

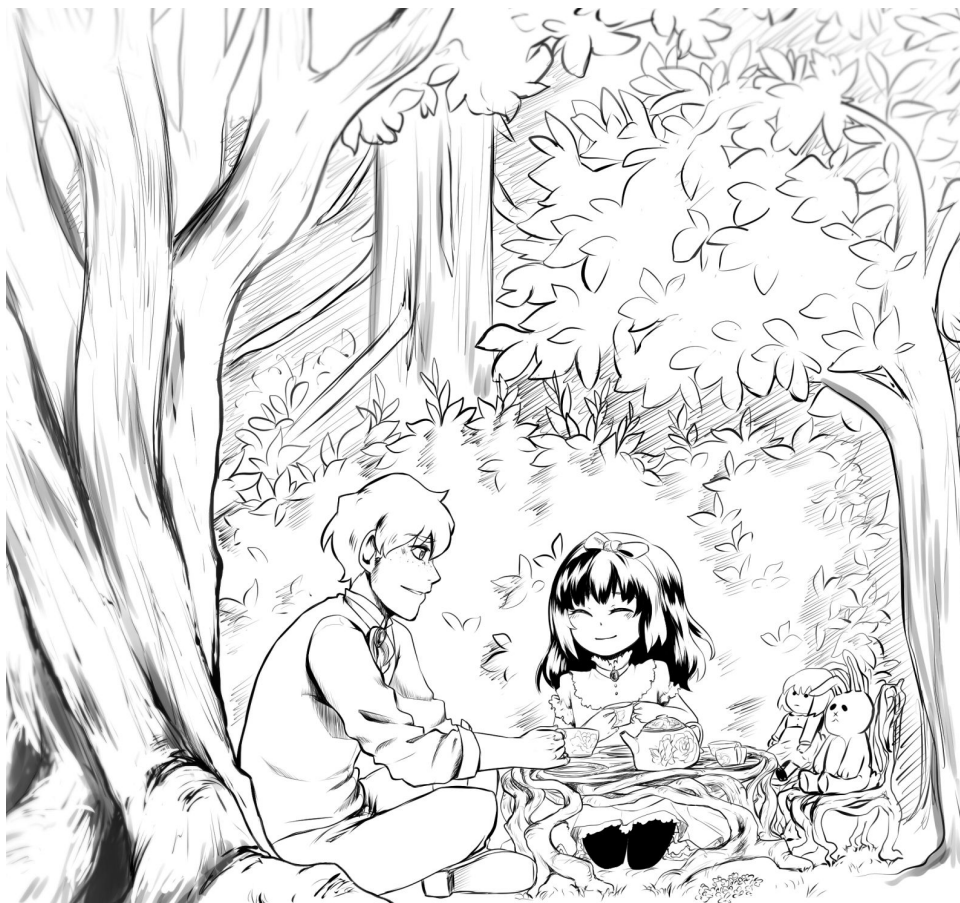
Voiceless – a Galebound story¹

By J. Michelle W.

Set in the **Galebound** webcomic world, which is completely owned, written, and drawn by Madeleine Ethridge, posted at Galebound.com

Cover artwork by J. Davis. Her webcomic **Moonlight Apparition** is posted at moonlightapparition.smackjeeves.com

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¹ Yes. I am fully aware of how pretentious that sounds. xD

A note on the footnotes in this story: many of them are inside jokes, explanations, etc. from conversations on the **Galebound Discord Server**. If you haven't checked it out – *what are you waiting for? Come join us!* xD The rest are me joking (or crying) about this story and my writing process.

Finally, **there are Voiceless spoilers in these notes**. Don't read them ahead, if you're using an ereader that lumps them all together at the end.

One hour of darkness.

They needed to get in and then out before the light returned.

The press of people in Lorraine's streets was thinning, as people headed home to sleep for a few hours. The cacophonous, oppressive roar of shouting venders, wheels clattering on the cobblestones, and voices, voices, voices, was finally slackening.

But the drop in noise did nothing for the air Margot was breathing into lungs tight with fear. Acrid smoke irritated her eyes, and the stench of cooking smells mixed up with refuse and day-old fish turned her stomach.

Why were cities such miserable places? Why did people feel the need to bunch up like ants – all living on top of each other – when there was leagues and leagues of empty land outside?

And this was the elegant part of Lorraine. Just outside the old castle walls, this teahouse was surrounded by trees and flowers. The few remaining customers seated outside on the open veranda spoke in quiet, well-modulated voices about proper, polite things. Fashionable hats and the proper sugar decorations for tea biscuits.

Margot hunched over her tepid cup of tea, swirling a properly fashionable biscuit in the light brown liquid. Around and around.

Nothing was going to go wrong. Breath in. Breath out. Don't think about your racing heartbeat, thumping away. Don't hunch your shoulders. Pretend like you belong. Pretend that you're not going to try and break into your cousin's castle, just as soon as the sun disappears.

• • •

Three days earlier

The room was low and dim. A wall of steam, tobacco smoke, and human smells greeted her at the door. She gagged, heart racing inside her threadbare gown that she wore under a rough cloak.

The dress had been fine once, but now it would betray her precarious position – gentle born, but alone and unprotected in the world. A thug's dream.

Two men reeking of smoke and sweat pushed passed her, heading for the counter.

The bar. It's called a bar.

She shied away from them, but they didn't even glance at her, as they loudly debated something in gravelly voices. One broke into a wracking cough.

A man with filthy hands wrapped around a mug of some steaming liquid glanced her way, then back down at his cup. Then, back up again, frowning. His gray eyes met hers, and his mouth split into a rotten grin.

Heat swept down from her scalp to her toes– probably turning her face red.

The woman behind the bar turned and shot her a quizzical look.

It was Adele Dumont. Jacques was right there – in her hazel eyes and the set of her mouth. She was about Margot's age, she'd heard, but Adele seemed so much older.

Hands shaking, Margot withdrew her letter, and stepping up to the bar, she placed it face up before the young woman.

Adele frowned, glanced at the opening line, and cursed.

"Hello Adele, I'm Marguerite Charlotte Lafarge," Margot had written.

Adele looked up, her face set like a mask.

"You found me."

Margot nodded, briefly met her eyes, and pointed at the paper.

“I have no intention of stealing the freedom you’ve won for yourself,” she’d written. “But I’d like to hire you to help me with a job. Just one job. You’ll be paid with valuable jewelry that will allow you to live comfortably, far from any of my kind. You are completely free to take this or turn me down. If you refuse, I swear I will not seek you out again, nor will I tell anyone about you.”

Adele slid the paper from the bar, crumpling it in her hand. Margot forced herself to meet the woman’s cold, calculating stare.

“How did you find me?”

Margot retrieved her blank book and pencil, and started to compose an answer with still unsteady hands.

“I’m afraid I was sworn to secrecy on that.”² She wrote. *“I cannot betray that confidence.”*

Adele hissed impatiently.

“Fine.” She pointed to a table in a dark corner. “Go wait for me. I’ll come talk when I can.”

Margot nodded, and left the bar.

The table was rough, scarred, and stained. The bench was much the same, but it had been rubbed smooth by years of sitting.

She didn’t wait long.

“So,” Adele said, sliding onto the other bench. “What is this job.”

Margot started to write, but Adele slapped her hand down on the page. “You proved your point – just tell me about the damn job for Gale’s sake.”

² Hand wave. Noun: when the author hasn’t figured out how something happened, and hopes you never ask.^{2.b}

^{2.b} Meta joke. Noun: when the author tries to excuse a writing sin (such as a hand wave) by making a self aware joke about committing said sin. xD

Margot bit her lip, staring at Adele's hand. It was dry and cracked from washing dishes, but surprisingly delicate. But then, Magicians don't fight with their hands.

She shook her head, and tugged her book free.

Adele sighed, leaning back against the wall. She tapped her fingers impatiently on the table top as Margot wrote furiously, hunched over her book.

"I need to steal something from the castle. If you help me, I will also show you where you can take a load of jewelry. My contact can fence them, if you like."

