier gripped his elbow like a vise. “Moulinier, answer me!”

“Haven’t you heard? Father Lothaire and... Sophia Sevazmios. They’re going to stay in Notre Dame to the end. To the very end. That’s what they decided. Now let me go, Lévêque, I have a lot of things to do.”

Eugène-Olivier’s fingers were already loosened. He started toward the Little Bridge, slowly at first, then picking up speed.

Something unbelievable was happening there. Neither the burned barricade nor the pathway on the bridge was visible, because of all the bodies in blue uniforms. Other blue uniforms were clambering over them. It looked like someone had used kerosene to set an enormous anthill on fire.

“Are they drugged? The devil take them!” exclaimed Georges Pernoud. “They’re still pushing forward! God have mercy, how they are dying! Hey, Bertaud!”

Bertaud put aside his Kalashnikov and took Pernoud’s place behind the machine gun.

“Hello, Paul, hello!” shouted Pernoud. “Do we have any more grenades? Give us more, half my people have been killed, more than half, two thirds. I need reinforcements.”

Yes, two thirds and in just half an hour, thought Eugène-Olivier, looking at the crushed head of Yves Montoux. They were no longer able to move the bodies aside.

“Lévêque, go get grenades while they’re still giving them out!” George ordered, smiling desperately. A lock of someone’s hair, black with coagulated blood, fell on his forehead.

Eugène-Olivier jumped up and ran. He paid no more attention to the whistling of the bullets than to the chirping of the May crickets.

* * *

Kasim moved his company along the Little Bridge as the advance guard. He was casual about staying behind his Kevlar shield. Here he was, leading the attack, even though he could have been sitting peacefully in Shakespeare’s library instead. He wondered whether anyone would notice that he himself was not firing. He didn’t understand why he wasn’t. He didn’t want to know what force was drawing him toward the bullets.

* * *

“Bertaud, I’ll replace you!” shouted Georges Pernoud before he understood why the machine gun with Roger behind it was not firing.

He didn’t even move the body; he simply moved his shoulder a little and lay down next to his dead friend. He fired for about five minutes until the machine gun fell silent again.

Larochejaquelein had succeeded: Eugène-Olivier brought back not only grenades, but a reinforcement of seven people from a quieter location, St. Ludovic.

There we go! Kasim easily jumped up onto the embankment of the second barricade. Another second more and he was on the other side. They had arrived in the Cité!... They? He looked behind him and noted that he had arrived alone. The dead who now lay before him had managed, before they fell, to kill all the attackers—all except Kasim.

Now, time began flowing more slowly than the waters of the Seine down below. He was alone with the dead, the only one still alive. A Maquisard with a baseball cap, small and skinny, was in fact a young woman. Not even a young woman—a girl, a child not older than thirteen. Next to her lay a

middle-aged man. Kasim knew him from the cheap auto mechanic's shop where he got his car repaired. He had worked there, there was no doubt. I would never have guessed he was a Maquisard . And the one behind the machine gun looked a lot like Antoine. Antoine? No, it must be someone else, it was just a resemblance.

How many years did those few seconds last?

As Kasim settled in behind the machine gun and began to fire it, time again began to race forward. Strangers wearing blue uniforms were already rushing over the bridge. He was able to cut them down methodically, drawing on his years of training, until the survivors fled back to the other side in panic.

Eugène-Olivier raced so fast he thought his heart would jump out of his throat onto the cobblestones. Was it his imagination, or had the shooting from the Little Bridge stopped? It was his imagination.

Out of two machine guns and a dozen Kalashnikovs, only a machine gun was still firing. Someone had apparently managed to climb over and take the place of a wounded gunner. It had been enough to stop the attackers from crossing the barricade. The shots had become intermittent. Eugène-Olivier ran up to see if he could help. A strange sight confronted him.

“What the hell . . . ?”

“Shit!” swore the gunner. “They can go... up the devil’s ass.” The badly wounded man, who was wearing the uniform of a Muslim officer, spoke with difficulty. He had little time left to live. “I am not Kasim!” he growled. “I am... Xavier!”

* * *

It was good that they were bringing people from St. Ludovic to the Little Bridge, thought Jeanne. On the other island you couldn't even turn around. They attacked constantly. Here, even two men were enough. And a third was due to arrive at any second.

