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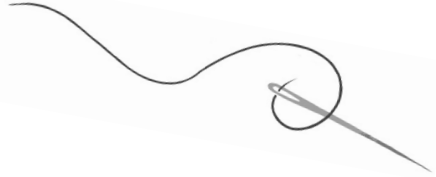
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The Sky Above the Conciergerie Prison, Paris

15 Prairial Year II



A bullet ripped through the fabric of the hot air balloon, and Ada knew their whole plan had been a terrible mistake. Dangling high above the most notorious prison in Robespierre's Paris, her faith in the scientific forces holding them aloft seemed suddenly a lot more questionable. The job was simple: rescue Olympe Marie de l'Aubespine, who was being held prisoner before being taken to the guillotine. The plan was anything but. Breaking someone out of the Conciergerie had never been done before. So they'd needed to do something no one had ever tried.

'If we die, I'm going to kill you.' Al clung to the wicker basket beside Ada, blond hair whipping around his pale, pinched face as the hot air balloon lurched violently.

Stomach in anxious knots, Ada yanked on several ropes and pulleys at once, sending them bobbing slantways over the rooftops. 'If you don't start helping, Al, I'll kill you first.'

She threw bag after bag of ballast over the side and watched them thunk onto the cobbles far below. Not far enough below for her liking. Streets and squares and parks unfurled beneath them, sprawling out from the prison like a spider's web. A muddy swirl of slate roofs and green treetops washed up against the brown ribbon of the Seine as it flowed through the centre. The river split around the Île de la Cité, where the Notre Dame cathedral dominated at one end. At the other lay the prison, among the complex of law courts and Revolutionary headquarters. Above them, a broad sky yawned the cool eggshell blue of a half-hearted summer.

The tear in the balloon flapped jauntily in the wind, huffing out precious hot air. Ada had thought they'd been too high up for the prison guards' musket fire to reach them.

She'd been wrong.

In the distance, she could just about see the Place de la Révolution, where the guillotine lay waiting. When the Revolution had started five years ago, it had been called Place Louis XV, named for the previous king. There had been hope of building a new France, of finding a better, fairer way to rule. But the new government had floundered, and King Louis XVI had been executed in the same square. It changed everything. It was as though France was a frustrated child, finally

getting what it wanted, but finding the prize sour and disappointing. Without the king, people still starved, inequality continued. The country splintered and the different factions spat at each other like a serpent with many heads. In the middle of all of it, Ada, Al and the rest of the Battalion of the Dead were the last port of call for anyone with a loved one in trouble – whatever side they were on – with prison breaks their speciality.

Ada loved the thrill of the chase, the flare of pride when a plan came off. But sometimes she knew they pushed their luck too far. The hiss of escaping air gave her the creeping fear that this was going to be the last mistake she ever made.

‘What do we do?’ shrieked Al, peering over the edge at the crenellations of the prison that were rapidly rising to meet them.

Ada rammed a hairpin back in place to secure the tight, black curls that framed her brown face. She threw another couple of ballast bags overboard, giving a calculating glance at the ground to try to judge their rate of descent. Dread made her chest tight, but she was damned if she’d let Al see it.

‘I’m making us lighter,’ she explained. ‘It’s a basic scientific principle. Hot air rises – we have lots of hot air above us – but only if we’re lighter than the volume of air.’

‘Are you mad? Air doesn’t weigh anything!’ Al clutched at the ropes, face ashen. ‘I’m going to die because a madwoman thinks she can weigh air. Dead, disowned and not even eighteen.’

Ada rolled her eyes. She yanked at the burner, sending a jet of flame soaring, praying the other members of the battalion were in place, ready to carry out their part of the plan.

‘Just throw the ballast overboard.’

The flame licked the drooping fabric and it started to smoulder. Al watched it curiously.

‘Is that supposed to happen?’

‘No.’ She swallowed. ‘It really isn’t.’

A rush of fire whooshed over the fabric and the balloon began to disintegrate around them. Below, guards clustered on the prison roof, pointing and shouting. She wondered what they must look like to them: one pale face, one dark, hurtling down in a shower of flames like Lucifer falling from the heavens.