Margot spun the book around so Adele could read it.

"So, what is this thing you want to steal?"

"Books." She wrote. *"Important books."*

"Really." Adele didn't attempt to hide her scorn and disbelief from her voice. "And do you have a plan?"

Margot blushed. *"Well,"* she scratched out. *"You will sneak us in. We grab the books and the jewelry. And then you get us back out."*

"That's it, huh. That's your plan."

Margot flushed. *"It has some gaps. Do you have suggestions?"*

"How did you get away?"

"Bastien's Feast. The palace was full of people. I slipped away from my lady-in-waiting and got out the gate with the crowd."

"Great. And the city daemon, did you consider that? And my uncle? And you *do* know your brother Alexandre is there, don't you?"

Margot gasped. "No —!" She cut off — slamming her hands across her mouth. She shrank down in her seat. Then wrote again with a hand that shook ever so slightly.

"How do you know? How long has he been there?"

“Half a year. Without me, your dear brother decided he needed Lorraine’s protection against daemons and such. So he swallowed his pride and came crawling back to your cousin. Swore allegiance to his rule.”

Margot frowned. After Alexandre’s long fight for the throne, after all the time she’d spent as a virtual prisoner in that castle? After all that, Alexandre placed himself under Roland’s rule, *voluntarily*.

Her hands were shaking. She squeezed them together. Alexandre’s presence changed nothing. Adele would make sure she wasn’t captured by either man. Breathe in. Out. In. Out. Alexandre wasn’t going to catch them.

“So – how many books?” Adele asked.

Margot glanced up briefly, then away. Adele was glaring, her lips pressed into a narrow line.

Carefully, she picked up her pencil in still shaking hands. “*There were about ten.*”

“Ten?” Adele didn’t sound pleased. “You want me to sneak out of that castle with ten books?”

“*Do you have an armory stone?*”

“Yes. It’s connected to Roucy. I don’t think anyone’s touched the room. I’ve been using it, so it still works. For now.”

She drummed her fingers thoughtfully on the table.

“We’ll have to get past the wall without raising the alarm. The daemon will alert Roland right away. But if we get inside quietly, with luck, the guards will know there’s an intruder, but not who or where. That’s our only chance.”

“*So, you’ll help me?*”

Adele sighed, crossed her arms, and leaned back against the wall. “I need the money. I can’t work here forever. Another damn Noble is bound to show up eventually. And life without magic requires money.”

"I drew a map of the castle. It was the best I could do."

She slid the paper out from the back of her book and unfolded it. She ran a finger over the folds, pressing them flat. It really wasn't good. She'd been away from the castle for too long. And she'd never been an artist.

Adele bent over the rough sketch, frowning.

"Tell me what you need," Margot wrote. *"— What commands you need from me."*

Adele's mouth twisted in a sour smile, but she nodded.

• • •

With a plop, the lower half of Margot's biscuit broke away and dropped into her tea. She flinched, then flushed with embarrassment.

Adele snorted. She was leaning back in her chair, shoulders relaxed, idly flipping her spoon between her fingers.

The world around them was sliding further into shadow as the minutes ticked away. Each time Margot noticed how fewer people there were around, or how much darker it had become, another knot formed in her stomach.

"You could still run away," Adele muttered. "Leave your damn books. Of course, I'd have to go back to drawing ale for drunks."

Margot stared at her hands. Adele had far more to lose than she did. There was no way Alexandre would hurt his sister, and Roland had no reason to hurt Margot either, once she was locked away in his castle again.

She wasn't afraid of *that*. Not really. Her hand closed around the biscuit, crumbling the rest into her cup.

Jacques.

• • •

Ten years ago

The leaves were still wet from that morning rain.

The soothing scent of wet earth filled Margot's lungs, and mossy ground squelched under knees and hands. As she clambered through her little green tunnel, drips shook off and sprinkled across her head and shoulders. They slid down under her collar, and she shivered.

The bushes were happy to see her. They rustled in a comforting way that she could never explain. But Alexi said there were daemons in everything, and if you spent enough time with them, they might decide to be your friend.

He'd said that so she'd leave him alone, she'd decided. But she was still pretty sure he'd told the truth. Her green cave of living foliage that she'd painstakingly shaped and woven together did feel ... safe.

Ignoring the cold mud seeping into her stockings and soiling her dress, she drew scrawny little knees up to her chest and held them very tight. She squeezed her eyes shut.

The trees and bushes were her friends. And papa was far away. She was safe here.

She pictured maman. She was beautiful. With long brown hair, just Margot's color. Good, kind, sweetness shone off of her.

Maman, my arm hurts, she thought. Kiss it.

Maman wrapped her in her soft arms that smelled like her perfume, and Margot was warm and safe –

Something here was wrong. She wasn't safe.

Her eyes snapped open, and someone stepped on a twig.

She wormed her way back, into the mass of leaves at the back of her green cave. *Hide me*, she thought at the trees. She bumped into a trunk and, unable to go further, she pressed her face into her knees, trying to block out the world.

“Margot.”

It wasn't Papa's voice. Not his loud, angry, slurred voice. Nor his soft, soothing, apologetic voice. It wasn't Alexi.

It was Jacques.

She raised her face, eyes wide, to see the man on his hands and knees, pushing through her little passage. The knees of his trousers and his shirt cuffs were muddy. His reddish brown hair was wet and hanging over his eyes. He was smiling disarmingly.

Her hands moved without thinking, to cover her mouth.

He reached out and gently touched her hurting arm. She yelped with pain, then snapped her mouth shut.

“I might be able to take the hurt away if you let me look at it.”

She held back, cradling her throbbing arm. It felt weak and strange and looked the wrong color.

“Tell me where it hurts most,” Jacques said.

She squeezed her lips tight.

“It's okay,” he said, gently. “You can talk to me. Just – just don't tell me to do things unless I tell you exactly what to say. Only when I say so. But you can talk to me. You won't hurt me with those kind of words. And I'll never tell.” He flashed his grin again. “So, would you show me where it hurts?”

Papa would explode if he knew. Never, ever, ever, talk to Jacques. That was the rule. Words could break him. And papa would be very angry if she broke Jacques. Much, much, more angry than today.

“Are you sure?” She asked in a very small voice.

“Well, *that* didn't hurt me.”

She studied him for a few more minutes. The leaves rustled. A little bird chirped nearby. Finally, she nodded. "It hurts here." She pointed to a place just above her elbow.

As soon as she said it out loud, she realized just how much it did hurt. Her eyes filled with tears and she started sobbing.

It hurt so much.

Jacques wrapped his arms around her shoulders, avoiding her arm, and she cried into his muddy sleeve.

Finally, she pulled back, embarrassed, confused, and hiccuping just a little. Her arm still hurt.

He placed a hand on her head. "I can make it stop hurting, but you need to help me. You need to say some words. Do you think you can do that?"

She nodded.

"These are words that tell me to do something, so you will need to say exactly what I tell you, okay?"

"Or you'll break?"

He smiled. "I don't think I'll break, but it could be a problem. But that won't happen, because you'll say exactly what I say. Right?"

She nodded again.

"Say 'make a splint for my arm.'"

She thought about the words, then took a deep breath. "Make a splint for my arm."

He smiled and pulled off the silk scarf he wore tied at his throat. Touching her arm with just his fingertips, he wound it around her arm.

She whimpered. Even that light pressure hurt.

Then, as he held her arm, his hand began to glow bright green. She'd seen his hands do that before, so it wasn't alarming. Just a little weird. No one else could make their hands glow green.

One of the trees reached out and wrapped smooth, narrow branches around her hurting arm and his scarf.

She gasped, startled, and tried to pull away, then screamed at the fresh spike of pain.

The light faded, leaving her arm wrapped in a tube of supple green wood.

She whimpered, cradling the now heavy arm against her chest.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm so sorry it hurt. I had to make a wooden sleeve for your arm, so it will heal and stop hurting."

She glared at him. She wanted maman. She wanted a hug. She wanted to cry again. But there was no maman. Just Papa, and Alexi, and Jacques.