“We repelled them,” said Slobodan to himself. “I can even have a cigarette. A cigar. Anything, even these disgusting Galoises.” Slobodan opened a new box. He would not have refused one of the Belomorkanals Sophia was smoking, but he could not ask the woman to share her expensive smuggled cigarettes.

“Hey, have you heard the news?” announced a young *Maquisard* Jeanne didn't recognize. Nor did Slobodan.

“No, what?”

“They’ve stopped attacking. They don’t want to die anymore. We managed to intercept the telephone conversation of one of them. We listened to his voicemail. They’re not doing anything for at least a whole hour! They want to prepare an artillery attack in response. That means they’ll probably come from the river. I almost regret to say they won’t have anyone to attack in an hour! We’ve been ordered to withdraw.”

“Great!” Jeanne jumped up. “Great, we’ve beat them! Oh, I’m going to dance a passage from *Giselle*!”

Slobodan smiled reluctantly and continued to enjoy his cigarette. He also stood up, leaning his leg on a bag; it felt so good to be able to straighten his back. He threw away his cigarette butt, carefully following where it would land. It fell on enemy territory, on the asphalt next to the hand of a dead man gripping a pistol. The hand slowly began to rise; the man looked at Jeanne jumping around on the barricade next to Slobodan.

The pistol recoiled, a shot rang out. The body on the asphalt jerked in its final convulsion.

But Slobodan had managed to half push away, half-protect Jeanne with his chest. “This is bad,” thought Slobodan calmly, as if nothing had happened. “It’s stupid.”

“Wounded? Hey, the creep really got you good...”

“I don’t know yet. When you run to the metro, send me back... medical... help.” At first, his words came easily, and then with greater difficulty. He slipped down to his knees. He didn’t fall, no, he was simply leaning his back on the bags. His consciousness, which until now had been clear, was suddenly foggy, as if someone had breathed on translucent glass.

“You heard... the... order. You can’t stay here. Run!”

“Like hell!”

Slobodan felt the cobblestones moving under him like a bumpy ride on a sled. Then the stones stopped moving and his vision became clear. He understood that he was lying at the entrance of the metro with Jeanne bending over him. He hadn’t recognized her right away. Jeanne’s usually pale face shone from within with an unnatural ruddiness. It was like a bright bulb, while her soft bangs were now dark and shiny, lying smoothly on her forehead as if they were wet. Ah, that was from the rain that was falling on his face.

But there was no rain. Jeanne wiped her face with the sleeve of her denim

shirt. Slobodan finally understood with horror that the girl had dragged him from the bridge of St. Ludovic all the way to the entrance of the metro. How had she even managed to move him, when he weighed more than 200 pounds?

“Why... are you doing this?” His words tasted somehow salty.

“Be quiet!” Jeanne could barely breathe. “You can’t talk... the blood... But why did you do that?”

Slobodan looked at her young face and could not take his eyes off her. The French girl was angry with him for protecting her with his body, and now that he was wounded, she refused to let him die.

Suddenly everything became easy for him, incredibly easy, his heart filled with an almost unbearable sense of happiness that he had thought he had forgotten, the happiness of a child as he watched them pouring wine on the Yule log in the hearth.

He understood. He understood everything.

His soul was far smarter than he was himself. No, he had not come here to seek revenge against the Muslims, although that was what he had fantasized about for years. Sophia was right, a normal person could not derive any satisfaction from revenge. He hadn’t known that before, but his soul knew. He had come here to share the difficulties of rebellion with this people, a people that had once done wrong to his own people, but now suffered just as much, inasmuch as suffering could be compared. He had come here to be together with a people whom he had forgiven.

In order to understand that he had forgiven, in order to feel the blessing and joy of Christian forgiveness, he needed but little. He had needed only to see before him the angry, tear-stained face of a young French girl.

He said to her, “You must live... please...” His words seemed unbelievably loud. The blood rushed from his mouth like water from a broken fountain.

“No!” cried Jeanne desperately. But Slobodan heard the cry as if it were coming from a very great distance, and he stopped hearing it before Jeanne stopped crying out.