Al grabbed her hand, naked panic in his eyes.

The last of the balloon was swallowed up, and then they were free-falling into the most notorious prison in Paris.

Well, they were supposed to create a distraction.

A Room on the Quai de la Mégisserie



‘Ten livre.’ Camille lumped the stack of coins on the table.

The soldier scowled. ‘You said twenty.’

‘I also said turn up on time and don’t tell anyone you’re coming. But you failed on both those counts.’

‘I didn’t tell anyone.’

‘You told someone ten minutes after our deal. Or were you too drunk to remember telling Guil, here, that you could make good money selling your uniform to mad bitches in trousers?’

Guillaume smiled pleasantly from where he blocked the exit of the garret they’d rented opposite the Conciergerie.

The soldier cursed.

‘Ten livre.’ She pushed the coins across to him.

He snatched them up and Guil stepped aside to let him slope away.

Guil put on the uniform and took Camille's pistol from her, tucking it into his belt. The uniform suited him; the blue and white tailored to his strong physique, the colours crisp against his dark skin. Suited the soldier he had once been. He was the oldest of her battalion but his months at the front in Germany made him seem far older, more authoritative. She was relying on it to get them into the prison.

Her disguise for the job was easier to come by: cheap canvas trousers, a worn-through shirt and a tattered jacket. She paused in front of the spotted mirror, scrubbing her hair into a rat's nest and rumpling her clothes. Her pale face was already smudged with dirt, completing her look.

Frowning, Guil crossed to the window.

'Camille – you ought to see this.'

She joined him at the window.

Above the prison, the last scrap of balloon disappeared from sight. Her stomach sank.

'Did you tell Ada to do that?' asked Guil.

'Definitely not.'

'I said Al should have stayed behind. He cannot be trusted with such a responsibility.'

Camille fell back from the window, fingers twisting in the cuffs of her shirt. She'd told Ada and Al to cause a distraction with the balloon, not crash the thing. Ada would be fine – she was clever, resourceful – Ada *had* to be fine.

The memory of Ada lighting the balloon's burner in the Jardin du Luxembourg came unbidden to her,

the warm rush of flame catching, lighting Ada's brown skin, picking out the tawny flecks in her eyes. Ada's fingers sliding against hers, comforting, intimate, gentle. They'd stood side by side watching the balloon slowly inflate and take shape. Before they'd cut the tether, Ada had leaned down and tucked a stray lock of Camille's hair behind her ear, running her thumb along her jaw. When she got her hands on Ada again she didn't know what she was going to do first, kiss her or yell at her for frightening her so badly.

She made a decision.

'Get ready. We move now.'

Outside, the crashing balloon had gathered a crowd along the banks of the Seine, a mix of dockworkers and shop girls, university students and Paris Commune members all wearing tricolore cockades and leaning up against the stone embankments. After five years of revolution and an endless string of riots, coups and public executions, it took something special to bring Paris to a standstill. As Camille had hoped, a hot air balloon was just the thing – and the commotion meant no one was paying much attention to a soldier hauling a prisoner over the Pont au Change. Guil had his hand clamped firmly around her arm and, with a look of stern indifference, was jostling a path through the crowd.

The day had started auspiciously, dawning crisp and clear ready for the balloon. After launching Ada and Al into the skies, Camille and Guil had just had time to prepare their half of the plan. It was a variation

on the battalion's favourite theme: the sleight of hand, the performance, the distraction. Make everyone look in one direction, while you do something in the other. It had worked for them half a dozen times or more. From forging documents and stealing identities, to fabricating a plague outbreak, Camille knew curiosity and fear were the two easiest weapons to wield.

This time would be no different. The crash was an unforeseen risk, but it had happened and it was certainly a distraction. They'd pulled off enough prison breaks together to know how to adapt on the run. Between her own strategic thinking, Al's contacts in old aristocratic circles, Guil's military knowledge and Ada's scientific problem-solving, Camille knew she could trust her battalion to get themselves out of whatever they'd got themselves into.