And Jacques was here.

She buried her face in his sleeve again for a while. When she was done with crying, she looked up, rubbing her eyes with muddy fingers.

"Shall I go then?" He asked.

She grabbed him, shaking her head fiercely. Her arm still hurt a little.

"No, stay!" She blurted without thinking, then slammed a hand over her mouth. Those words told him to do things. Did she break him?

He smiled. "It's okay. That didn't hurt me. I'll stay as long as you like." He shifted so that he sat on his rear in the mud, his knees drawn up to his chest. Just like her. "This is a lovely place. How long have you had it?"

She told him about pushing the bushes together and stamping down the little green plants on the ground to make a floor.

He told her about friendly daemons and he showed her some magic. So she told him all about her pet kitten, and her favorite story books. He listened carefully, and asked plenty of questions.

Eventually, her stomach growled, loud enough for them both to hear. Papa had gone to sleep, he said. Papa wouldn't be awake again until tomorrow. It was safe to come back with him. Would she?

She nodded.

The papa who'd wake would be the soft-voiced, apologetic papa. The version who'd buy whatever treats she wanted. The one who'd say he'd never ever positively *ever* hurt her again.

She shuddered and reached for Jacques' hand as they walked back to the country manor.

• • •

Margot stared into her teacup, tracing the delicate pattern around the edge with a finger. Her hand trembled. She clenched it into a fist, then reached for her notebook.

"It is getting dark," she wrote.

Adele nodded.

Margot could still walk away. But, those journals. She finally had a chance to meet – to know – her mother.

The last few minutes before dark hour were always strange. The whole world seemed to drop into an eerie gloom, like someone draped a gray curtain over the world. And then, the sun just slipped away.

As full dark came, they pushed to their feet, grabbed dark cloaks and tossed them around their shoulders.

The old castle wall stood right across the street. Built in an older era, the royal residence of Lorraine had never been rebuilt to reflect modern architectural sensibilities. In Margot's three years living there before her escape, it had been a prison. Giant, gray stone blocks. A massive wall. Turrets.

Adele grabbed her wrist and yanked her into the narrow alley they'd chosen. "Wake up," she hissed.

On one side, the old wall towered over their heads, and on their other stood the much newer teahouse wall. It was almost completely dark. Most people would be home, sleeping.

Adele looked at Margot, expectant.

She nodded, and took a deep breath. "Make a tunnel under the wall. Quietly."³

Adele smiled, and bent down to place her hands on the cobblestones. Her face pinched with concentration. Her hands, the stones, even the air, lit up with a purple glow. There were no windows around them. No one should be able to see her light, even in this darkness.

The stones began to shift with a creaking, scratching, groaning sound all around. Then they broke free from the road, floating in the air, glowing with purple light. Adele shifted her stance, and the stones coalesced into a pile nearby, moving slowly, and landing softly. Their glow faded, and the darkness closed around them.

Adele slid to sit on the ground, resting her head in her hands for a few minutes. Margot stood, waiting, watching, listening. Far away, she could hear marching on the wall top. But there was no alarm. Not yet. But Adele had said the daemon may, even now, be warning Roland.

Adele sat up, and slid down into the hole that had opened in the ground in front of her. Her hands glowed faintly – enough that Margot could follow.

The smell of subterranean soil was a welcome change from oppressive city air. But the tunnel was narrow and low. As they moved away from the entrance, the weight of the earth around them grew oppressive. It was narrow. Dark. There was dirt and a massive wall above, between them and the open air.

Margot's throat tightened. *Breath in. Breath out. Follow Adele. She knows what she's doing.*

³ So, yeah. I really had no idea for how to actually get them inside, so I gave up and made a tunnel. Sometimes you just gotta use the simplest solutions, you know? xD

Ahead, Adele stopped moving. She raised a hand, now bright with purple. They faced another solid stone wall. She turned her head, looking over her shoulder, and waited.

Margot's voice was small and muffled in the claustrophobic darkness. "Make a hole in the wall, quietly."

Adele placed two glowing hands against the stones. A deep, shuddering, shifting vibration filled the earth around them. The stone began to glow as well. Adele's shoulders tensed, and the stone slid inward, floating down to the floor of the room beyond.

If it hadn't already, the city daemon would be alerting Roland by now. They needed to move fast.

Adele slid through the opening, and Margot followed. It was an awkward position, and she emerged with her shoulders and torso hanging a couple feet above the stone floor. She reached out her arms to take her weight as Adele had done, but she crumpled onto the hard floor in an ungainly tangle of limbs, cloak, and skirt.

Adele stepped back, waiting as she sorted herself out.

Her purple light confirmed that Margot's memory and spatial guesses had been correct. They were in a cellar. The walls were lined with bags of root vegetables and grain. A vague mustiness and a strong earthy smell hung in the air. The smell of potatoes.

Adele glanced around. "So, the laundry?"

Margot nodded. Right. The next Obligation. "It should be down the passage to the right. No, left, sorry."

"Yes. We talked about this." Adele's voice was tense.

"Go to the laundry and steal two sets of livery. Bring them back here."

Adele vanished into the darkness, and Margot reached out to find the broken wall. She leaned back against it, then slid down to sit on the floor. She drew her knees up to her chest, hugging them against the damp cold.

There wasn't anything she could do until Adele returned. Unlike Margot, no one, other than possibly Alexandre, would recognize her. But Margot

had escaped only a year ago. Most of the staff would know her. But hopefully not dressed in servant livery, Adele had suggested.

“People see the uniform, not you,” she said. “They look right past you. You’re basically window drapes.”

The room was totally black. The sort of enveloping darkness that’s somehow solid. The only sound was her soft, rapid breathing. In. Out. In. Out.

She started counting – forming each number silently with her mouth, picturing the shapes. Keeping her mind focused. Here, in the present.

...235. 236. 237. 238...

Alone with her memory in the dark wasn’t safe.

• • •

Eleven years ago

She woke up screaming in a wet bed. Again.

Nurse bustled in, alternating between murmuring she was there – everything was okay – and softly fussing over the soiled bedding. This was the third night in a row – couldn’t Margot try a bit harder?

Her presence was reassuring, but not enough to stop Margot’s sobs. She sat on the rug before the fire’s embers while the woman deftly stripped the bed, replacing the wet linens with fresh.

“You hush now – there’s nothin’ to cry over, lamb,” Nurse muttered as she pulled the wet nightdress over her head and stuffed her into another. “There’s nothin’ in the dark.”

Then the nursery door creaked open. Surprised, Margot stopped screaming, and rubbed her eyes.

Maman stood in the door. The candle in her hand cast a golden glow across her face and glimmered in her silky curls. This was the comforting presence she’d been craving for too many nights.

Margot shrieked with joy. "Maman!"

She swept into the room and scooped Margot up. "What is it, my dear? I heard you – what made you cry?"

Margot hiccuped. "I don't remember."

Nurse bustled over, muttering about spoiling her – it'll be worse in the morning for it, now that she'd shown herself to Margot – but maman brushed her off, telling her to mind her place. The woman left through the other door, grumbling the whole way.

Maman carried Margot to the bed and sat down. "I'm here now, love. I'm here."

Margot rubbed chubby fists in her eyes. "You left," she said reproachfully.

"I did. I'm sorry, love. I had to fix something."

"Alexi broke Nina and Nurse said she couldn't fix her." The thought of her discarded wooden toy filled Margot's eyes with tears again.

Maman nodded. "Something was broken – like Nina. But I fixed it. Now I shall see if we can fix Nina – would you like that?"

"But Nina was tossed into the rubbish."

Maman smiled. "Oh, don't worry. You'll get her back – she'll be fixed so well, that," maman gave her a tight squeeze. "That she'll look new. How's that sound?"

Margot thought about this for a minute. Then nodded again. "Who broke your Nina?"

"Someone very wicked."

"More than Alexi?"

"Much more. But don't worry. He's been punished. Now," she squeezed Margot again. "Do you think you're ready to sleep again?"