* * *

“Did you hear me, Lévêque? We’ve been ordered to withdraw. We’ve lasted as long as we needed to! They have a whole hour left in the church, which is far more than they need!”

Eugène-Olivier nodded and took a bottle of water someone passed to him. He understood only one thing: He did not have to fight or shoot, at least for a while. He closed his eyes. It was dark. He didn’t sleep; he simply enjoyed his

relaxed muscles and empty head.

A minute passed. Five minutes. Then Eugène-Olivier gave a sudden start.
He remembered.

CHAPTER 18

THE SHIP IS SAILING

The machine-gun fire was no longer coming just from the bridges. There was also firing from the platform of the St. Michel metro station.

“The artillery has almost begun,” said Vincent de Lescure. “Our artillery. My parents could never have imagined that I would take part in such a *Ritus reconcilliandi ecclesiam violatam*. ”

“How can you know what’s going on in the battle by the sound of the shooting?” Father Lothaire was turning the pages of a pocket edition of the *Rituale Romanum*. “I must say, Monsieur de Lescure, you really surprised me with your contribution to the defensive plan. Even Sophia Sevazmios had to listen to you.”

“You forget how old I am,” said de Lescure with a smile. “I studied at St. Cyr. The only place in our atrocious republic where a young man who was not from a wealthy family, but a member of the poor aristocracy, could go to begin a great military career. I didn’t manage to do that because I was too young. Otherwise, today I would not be a book seller but a staff general.”

“It never occurred to me.” Father Lothaire marked the page, handed the book to de Lescure and donned a white cope over his cassock. “Let us begin with God. It’s time.”

They were sitting in front of the doors of the main entrance. The breeze was fluttering the pages of the *Rituale* and billowing folds of the alb de Lescure was wearing, which was too wide for his spare frame.

The charcoal hissed and spat in the censor as a thin wisp of incense began to swirl in the wind.

Father Lothaire’s voice flew toward Heaven, echoing from the walls. It was strange, very strange, to carry out the ritual without fear, not underground, and under the bright light of the sun.

They began to move slowly along the walls. Before the small procession had circled the façade, two people carrying large sacks appeared in the courtyard and hurried toward the main entrance.

Sophia looked at her watch and sighed with relief.

“Madame, please be so kind as to accept twenty kilos of chocolate!” sighed Thomas Bourdelle—the short, freckled, unbelievably young man to whom every onerous task seemed like a trifle. Since early childhood, he had been coming to Mass in the ghetto, first with his parents; then, after they were killed,

on his own.

“Quiet, you nut,” Roger Moulinier told him, transferring his own load to his other shoulder. “Father Lothaire has already begun.”

Only a month ago, the nineteen year-old Moulinier, who was a very important member of *Maquis*, didn’t even know Mass existed.

“Sophie, everything is fine,” he said brightly. “It’s not easy to enter the metro anymore. They’ve finally managed to cut the power, so we’ve made torches out of branches. The stations still in service are now in the same kind of darkness as the abandoned ones. And there really is twenty kilos of plastic explosive—ten in each bag, already divided by kilo.”

David’s repentance could be heard in the words of Psalm 50, begging the Lord to wash him from iniquity and cleanse him from sin. Passing under the outside stairs leading to the “women’s” floor of the soon-to-be-former mosque, de Lescure frowned and with some difficulty refrained from cursing.

“You’ve done very well, boys!” Sophia Sevazmios lifted her dark glasses to her forehead. Cheerful flames played in her eyes. “Roger, you may die today, too,” Sophia smiled and the glasses again hid the cheerful look, “Especially if you hurry. All the Kalashnikovs are in their places. Boys, bring it all into the center of the church. Don’t make an old woman break her back.”

The procession of two men was already passing under the cobweb-covered paws of the flying buttresses. This was certainly where Sophia would attach the explosive, thought Father Lothaire reluctantly as he swung the *aspergillum*. The drops fell on the stones, glistening cheerfully.

If only we can circle the church as quickly as possible, thought de Lescure, fighting the desire to speed up his step. Lord, let us finish, because everything depends on this boy who carries the heavy burden of dreams on his breast. Even my youngest son, Étienne, if he were still alive, would now be six years older than he. Why does it seem to me that as soon as we circle the church the danger will disappear? Perhaps it doesn’t exist after all?