The Revolution had lost its way, the Terror ensnaring too many innocents. The battalion saved people because it was the right thing to do. And it didn't hurt that they were damn good at it.

Camille and Guil crossed the ancient bridge over the broad, dark water. On the far side, the Conciergerie soared like a cliff from the edge of the Île de la Cité, all looming gothic arches and spindly towers. At the other end of the island was its echo in the Notre Dame cathedral and its countless gargoyles and spires.

The Conciergerie: the fortress prison, seat of the Revolutionary Tribunal itself and last staging post for those condemned to die. The last time Camille had been there was to rescue her father on her own,

before she'd had the battalion to back her up. She'd failed. Now she had a second chance. An innocent girl needed her help. If she managed this, her demanding father might have even been proud.

The last scraps of balloon fabric were slipping over the roof when they reached the iron gate set into the stone wall. They mounted the steps and Guil rapped the handle of his pistol against the bars to get the attention of the single guard on duty. That was two less than had been there when she'd made a sweep that morning. The guard tore his eyes away from the commotion in the courtyard behind him. Camille's muscles were so tense she felt as if her bones might snap. That must be where the balloon had crashed.

Guil knocked on the bars again and the guard finally gave them an assessing look.

'What?'

'Found a stray one hiding in a flop house down the Rue Avoye, dressed as a boy.' He hefted Camille by the armpit, showing her to the guard.

The guard sniffed. 'One what?'

'A stray from the Vendée sympathisers. My god, man, do you not listen to a thing in morning docket? General Dumas would have your hide for such lax behaviour.'

The guard eyed Camille.

'Rationalist scum!' She spat at him through the bars. 'Your so-called Revolution rejects God, so we reject you.'

Sneering, the guard opened the gate.

‘Throw her somewhere dank,’ he said to Guil.

Guil strode past, hauling Camille fast enough that she lost her footing on the cobbles. She was going to end up with bruises. Good. It had to look real.

‘My pleasure. Back to your post, soldier.’

Snapping a salute, he led her away and the guard shut the gate behind them.

They were in. Now for the hard part.

The smooth stone towers and walls of the prison rose before her. Home of the Revolutionary Court, the Palais de Justice, and if their information was correct, holding place of fifteen-year-old Olympe Marie de l’Aubespine on her way to the guillotine. Their mission.

Confidently, Guil walked Camille to a squat door in a tower as patrols of Revolutionary Army crossed their path in drilled ranks. He knew his way around better than she did; he’d spent enough time here as a soldier in the Legion St George. A spiral staircase wound down into the dungeons where the worst cells and the oubliettes were, depositing them into a featureless corridor. Camille paused, leaning on her thighs. Her weak lungs were playing up, feeling too tight to draw full breath. When she finally stood, Guil gave back her gun, and pointed down the corridor.

‘Left, then two rights, and you’ll come to an iron door. That’s the one.’

Camille hesitated.

Somewhere in the prison was Ada. She didn’t know if she was captured, let alone alive. Their plan relied on

them getting in and out as quickly as possible. If she changed things to look for Ada, they might miss their chance to rescue Olympe. They could fail. A curl of pride flared in her belly.

Ada knew that. She knew the plan and she could look after herself.

But leaving Ada behind felt worse than failure.

Guil brushed his fingers against her arm.

‘Go get the girl,’ he said. ‘I’ll get Ada and Al.’

‘That’s not the plan.’

‘So change it.’

She reached for her father’s pistol, wanting the comfort of its handle against her palm. ‘All right. Don’t get into trouble.’

Guil squeezed her shoulder then set off back up the stairs.

Before she lost her nerve, Camille strode deeper into the dungeons on her own. Left, then two rights, and there was the iron door. Low and heavy with rust caking the rivets that held it together, and moss growing between the damp-slick stones around it. Steadying her shaking fingers, she hunkered next to Olympe’s cell and took out her lock picks.

This was the plan. There was no fate. No destiny. Everything was a choice.

Guil and Ada and Al could make their own choices, and she would make hers.

The lock snicked open, and she slipped inside.

It was show time.