Margot shook her head, and wrapped her arms firmly around one of maman's. She buried her face in her maman's arm, smelling the sweet perfume. She wasn't going to sleep – and she wasn't going to let go. She was going to make sure maman didn't disappear again.

Maman began to softly hum, swaying back and forth to the tune. It was warm and very cozy. Margot's hold on maman relaxed just a bit.

Maman was gone in the morning. Even a shiny, undamaged Nina waiting for her on the nursery table could do nothing to stop the flood of tears.

It was the last time Margot saw her alive.

• • •

... 239. 240. 241. 242.

Margot hugged her knees to her chest, shivering just a bit.

What had been so important to keep Claudette Lafarge away from her children? Lorraine politics? Her mother's half brother? – Roland's father – the man who'd viciously ordered his own half-sister's murder when she'd challenged his undeserving claim to the throne?

Hadn't they stolen enough from Margot's family? Her mother. Her mother's throne. Her father's sanity – she didn't remember his voice ever slurring, nor his explosive temper or vicious cruelty while maman was alive. She'd been the heart and goodness in their family.

And Margot had almost no memories of the woman herself – none that were free from the extreme distortions of childhood.

She squeezed her eyes shut. It didn't make any difference in the darkness, but it felt better, somehow.

She pictured each number's shape and sound in her mind.

... 243. 244. 245. 246. 247.

I'm scared, maman. She thought. But this would all be worth it. Her mother was still alive in her journals, and between those pages, Margot would finally meet her.

A real sound – footsteps – snapped her eyes open. She pressed back against the stone wall, her heart pounding in her ears.

Light.

A purple glow.

Adele.

She pushed to her feet, almost sobbing with relief.

The Magician hurried into the room and tossed her a uniform. Margot turned around and, after stripping down to her underclothes, fumbled with the unfamiliar garments.

Adele stepped over, helping her sort it out. "Let's go," she murmured. "They rang the warning bell."

Margot nodded. They were betting on the guard and Adele's uncle running to Roland's side, to protect the king from assassins, rather than search the lower levels for thieves.

They navigated through the first few passages with Adele's light, finally reaching areas with gas lamps set into the walls.

Here, sounds of hushed voices echoed through the corridors, along with tapping footsteps. A tense, dangerous presence knew Margot was here. And knew she wasn't supposed to be. She felt strangely disoriented and sick.

Adele grabbed her arm, dragging her along.

Fortunately, Margot's map must have been correct, because while she wasn't sure where they were, Adele led her through several turns without hesitating.

They reached a T, and Adele stopped. "Which way?" she hissed.

Voices echoed down one side, and there were sounds of activity down the other. Margot frowned. She should know this area. One direction led to the – the courtyard. She pointed toward the voices.

“Damn,” Adele muttered. They’d find out for sure if the clothes were enough of a disguise. “Keep your eyes down and walk quickly, but, as if you’ve urgent business, and not like a scared little rabbit.”

Margot nodded, blushing. She probably looked just about like that. Adele, of course, was striding along confidently, as if she belonged.

The voices came into view. Two men. Dressed in lavish colors and rich fabric. She dropped her eyes. Head down. She had somewhere to go, something to do. *Don’t notice us*, she thought desperately. *Please, please, don’t notice us. Or at least, don’t be Noblemen.* Oh, Gale – they’d better not be Noblemen.

“Hey!” said one. Adele didn’t respond, but Margot was sure she flinched. “You – girls,” he added. Adele stopped and turned to him. “Yes, sir?”

“I ordered a good, strong coffee. Hours ago.”

Adele inclined her head, stiffly. “I apologize, sir. I’ll be sure to let the kitchens know.” She turned as if to go, but the man huffed out a protest. “Go and get it now, girl! I’ve already waited far longer than is decent.”

“Unless you are demanding I make my royal mistress wait for your needs, I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a bit longer.” There was a vaguely haughty air to Adele’s voice. She turned again, this time with a bit of a toss of her hair.

The man scowled and muttered a crude insult, but let them past.

When they turned down the next hall, Adele huffed out a breath of relief, her shoulders slumping. “Gales, I was so worried those would be some of your relatives.”

Margot nodded, and they moved on. The secret library she’d discovered shortly before her escape was nearby. Even with castle on alert for danger, the halls were quiet – asleep. Maybe – would they – actually do it and get away clean?

A small trickle of sweat itched between her shoulder blades, under the stiff servant livery.

Nearing the main living rooms for the royal family, they passed several groups of servants, all hurrying on some errand. And four soldiers. It was like she and Adele were invisible. Adele was right.

She tapped Adele, and pointed at a door. Adele stopped, turned, and nodded.

Margot reached for the handle, but the door didn't open. "Open this door," she murmured to Adele.

The Magician glanced up and down the hall, waiting for a servant to disappear around a corner, then, she stepped close and placed her hand over the lock. It glowed for a heartbeat, then the door creaked open.

The tapestry room entrance should be just down this hall. Margot's heart raced. They were so close, and also, so close to danger. This passage was also one of the ways to Roland's private rooms.

Servant girls here would be noticed, and Margot would be easily recognized. They moved softly, carefully. Had this hall always been this long? Far off masculine voices spoke loudly. An argument. Or an animated discussion. This part of the castle was very awake.

They passed several closed doors. Those couldn't be it – the tapestry hall entrance had a high arch. At least, she was pretty sure it did.

It did. Just in time. There were footsteps coming their way. They slipped into the tapestry hall.

In the daytime, it would be well lit from a line of large windows. At intervals along that wall were massive window alcoves, set with plush benches and hung with red curtains. The opposite wall was hung with bright tapestries depicting the history of Lorraine, starting with its founding king – Margot's ancestor. This was a favorite place for Roland to meet with ambassadors and important persons. It conveyed a message of power and opulence – and a bloody history of Lorraine's dominance over other city states through the centuries.

Margot pulled Adele into the nearest window alcove, to wait for the footsteps to pass. They climbed up to stand on the cushioned bench,

pressing themselves against the curved shape of the window, mostly hidden behind the drawn curtains.

Margot thought about releasing them from their catches, and closing the heavy drapes. But none of the other windows had drawn curtains. She pulled her hand back from the catch. Staying still and quiet would be the best option.

The footsteps slowed as they neared the tapestry hall entrance. Margot sucked in a breath and held it. Adele closed her eyes, hiding her glowing purple eye rings, and held her breath as well.

The steps turned, entering the hall. Margot bit her lip and pressed herself against the stonework. They couldn't have been heard or seen. It was just a coincidence. There was no reason to think they were being followed. Her heartbeat sounded horrifyingly loud in her ears.

The footsteps came level with their hiding place.

A set of well-dressed shoulders appeared. The side of a man's head. Well-combed reddish brown hair.

Jeoffroi⁴.

Jacques' brother. Roland's Court Magician. Margot never spoke to him in all the time she'd been at the castle, and he'd never initiated a conversation with her.

He was walking past. He hadn't noticed them.

He passed the alcove without a glance.

He continued down the hall, and disappeared through a door in the far end.

Margot released her breath in a rush. It sounded like a sob. Her legs were shaking as she jumped down to the stone floor.

Adele followed more cautiously. She looked down the hall after Jeoffroi. "You recognized him."

⁴ I wanted to use the name Jasper so bad, but I'd already voted for it to be Rock Magician's name, and so I had to pick something else. Two OC Magician Jaspers would just be confusing. :P xD

Margot nodded.

“Who was it?”

“Jeoffroi Dumont.”

“My uncle?”

Margot nodded again.

“You idiot,” Adele hissed in an angry whisper. “He was right here – you could have ordered him to stop and be quiet. We could have used his help.”

Margot shook her head.

“Look, I appreciate it, I really do,” Adele snapped. “But we’re here in the thick of it right now – you damn well better be prepared to do what you’ve got to do. I need to know you’re going to do your part.”

Margot nodded.

Adele glared at her. Then, shaking her head, she turned away.

Margot hurried down the hall, watching for the Siege of Montagu. The room would be there – up a flight of stairs, behind a door, hidden behind that tapestry.