A sniper bullet coming from who-knows-where whizzed by and dully struck a stone. The censer shook. They missed, thought Father Lothaire, before he saw that de Lescure was down on one knee.

“A nasty thing... that... ricochet,” said he, holding the vessel with the *aspergillum* out to the priest.

“Are you seriously wounded, Lescure?” Fumbling with the censer, the *Rituale* and the water, Father Lothaire was trying to free one hand to help his altar server.

“Wounded, killed, how can I know?” De Lescure raised his voice commandingly. “Go on! We’re not playing a game here; this is still a mosque!”

Father Lothaire bit his lip deeply, turned his back to the wounded man and walked around the corner. Another bullet hit the stone, but as de Lescure had thought, the priest behind the corner was now out of reach of the sniper.

Leaning heavily against the wall, de Lescure tried to calculate where the shooting was coming from. But there were no more shots fired. What had happened, and from where, was impossible to know in this bloody mess. The pain brought scenes from his childhood before his eyes. De Lescure finally allowed himself to cry out, hoping that the priest was already far away.

Father Lothaire heard the cry nevertheless, because he now worked at half speed, forced to manage by himself with the *Rituale*, the censer, and the holy water. But he could not go on like this. *In extremis*, Sophia could help, but she was busy.

Sophia was already inside, distributing the contents of the bags, attaching a timer to each small package. Bourdelle and Moulinier had already returned to their positions.

Father Lothaire was back at the entrance ordering the devil to flee before the Savior who was to come. His work of reclaiming the space outside for Christ was finished. Now, for the church itself.

The door was open, which was fortunate, since he could not have opened it himself, with all he was carrying.

Sophia, who was kneeling with plastic explosive in her hands forty feet from the entrance, lifted her head. A shadow fell over her face. She jumped to her feet in obvious confusion unique to her—whether to run toward the priest and relieve him of some of his burdens, or was that not allowed?

Father Lothaire smiled, as if to say, *In extremis, many things are allowed. In Soviet camps where there were no priests, women baptized children. Couldn’t a woman now hold a censer? They’ve managed to slow us down by killing Vincent de Lescure; his absence will cost us another dozen lives.*

Rapid footsteps could be heard from their backs, but Father Lothaire didn’t even turn around; from Sophia’s face, he could see there was no imminent danger.

The Kalashnikov thrown on the floor clattered. Eugène-Olivier Lévêque, panting, with barely dry hands stained with blood, gasoline, dirt, and cement—and wearing pants torn at the knee—was already reaching for the censer.

“*Jube, Domine, benedicere!*” The words flowed by themselves, as if he

had uttered them a hundred times.

There was no time to ask whether he had learned that de Lescure was out of the picture, or if he had appeared for some other reason. Sophia continued to plant explosives, hurrying to compensate for the lost minutes. Father Lothaire, blessing the young man with the sign of the cross, handed him the censer, the aspergillum, and the vessel, keeping only the *Rituale* for himself.

“*Oremus.*” Here was a sense of mystery, perfect mystery, which Eugène-Olivier had known existed, but had never hoped to experience. He did not anticipate what a joy it would be. The soaring dome accepted his voice and lifted it high. Oh, how different it was from serving in common buildings, barely adapted to serve as churches! Lord, how foolish it had been to hang microphones everywhere—which later came in so handy for the Muslims! This architecture had known for centuries how to amplify sound:

Omnipotens et misericors Deus, qui Sacerdotibus tuis tantam prae ceteris gratiam contulisti, ut quidquid in tuo nomine digne perfecteque ab eis agitur, a te fieri credatur, quaesumus immensam clementiam tuam, ut quod modo visitatari sumus, visites, et quidquid benedicturi sumus, benedicas; sitque ad nostrae humilitatis introitum, Sanctorum tuorum meritis, fuga daemonum, Angeli pacis ingressus. Per Christum Dominum nostrum.

“*Amen,*” responded Eugène-Olivier.