She stopped, and gestured for Adele to join her, then she slipped behind the massive, heavy fabric. She gripped the door handle. It didn’t open.

She stepped to one side. “Open the door,” she whispered, carefully.

Adele moved to take her place, and reached for the handle, her hand glowing purple.

Blue light slammed into Margot, knocking aside the tapestry and sending her sprawling in a tangle with Adele. The stone floor slammed into her shoulder, and she screamed in blank shock. Adele pushed away from her as Margot struggled to understand what had just happened. Her shoulder hurt, and she squinted into the blazing light filling the hall.

Adele stood over her, hands raised, surrounded by purple light, deflecting the blue. “Tell him to stop, Gale blast you!” Adele hissed through clenched teeth.⁵

Margot opened her mouth, but the words caught in her throat.

The memory of a blade. Bright red, sticky, blood. The smell of copper. She covered her mouth, trying not to cry.

Above her, Adele turned suddenly, and blasted the secret door open. Then with what looked like one motion, she grabbed Margot’s arm and dragged her through the door.

Adele was shouting into her face. “I’ve got to close this door! Tell me to –”

Margot croaked out words. She hoped they were enough.

Adele dropped her hold on Margot’s arm, and raised both hands to the doorframe. Purple light filled Margot’s vision, and then, with a crashing, roaring tumble of stone and masonry, the opening disappeared. The purple light vanished into total darkness.

Margot half heard, half felt Adele sit beside her on the stone stairs, gasping for breath.

Margot pushed herself upright, rubbing her bruised shoulder and took a deep breath. She doubled over in a hacking cough. Dust from the collapsed doorway must be filling the air. She rubbed itchy eyes. It was a mistake.

Adele’s voice came from the darkness, harsh with exhaustion and anger. “Damnit – what *is* your problem?”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I – I can’t.”

“You can’t *what*?”

“I can’t just – shout a command like that. I can’t do it.”

⁵ Adele: “You had one job, damnit!” Din: “Wanna trade? Mine’s happy to recklessly toss out Obligations when I need him to stay quiet.” xD

Something slammed into the blocked passage from the other side, shaking the walls and stairs. Adele's hand glowed with purple, and her face appeared through the settling dust. "My uncle will break through in a minute – go get your damn books." She stepped passed Margot. "And tell me to hold him out. Can you do at least *that*?"

Margot nodded. "Hold – keep anyone who attacks that door out."

She pushed to her feet and started to climb the narrow little staircase. From behind, she could hear a growing roar of stone shifting, vibrating, cracking, as two Magicians fought to control the stones. Or, the daemons linked to the stones. Something like that.

After Jacques, there hadn't been anything to protect her father from Roland's attack. They killed him, and brought her here. To the castle – for "protection."

Roland hadn't cared where she went inside, as long as she stayed *in* the castle, and safely out of public view – safely away from any faction or city leader who might have supported her mother's claim.

Shortly before her escape, she'd found this place. Only once, and she'd only had a little time. Just long enough to find the journals, and figure out they'd been written by maman.

Well. If Roland caught her and locked her up, at least now she'd have maman's journals.

The stone steps shook, and, ahead, something rattled.

She stepped into the little room. She'd found it.

A strange collection of things filled the shelves. The jewelry she'd promised Adele. Books. Artifacts.

The journals.

Why had Roland hidden them away in here? Guilt for what his father had done? Did he hope people would forget about the queen they should have had?

A thrill of excitement slid down her spine as she wrapped her arms around the musty handwritten volumes. She hurried back down the steps

as fast as she could in the midst of the magical war going on below, without dropping any books.

Adele shot a quick glance her way as Margot joined her at the bottom of the steps. She pointed. "Put them here."

Another wave slammed against the makeshift wall, cracking the stones. Margot's eyes stung from the dust as she placed the books.

Adele reached out, hand glowing, and touched the first few. They glowed purple, then disappeared. She repeated the action, vanishing the rest of the stack.

"I assume there's no other way out of here?" Adele snapped. "Tell me to open the way. And then get ready to run like hell."

"The jewelry!"

"Forget it, you stupid girl! There's no time."

Margot squeaked out the words that would reverse her earlier Obligation, and Adele raised a hand. "Get ready. If this doesn't stun any possible Nobleman out there, I'm done." ⁶

Margot nodded. She was ready. She could be as strong as Adele. She could run.

The narrow passage filled with purple, then deafening, chaotic noise, and the entire wall exploded out, away from them. Adele grabbed her arm, and ran.

Pulse pounding in her ears, Margot forced her limbs to move. Each step, putting everything she could into it. She had no idea where they were or where they were going. All she could think about was running. Her breath came in ragged gasps, and her side burned.

She couldn't go much further. She missed a step, and looked around.

⁶ She's also secretly hoping it's gonna make a really loud noise. Loud enough that she won't be able to hear anything. But she can't do anything to *intentionally* prevent her hearing, so that would be a pleasant byproduct of a very big explosion.

“Wait – stop. In there.” She pointed, gasping, at a little hall that lead to a bunch of closets and things.

Adele skidded to a stop and followed Margot into one of the little rooms. One of these had a random low tunnel to one of the servant’s rooms – . No, this was the wrong one. Margot spun, but she could already hear the pursuit.

“Barricade the door,” she gasped.

With a flash of purple, a wall beam slammed into place behind the door. The room was totally dark. They stood panting in the darkness.

“Why are we in here?” Adele raised a glowing hand. “Is there a way out?”

Margot shook her head. “I’m sorry. I thought so – I was – I was wrong.”

Adele snorted. “Naturally.”

She extinguished the light, and, miraculously, their pursuers moved past their little, inconspicuous door. But they heard voices up and down the passage. There would be no quick exit out of here.

As her breathing slowed, Margot slid to sit on the floor.

Adele’s eyes – tiny glowing circles of purple in the darkness – showed where she sat across from Margot, breathing softly.

• • •

Nine years ago

Margot pushed up onto her toes, stretching to reach the door handle, and pulled.

She was careful to open the door slowly – softly. The hinges might squeak, and papa might hear. Well, papa was out in the far field with his new horse. But, she wasn’t going to take any chances.

Jacques had turned away from his desk and was facing her, when she’d opened the door far enough to see inside.

He flashed her a welcoming smile.

“Hello Margot.”

She hung back. Was he busy? Maybe he had important business to do for papa.

She opened her mouth, frowning with concentration. She spoke slowly, thinking hard about what to say. “I wanted to know – I was wondering,” she hesitated. Was this the right way to ask him to do something, but without words that *told* him to do things? ⁷

He nodded encouragingly. “That’s right. You can ask a question. Those are safe.”

“Do you wanna play with me?” she asked in a rush. “I was having tea with my dolls, but –”

“But dolls aren’t really the most engaging company,” he finished for her.

She frowned. The words were unfamiliar, but they sounded sort of right. So she nodded.

He grinned. “I’d very much like to play with you, Miss Margot. And,” he leaned down, whispering. “How would you like some real tea and tea service for our tea party?” ⁸

“Oh! Yes!” She lowered her own voice. “Can – can you? From the kitchen? *Real* tea?”

“Of course. Where are you planning to have this party?”

“Well – in my forest place.”

He nodded. “An excellent location. Moldy leaves and mud are the best compliment to fine porcelain.”

⁷ technically, she IS Obligating him to answer her question, but the Obligation is for the answer, not the action. I believe. So as long as every request she makes of him is a question of if he wants to, then she’s safe from accidentally giving him an awkward or unfortunate Obligation. I think. xD

⁸ This scene is dedicated to whoever it was that created the adorable Noble child/Magician tea party head canon. ^_^

She frowned. More big words. "Yes?"

"Right. You head out there with your dolls, and I'll meet you there with the tea. I just need one thing from you."

"What?"

"Tell me to bring tea."

Words that told him to do things. She nodded solemnly, and took a deep breath. It was important to say them right. "Jacques. Bring tea."

He was already there when she arrived, lugging three large dolls in her arms. Nurse would scold her for getting them dirty, but papa didn't care about muddy doll frocks, so nothing would come of it.

Cook, on the other hand, was a terrifying person who must never be crossed. Unless, apparently, you were a Magician.

He waved his hand around the small hollow that, together they'd built up quite a bit since he first invaded her little world. "I think we need a table for the tea, don't you think?"

"Do we?"

"Don't worry, we can put it back afterward."

"Okay. Where do we get a table?"

"Tell me to make a table."

A second set of words telling him to do things in one morning. Was that – bad? Would she break him if she told him to do too many things?

He smiled reassuringly. "It'll be okay. Just tell me to make a table for tea, and nothing bad can happen."

She nodded. "Make a – table for tea?" Her voice wavered a little, and she watched him closely, in case he broke anyway.

He spread glowing hands across the muddy ground, and a mass of roots swelled up out of the ground, spreading and knotting together, until a low, round table filled the center of the hollow. Dark soil clung to many of the roots, but the surface was flat and solid.

She laughed with delight.

Underneath her dolls, more roots grew into chairs to hold their stuffed bodies upright, sitting at the table.

He brushed leaves and the biggest clumps of dirt off with his sleeve. Then, holding out his hand, one at a time, tea things appeared, and he set them where they belonged.

A jug with a cork stopper. A second, smaller jug. A porcelain pot decorated with gold and painted with delicate roses.⁹ Five matching cups and saucers with delicate handles. A silver plate and a collection of biscuits tied in a napkin. Another silver plate with sugar cakes.

Margot squealed, and pounced on the cakes as Jacques opened the jug and filled the teapot with steaming brown tea. Then, uncorking the second jug, he poured milk into her cup, then tea.

“Do you take sugar, Madame Margot?”

She giggled around a mouthful of cake. “Oh, yes, good sir. Two lumps, please.”

He served each of her dolls, and then himself.

After munching and sipping quietly for a few minutes, Jacques asked what she’d done that morning.

Mostly, she’d avoided papa – this was an angry day. But instead, she told Jacques a story about how her cat had caught a mouse, and then the cat and mouse became friends, and the cat decided to move into the mouse’s house, but she didn’t fit, so they asked Margot to build it bigger.

But that required magic. And she couldn’t do magic. But – she looked up, excited.

⁹ No, I didn’t look up any deep flower meanings. Thanks for asking. xD It’s a set of tea cups, people. Sometimes a flower is just a flower! xD

“You –”

He held up a hand. The warning that she might say something bad.

The rush of words died in her throat, and she flushed, looking down at her cup. She’d messed up again.

“It’s okay, Margot. I’m not angry. I loved that story about Petunia. But can you think of where you might have told me to do things by accident?”

She bit her lip, and swished the tea in her cup.

“Margot.”

She refused to look at him. He sighed.

“Margot – I’m not angry with you. You haven’t hurt me. I won’t ever choose to stop playing with you and I won’t leave you. And if you ever do hurt me, I wouldn’t be angry with you. Do you believe me?”

She blinked at the prickles in her eyes, then nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “So – can you think of what you might have said that was dangerous?”

She nodded again.

He waited.

“I – it was about the mouse’s house. I – about how you could – and –”

“And that I should do it for you.”

“Yeah.”

He grinned. “Good job. You found the ‘telling to do’ words.”

She nodded, cracking a small smile.

“Good. So, let’s build a house for a mouse. Not in the manor – we might get into trouble there. But out here – with roots and plants. And we’ll find berries to put into a little larder for the mouse.”

Margot clapped her hands with excitement. “Really? You’ll help me?”

“Of course. Now, are you going to help me finish off this tea?”

• • •

A low purple glow filled the dark room, from Adele’s hand.

One of maman’s journals appeared in her hand, and she opened the book.

Margot started to protest, then snapped her mouth shut. Adele glanced up, a malicious smile hovering on her lips.

“I’m trying to figure what is so precious about these books.”

She scanned a few pages, then shut the book with a snap.

“A diary. We came here for a Gale-blasted diary.”

Margot looked away.

“Who is this person to you?”

Margot bit her lip. “My – my mother.”

“Why.”

“I’m sorry,” Margot whispered. “I brought you into this. So I have to get you out of here safe. And I’ll find a way to pay what I promised, I swear.”

Adele snorted again. “I’ll settle for getting out of here. Have any ideas?”

Margot shook her head, and closed her eyes. Just, waiting. For an idea. For a chance. For something.

The minutes ticked away in her mind. Voices moved up and down the passage. Muttered conversations.

Finally Adele spoke again.

"I'll settle for some answers as payment."

Margot glanced her way. Her hand was glowing again, so she could see the tension in Adele's face.

"How did my parents die?" she asked. Her tone was flat, unemotional.
"Alexandre said you were there."

Panic slammed into Margot's chest. No, not that. Anything but that. She shook her head dumbly.

"Seriously?" Adele slammed the book down beside Margot, looming over her. "You know the last time I saw *my* mother? I was ten. It was the day *your* father found me and my mother."

Margot shook her head.

Adele sat back, her hands clenched into fists, and drew in several deep breaths.

She rested her head back against the wall, looking up toward the ceiling.
"We were found out somehow. Lafarge discovered we existed. I never heard how. So then that *bastard* made my father lead him right to us. He promptly gave me to Alexandre, and I never saw them again. I got *one* message smuggled from my father a year later. He had an idea of how to get around his Obligations and rescue me. Of course Alexandre had ordered me to tell him if my father ever contacted me. And then, they were both *dead*."

Margot pulled her knees up to her chest, hiding her face.

"Fine. Do you have any escape ideas yet?"

"I – no. I don't know," Margot said softly into her knees. "I'm – I'm sorry."

Adele shifted, leaned over, and scooped up the book, returning it to her armory.

What do I do, maman? Margot thought, helplessly. Her mother – what would her mother do?

• • •

Five years ago

The manor daemon knew something horrible was about to happen.

Margot had been born at this country manor – now her father's retreat after his loss of Lorraine's throne and his wife. Even before Jacques had taught her about daemons, she'd sensed something more than simple familiarity with the place. The dark empty halls and massive, untended park *knew* her. They responded to her and warned her when papa was drunk and angry. They told her when Alexandre was home, and looking for someone to be nasty to.

Today, the warning was almost a scream.

Normally, she would have run to her deepest hole, but a sick, terrified voice in the back of her head feared it was Jacques who was in trouble.

He'd asked for her help, and he was her friend, so she'd done everything he'd asked. Just a few simple Obligations. But Obligations that terrified her with their implications.

So this bright morning, with wobbly legs, she crept out the back door. This was where the stables were. She could hear her father before she saw him. His voice was thundering. Not slurring. Not today. Today he was using his most terrifying voice of all.

He was in the act of swinging down from his horse, his face red, riding crop gripped with white knuckles. His horse was lathered with sweat and exhausted. Its head drooped, and its sides heaved in and out.

He was shouting for Jacques. And Jacques' wife, Tess.

She appeared first, stepping out the kitchen door, wiping her hands on a cloth.

Tess had joined their staff a year ago. And she was married to Jacques. But they'd been married for a long time. When Tess had first arrived, Margot asked Jacques why he'd never talked about her before – if they'd been married for so long. He'd said it had been better when no one knew.

“But, then why did you bring Tess *now*?” She’d retorted just a bit too enthusiastically, to cover for the thread of fear she’d felt at the tone of his voice.

He’d looked away, and then pointed out a bird. It was one of the kind Margot loved to watch, and it ended her questions, but not her confusion. After that, something always felt ... wrong between them. He’d turned into a normal adult. The kind with secrets and things they don’t share.

But now, at age eleven, after a year spent watching and listening, she’d started to figure some things out. Things that made her feel sick and scared.

Jacques arrived in the carriage yard, out of breath from running.

He stepped between Tess and papa.

“Sir?”

Papa lashed out with the riding crop, still in his hand. “How dare you! How did you do it? You’d need a Nobleman – who helped you, damn it? Answer all my questions truthfully.”