The procession headed toward the altar. When he reached Sophia, Father Lothaire lifted the *aspergillum*. The drops fell on her face. In her youth, during those few, happy years with Leonid Sevazmios—as happy as Sonya Greenberg could feel happy—holy water smelled to her like lilies-of-the-valley. So many years had passed, and yet the smell was the same!

Father Lothaire walked through the enormous church—lit by the rays of the sun and resembling the nave of a ship—as if in a dream.

“*It is a ship that is sailing into eternity,*” Father Lothaire observed to himself, smiling. *If he continued to think so pathetically and passionately, it would be easy to imagine himself a hero. Better to say it as Valerie would: “We need to finish the task before the buttocks arrive.”*

As he began the litany, Father Lothaire saw out of the corner of his eye that Sophia was headed for the exit with her arms full. Ah, yes, the flying buttresses. If she were killed like de Lescure, the priest mused that he himself wouldn’t be much good at setting the charges. Perhaps the young man would be able to deal with that as well. But try, Sophia—try to live an hour and a half more!

“Ut hanc Ecclesiam, et altare hoc, ac coemeterium purgare, et reconcilare...” (Here, Father Lothaire paused, got up from his knees, and made the sign of the cross over the stone that had spent so many years cluttered with all sorts of meaningless decorations) *“...digneris.”*

“Te rogamus, audi nos!” chanted Eugène-Olivier, no longer questioning how the memory of his forebear was speaking through his mouth.

The 67th Psalm was approaching. So many more things to do, and so far away the shore!

Sophia returned to the church empty-handed, the charges now in place.

“This is a church again,” said Father Lothaire. For a moment, he felt his head swaying, as if he were outside of himself. From the beginning of time, in the mind of his Creator, he had been put on earth for a purpose. He realized that he was nearly done.

“Eugène-Olivier, Sophia: It is time for Mass. We stand in the new Notre Dame, the throne of Our Lady, who crushes the head of the serpent. Al Franconi Mosque no longer exists. It has been cast into hell!”

“YES!” shouted Eugène-Olivier in English, without thinking. The ancient cathedral echoed with the sound of his voice, and he blushed to the roots of his hair, awkward and mortified.

Father Lothaire smiled. In the fires that burned in Sophia’s eyes, he could read exactly the same word: *“Yes!”*

He asked evenly, “What happened with de Lescure, Sophie?”

“Dead.”

“Requiem æternam dona ei, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat ei. When our labors are done, may we meet swiftly in Heaven. Everyone in position.”

Father Lothaire turned to Eugène-Olivier: “The vestments are lying in the order that you need to give them to me. I’ll tell you what to do after that.”

Father Lothaire covered his head with the amice, drew it down on his shoulders and put a long linen alb over his cassock. Over the alb, he tied a belt of rope. *Our knots are like sailors’ knots*, he thought to himself.

The stole and chasuble were black, for a Requiem Mass.

* * *

Earlier, as she was attaching a piece of plastic explosive the size of a book to one of the many columns, Sophia had suddenly remembered her Aunt Liza, who was only eleven years older than she.

Liza Zabelin, her mother’s much-younger sister, had luxuriant, light-brown,

softly curled hair that fell below her waist. Everyone turned to look at Liza's hair when she walked by. She had a slightly round face with widely spaced gray eyes, broad shoulders, and an athletic figure. Since birth she had had heart problems. To Sonya's shame, she had never asked what sort of heart problems they were. By the time she thought to ask, there was no one left who could answer.

The adult Sophia only remembered the exterior things about her young aunt: a well-worn copy of *Gone with the Wind*, portraits of dignified generals, a boy in a general's uniform, and an icon in a box with a glass cover. Liza referred to Sophia as "my goddaughter Sonya"—since, as a 12-year-old, she had secretly baptized her one-year-old niece. As they grew older, Sophia was the only exception to Liza's highly intellectual society. She would play with her for hours.

"Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine." Father Lothaire did not make the sign of the Cross over himself—as in an ordinary liturgy, but over the stone altar, blessing all who were bound by the chains of death— *"et lux perpetua luceat eis. Te decet hymnus Deus, in Sion, et tibi reddetur votum in Ierusalem. Exaudi orationem meam; ad te omnis caro veniet. Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis."*

From the age of nine, Sonya no longer rushed to visit her aunt's spacious, modern, dark apartment on University Prospekt. Liza was at an angry age. She made Sophia watch long films about Russian history—without castles, knights, or tournaments.