Jacques winced. His answer didn’t reach Margot’s horrified ears, but she knew he’d have to tell papa. Run away, the voice in the back of her head said. Go now. Don’t come back.

But she stayed. Jacques was her friend, and he was in trouble.

Her father stepped up to him. He was taller than the Magician, and a nasty grin spread across his face. “I warned you what I’d do if you ever defied me. You’d dare to use my own daughter against me?!”

Tess placed a hand on her husband’s arm from behind, cowering.

Her father spoke, holding out the riding crop, handle first, to Jacques. Margot couldn’t hear the words, but she knew what it would be. She started running.

“No, papa!” she shouted. “You can’t.”

She was too late. Tess screamed and Jacques seemed to fold in half, slumping to the packed ground. Tess dropped to her knees beside him. Papa had turned toward Margot, but, seeing the effect his Obligation had, gaped at Jacques's shaking form.

He hadn't expected that at all.

Margot was sobbing as she reached them.

"No, you can't," she repeated into papa's terrifying face.

"What have you done," he asked in a low growl.

She cowered. "I – I told him he couldn't hurt Tess or Adele in any way. He said it was – just in case."

His face seemed to shift through several shades, one after the other. She trembled. He'd broken her arm over something she couldn't even remember. What would he do to her for this? Jacques was hurt. Maybe dead.

He grabbed her shoulder in a vice grip that made her yelp with pain, and shook her so hard her teeth rattled together.

"Tell Jacques you rescind all Obligations. Right. Now."

She was sobbing. "I – I promised – no matter what. He – he said –"

Papa raised his hand. She tried to duck, but he held her firm, and she took the full force of his backhand across her cheek and mouth.¹⁰

She closed her eyes, waiting for the next blow. Instead, her father released her, and shouted at Jacques that he rescinded the order to flog Tess.

Margot dropped to her knees in the hard packed dirt. She could taste blood and her cheek and mouth felt swollen. Then papa spoke again. His voice was calm, quiet, and sounded like ice.

¹⁰ So, unless I'm very mistaken, I kinda, accidentally, created a dad way worse than Felix in this universe. And yes, I do feel horrible for that, thanks for asking.

“Margot, dear. I’ll kill Tess if you don’t rescind that Obligation.”¹¹

• • •

Margot wiped her eyes and pushed slowly to her feet.

She’d made a decision, sitting there in the dark. Her voice was weak when she spoke, but determined. “Adele, you must escape. You must protect yourself. I retract all Obligations to protect me. I should have never brought you here. I’m sorry.”

Adele narrowed her eyes. “What are you doing?”

“I’ll draw them off – you must – I order you to – to *try* and escape. If you can. You’ll have to find a way out – you’ll be on your own. Don’t try to follow me.”

Adele opened her mouth, then shut it again.

“Unlock the door, please.”

When Adele had removed the beam barricading the door, Margot gave her a final nod. If only she knew the secret to looking strong and confident, instead of just terrified. But she pushed her narrow shoulders back, and stepped out of the door.

As soon as she was in the main passage, she dashed forward and started running blindly – it didn’t matter which way – her goal was to be noticed, and caught.

She took a corner, feet slipping sideways on smooth stone, and slammed into a richly dressed torso.

¹¹ TBH, I wasn’t going to actually write this scene out. I was just going to allude to it and let you fill in whatever horrible you wanted with your imagination, but I realized this is kinda key to understanding Margot. And yes, writing this scene physically hurt.

There was a surprised shout, followed by a laugh. She looked up into Roland's confused face. It changed to recognition an instant later. She pushed away, but he lunged forward and caught her wrist.

"You!?"

She tried to yank her hand from his grasp, but Roland caught her other elbow, pinning her arms.

"Let me go!" She wasn't really expecting him to comply.

His eyes narrowed. "You took the books. Where are they?"

She stopped struggling, shocked. He cared about musty old books written by his aunt? "Why do you care?"

"And you brought a Magician – where is he?"

Her chin came up, defiant. "Why did you hide my mother's books?"

"Dumont says the Magician's aura was purple. She's got Adele."

Margot stiffened. Alexandre's voice. She turned. Tall, elegant, handsome, Alexandre strode toward her. He looked so much like papa. Her throat tightened as he flashed her a grin and inclined his head.

"So good to see you are well, Margot dear. We've all been so worried that you were begging in some gutter somewhere or worse, since you ran away. Where is Adele?"

"She's nowhere *your* voice will reach her."

He laughed. "I see." He took a deep breath, and bellowed. "Adele, come here right now."

Margot cringed, waiting for Adele to emerge. They were far too close to the room. She must have heard him. He'd been watching her with a triumphant grin on his face.

They waited.

He frowned, then shouted again.

Nothing.

Margot couldn't hide her smile. Somehow, Adele was safe.¹²

Roland sniffed.

"This is all very well. But I need those books. Now. Where are they?"

Alexandre snorted. "Who cares about some damn moldy books. Let her keep them in exchange for a *Magician!*"

Margot shook her head. "Never. Not even for those books."

"No," Roland said. "The books stay here."

Alexandre frowned. "What's so important –?"

"Shut up, Lafarge."

Margot glanced between the two men, feeling the sudden tension.
"Mother's journals."

Alexandre laughed. "What? You found my Magician and you brought her *here*, for – you wanted that evil bitch's –" He stopped, and his eyes narrowed "Why do *you* care?" He asked Roland in a completely different tone.

Margot shouted in a sudden rage at her brother. "How dare you –!"

"That's nothing of interest to *you*," Roland snapped back.

The two men glared at each other.

"Enough of this," Roland snarled. "Dumont!"

Jacques' brother appeared. "Sir?"

Alexandre and Roland spoke at once.

"Find that Magician – Adele – she'll have the books," Roland said.

¹² Not shown: powered by her Obligation, Adele created a new hole in the room wall, and is running like crazy for the exit. I never did figure out how to incorporate that into the narrative proper.

“Dumont!” Alexandre shouted over his cousin’s command. “Tell me immediately and truthfully what’s in those books.”

Jeoffroi grinned maliciously. “It’s her blackmail library. She had dirt on half the powers this side of the Dusk. We’ve decoded a bit – .”

“Shut up, you idiot!” Roland shouted, releasing Margot as he spun around to face his Magician, hand raised. The back of his hand struck Jeoffroi across the mouth with all the force of his motion.

Margot could have run, but she could barely think. This woman they were speaking of so casually – this could not be her *maman*. There was a mistake. She’d misunderstood. They’d misunderstood.

She wanted to cry. She wanted to talk to *maman*, like she always did when she was scared or confused. But – but – but that was just the problem. Her *maman* was dead. Long dead. And all she had of her *really* was a child’s dreams.

Margot raised her chin. Her voice quivered, but it was loud enough for the men to hear her. “I’ll give you the books, Alexandre, if you help us get out, and you free Adele from all old Obligations.”

Both men laughed, talking at once again.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Alexandre said. “With Adele back – ” He grinned at Roland. “With Adele back and those books –”

“Margot dear,” Roland said. “You’re talking to the wrong man. He could never make such a deal, even if he wanted to.”

Alexandre spun on his heel and took off at a run, down the way Margot had first come. “Good luck finding Adele before I do, Roland – I know how she works,” he shouted over his shoulder as he disappeared around the corner.

Margot, without thinking, started after her brother, finally galvanized into motion.

“Stop her! Catch her!” Roland shouted. The hall filled with blue light, then, in front of her, the passage filled with stone, dust, and mortar. She skidded to a stop, coughing.

Jeoffroi's hands closed around her arms. As Roland caught up with them, he released a torrent of profanity at Jeoffroi for closing the way to pursue Alexandre and Adele. Jeoffroi, face red and swollen where Roland had hit him, gave the king a lopsided smirking salute.¹³

Roland cursed again. "Open this passage."

Jeoffroi released her arm and raised two glowing hands. As he did, he leaned down to whisper in Margot's ear. "Margot, quickly – order me to protect my niece from injury."

She froze.

"I must protect Roland at all cost," he hissed. "Your brother will use her against Roland if he catches her. I'll not be the cause of her death."