But during the horrible months Sophia spent as a hostage of the Muslims, it was Liza who stayed at the side of Sophia's bewildered father. She became his most reliable secretary, executing his instructions for his business while he immersed himself with the calls and negotiations for saving Sonya.

On the day when her father, dropping the telephone receiver on the floor, shouted: "Liza, they've released Sonya!" there was no response from the next room. He found Liza sitting on the couch, her lips curled in a smile.

Four years later, when she heard the details of how her aunt had died, Sonya was wracked with guilt. Why?

Who would have imagined that more than 50 years later, she would remember her aunt's favorite song, from the first verse to the last, in a cathedral—which is after all modeled on a ship:

*Hear us, almighty God,
And receive our prayer,*

*The “Defender” died like a hunter,
Far from Russia, our land.*

Despite the awkwardness of the words accompanying the melody, the song sounded mighty, like the breathing of a giant.

*The captain said: “Go, boys!
Surely we will not see the dawn!
Russia is full of heroes
And for the Tsar, like them, we’ll die!”
And suddenly the watery doors opened,
And they sank into the deep sea,
Without a sigh, without a tear,
Far from Russia, their land.*

Sophia had smiled, carefully adjusting the green numbers on the display of the timer.

As he said the Mass now, Father Lothaire mused sadly, “So many years have passed since these walls have heard Latin. How they must have missed it!”

Sophia effortlessly recalled the next verse in her head:

*The gulls flapping their wings,
Circled in sorrow at their deaths
Singing “Memory Eternal”
To the heroes of the sea.*

Now it was time for Father Lothaire to chant the sequence heard at every Requiem Mass, asking God’s mercy on the dead—

*Dies iræ! dies illa
Day of wrath! That very day...
Solvat sæculum in favilla
Will consume the world in ashes...
Teste David cum Sibylla!
As David and the Sibyl foretold.
Quantus tremor est futurus,
What a tremor awaits us...
quando judex est venturus,
When the Judge arrives...
cuncta stricte discussurus!
Shattering every bond!*

“Yes,” thought Sophia as she followed the priest’s motions at the altar,

“This is like our *Memory Eternal*.” The two songs began to interweave in her mind.

*Your strength, Russia, your torch,
Are your immortal heroes.
And forever the “Defender”
Will live in the people’s heart.
Tuba mirum spargens sonum
The trumpet’s blast will astonish...
per sepulchra regionum,
all who inhabit the world of the tomb,
coget omnes ante thronum.
Summoning all men before the Throne.
Mors stupebit et natura,
Death and Nature will be stunned...
cum resurget creatura,
to see the creature arise
judicanti responsura.
to answer his Judge.*

When the Sequence ended, Sophia knelt. Now she could listen to the liturgy. The sands of time would continue to flow by themselves.

How much Eugène-Olivier regretted not understanding the Gospel reading, which Father Lothaire chanted in Latin! It must have been about the passage from death to eternal life. How fortunate were those who understood. After the Gospel comes the sermon... How did he know that? He just did.

Father Lothaire turned to face the flock. He looked at Sophia and nodded to her, understanding why she was resting. And he looked at Eugène-Olivier.

“My dear ones, I will not be giving a sermon—although in a sense that is not correct. Everything that could be said, we have said today without words. Eugène-Olivier, after you have poured water on my hands, I will continue alone, without an altar server.”

“What do you mean, Father?”

“That after that, you may leave. After the washing of the hands.” The priest looked at him solemnly.

“Father Lothaire, don’t you understand?” Eugène-Olivier asked in a quiet shout, so that the church’s towering vaults, which were sensitive to the sacred, should not catch the unworthy words of men. “I am not leaving! I have a right to be here. I have a right to die with Notre Dame. I am the hereditary altar

server of this church!”

“And today you served. But today is not your time to die.”

After hesitating, Eugène-Olivier said, “I want to receive Holy Communion!”

“No, you are not prepared for Communion. If this liturgy were to be the last on Earth, I would give you Communion at my own risk. But what you owe this church is to receive Holy Communion in the right way. Even if it is in another place.” Father Lothaire smiled. “I am the captain of the ship today. And I order you to abandon ship.”

Good, thought Sophia. If he leaves now, he'll have time to get far enough away from the walls as they fall.

“And as your earthly commander, Lévêque,” Sophia added gently, “I am ordering you to live.”

Cheerful candles played in Sophia's dark eyes. The light-gray gaze of Father Lothaire was decisive. Eighteen year-old Eugène-Olivier was not strong enough to overcome them.

“But who will pray during the Mass?” he asked weakly. “Only modernist priests would serve alone— isn't that right, Father Lothaire?”

“I will try,” offered Sophia. “I'm not sure that I know how, but it's high time I learned.”

“There,” said Father Lothaire. “Everything is resolved.” He turned toward the altar. “*Gloria Tibi Domine.*”

Glory to you, O Lord.

Eugène-Olivier continued with his last labors in the Mass, but did not follow the words. He swam in the river of his humiliation, insulted by the rejection of his sacrifice. The plain bottles he held, made of brown glass like those from a pharmacy, shook in his hands. From the second bottle he poured water on Father Lothaire's fingers.

“Go with God,” whispered the priest, and turned toward the altar.

Oh, how that boy doesn't want to live, thought Sophia. Enough people died today without you.

“*Orate, fratres,*” said Father Lothaire. *Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours be acceptable to God, the Father Almighty...*

Wavering slightly, as if he expected the priest to call him back, Eugène-Olivier slowly made his way to the door. Eugène-Olivier walked along the stone floor, down the aisle between the long benches to the left and right—hard benches where, he noticed with mild surprise, dozens of people now knelt.

Among them he recognized some: Patrice Lévêque, who looked over at his grandson with a quiet smile. Antoine Philippe Lévêque, with the face of a seriously ill man who was now free of intolerable pain. Claire Eugénie Lévêque, who had lost three sons during the breach of the Maginot Line in 1940. Geneviève Lévêque, who died at the age of seventeen of tuberculosis. Auguste Antoine Lévêque, who made his fortune importing chocolate. Patrice Olivier Lévêque, with a wig divided into three parts...

“ *They* will receive Communion today,” Eugène-Olivier realized. His step became more resolute.

A pile of gray rags that someone had dropped in the vestibule caught his eye. Valerie! Valerie in her rags had slid to the ground, motionless. Her light-colored curls fell on the ground. Her wounded hands—white, spread out, looked like the hands of a porcelain doll. It could not have been otherwise. She had died, together with the church!

Overcoming his fear, Eugène-Olivier bent down. Without knowing why, he moved a lock of the hair that covered her face. Although he did not touch her skin, his hand felt the warmth of her forehead. He touched her chest, which was rising, and felt her heart beating. But what was wrong with her, then?

Her breathing was even, very even. Eugène-Olivier easily lifted the sleeping child into his arms and with a sudden thought, marched briskly toward the doors, almost breaking into a run. If Father Lothaire had not chased him out, who would have saved Valerie from the fire that was only minutes away?

Jostled by his haste, Valerie opened her eyes. Her sleepy gaze briefly met his. Then the eyelids closed and the little girl sighed, finding a more comfortable position for her head on his shoulder. Never before had Eugène-Olivier seen such an ordinary, childlike gaze from Valerie. A child like any other, although very dirty, now slept in his arms.

On her hand, he found only traces of dried blood. The stigmata were gone. There were not even scabs in their place. Only some rose-colored stains remained on her white skin.

Careful not to wake her, Eugène-Olivier used his elbow and knee to open the heavy door and stepped out into the bright light of Paris: grayish blue, sunny—and echoing with gunshots.

It was a day in which, despite the blood and death, clear water murmured from the small street fountain, as always. A day in which Jeanne was somewhere nearby—alive, most certainly alive.

The timers rhythmically counted down the time remaining for the church.

The young priest continued his prayer. For the first time in her life, the old woman prayed on her knees. They both asked themselves whether they were afraid that, in the next few minutes, their souls, wrenched from their corporal frames in inconceivable, but short-lived suffering, would rise above, through the gigantic cyclone of stone and flame.

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