The passage filled with blue light again, and with the crash and roar of moving stone.

"Please, Margot?"

Through the settling stone dust, a wall of purple slammed into Roland. It lifted him from his feet and tossed him against the far stone wall. He slid to the floor, his limbs spread uselessly around him.

Margot screamed as Adele, hand raised, stepped through the opening, followed by her brother, triumphant.

Jeoffroi's blue light filled the room a heartbeat later, and crashed into a stone shield appearing just in time around Adele. It crumbled under the attack.

Through the dust, she could hear Jeoffroi's desperate voice. "Margot, please?!"

Margot's throat constricted. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't move. She couldn't speak.

¹³ See, now, this is why it pays to treat your Magician with care and respect.

• • •

Five years ago

Margot raised her eyes to look at papa's face.

In her quivering heart, she fully believed he meant his threat. He would kill Tess if she didn't release Jacques from the Obligation.

She didn't dare look to him – she'd promised that no matter what her father threatened, she wouldn't give in, but –

Papa's face disappeared as her eyes filled with tears again.

"Jacques," she choked. "I – I'm sorry, but –"

She wiped the tears from her eyes, and turned around. He was struggling to sit up, his face frighteningly pale.¹⁴

"It's okay," he whispered hoarsely.

Papa's voice was ice cold. "Say it."

As she spoke the words he was waiting for, several things happened at once.

Jacques managed to push himself up onto his knees. His hand glowed green, and a knife dropped into his grasp. Papa, still focused on Margot, didn't noticed.

Tess did, and screamed. "Jacq, no!"

"I'm sorry," he whispered, then louder, "Margot, close your eyes!"

Shocked by the sharp command and conditioned to obey, she did so without thinking.

Over her head, papa's voice rang out. "Stop – dammit man – stop!" and Tess screamed again.

¹⁴ I'm not actually sure if this is canon compliant, but since Din says Conan *could* have rescinded his command, if not for the ear damage, and.... Patreon accessible script.... events. I made a guess.

Margot opened her eyes to Tess and papa kneeling over Jacques. Something bright red and thick was spurting from his neck. Her father was swearing and shouting at him to fix it – to stop the bleeding. He sounded nearly hysterical.

It was Tess who ordered Margot to leave. She didn't comply – she couldn't. She couldn't move. She couldn't breath. She couldn't scream.¹⁵

Why.

Why, maman? What did I do wrong?

• • •

Had there been any right choice? Was there anything she could have done to save Jacques?

Jeoffroi stopped Adele's next attack, and responded with his own, knocking her off her feet. He stepped forward.

Please, Margot.

Jacques had chosen death over hurting his family.

She forced her mouth open and took in a single, rasping breath. The words came out as a whisper, but by some miracle, Jeoffroi heard. "Jeoffroi, protect Adele from injury."

He smiled and stepped back, spreading his arms. He was protecting Roland with his body, but offering no counter attack.

Margot's brother appeared beside her out of the dust, and wrapped a hand around her waist.

"Well, now, that's a surprise, dear little Margot."

"He – he told me to," she choked out.

¹⁵ Don't mind me – I'll just be in my dark corner for a while, hurting for my characters. Mostly Jacques. I kinda love Jacques. So, naturally, he's dead. (Darkhalo: DON'T YOU DARE GET ANY IDEAS!!!)

“Naturally. Thank you for the help. Now, we’ve finally got a shot at Lorraine. Adele, stand down – you can wait to kill Roland.”

In her mind, Margot still saw papa slumped over Jacques’ body, cursing and commanding. Crying.

Lost.

Everything ended with Jacques’ death. Roland’s agents made quick work of papa, seized the country estate, and took her back to the castle. Alexandre disappeared with Adele – there’d been rumors from time to time about a mercenary Nobleman with a Magician who’d do anything if you paid enough.

Until Adele had escaped from Alexandre. And he’d come here, for protection.

Papa. Alexandre. They were *nothing* without their Magicians.

She’d failed Jacques. He’d needed her to call papa’s bluff, and she’d him given in. She’d been weak and scared.

Margot glared up at Alexandre, drawing herself together. “You think so?” Her voice was weak, but she knew what to do. Alexandre won’t risk Adele – not when he just got her back.

“Adele? You must not give Alexandre our mother’s journals for any reason, at any time, nor allow him to find or capture them.”¹⁶

Her brother swore loudly. Then he sneered and stepped away. “But you’ve neglected to think of one little detail, sister dear. So I’m afraid you force my hand. Jeoffroi, kill Margot. *Immediately.*”¹⁷

Jeoffroi’s head jerked around, then he was moving before the words hit Margot. He was almost to her when she had the sense to drop as he tossed a blade. It slammed into the wall over her head.

¹⁶ Now, if he orders Adele to give him the books in any way, he’ll lose her, *and* lose access to the books. And he’s not keen to lose either “thing.”

¹⁷ Let’s be honest, this is one heck of a dysfunctional family. And based on Din’s comments about Obligations ending from the death of the Nobleman, this seems to be one way to undo an Obligation. |:

“Stop me,” he hissed at her. “You’re Adele’s only hope right now.”

He tossed another knife. He wasn’t using magic.

“You can stop me, damn it!”

Margot had failed this man’s brother, forcing him into a desperate choice. And it was happening all over again. With her own life at stake. And just like then, there was nothing she could do to stop it.

She was voiceless.

She leaped behind the broken wall, falling on the hard stone. She lay there, stunned. It was over. There were no more chances left. Alexandre had won, after all.

Wait.

Yes.

There was one chance.

There was one desperate, horrible chance for them all.¹⁸

There were two Obligations that Alexandre would not – could not dare – rescind.

She pushed to her feet, shouting the words in one breath. “Jeoffroi, never attempt to kill me. Adele – kill Alexandre!”

Her voice grated on her ears and seemed to echo off the walls of the suddenly silent hall. She didn’t dare look at either Magician. This already tore her heart out, without seeing the pain the conflicting Obligations were creating.

She stepped forward on shaking legs.

¹⁸ Again – not sure if this is going to be canon compliant, but, oh well. This was the only way out of this predicament that I could find.

Remarkably, for once in her life, when she felt most unsure of what she was doing, her voice was cold and calm in her ears. “The books for Adele. And Jeoffroi’s life.” She walked straight up to her brother, where he stood in shocked horror. “I renounce all claim to the throne of Lorraine. Hell – I wouldn’t touch it if the city begged me to take it. I couldn’t sit in all that blood. You want it – then kill Roland yourself and take it. But I dare you to hold it without –” she choked, and took a deep breath.

To say it – that was to believe it.

“I dare you to hold it without maman’s journals.”

She took another deep breath. “I’ll trade you the books – and Jeoffroi, but you give Adele her freedom. With. No. Obligations. If you do this, I swear I will bring you the books.”

Her brother started to laugh, softly at first, then harder and harder until he was almost hysterical, bent in half. Gasping.

Finally, he controlled himself enough to speak. “My little Margot – bargaining with two lives on the balance. I never would have seen it – what do you know – you really *are* the daughter of our mother.”¹⁹

Margot felt every second melt away. How long did they have? Was one or both already dead?

“Rescind. All. Claims and Obligations on Adele. And. I. Will. Deliver. Your. Damn. Books. Or you can find out just how long you hold this throne without books *or* Magicians. Papa lasted two days. This castle wall should give you – I don’t know – maybe ten.”

He started laughing again. “You – you started all this for those books. Why?”

“I wanted to know maman,” she said, her voice cold. “And now, I’ve learned all I need.”

¹⁹ I kinda picture her as the evil genius of the family. After she died, the father had no idea how to hold his wife’s network of power together, and just started drinking A TON. And taking out his anger at losing his shot at ruling Lorraine on anyone who couldn’t fight back. D:

“Our mother was a bitch, Margot. After all her plots and deals, she reached too far and someone²⁰ finally got her.”

Margot glared at him. “We’re running out of time. Make a choice, Alexandre.”

His face twisted with frustrated rage, but, drawing his dress dagger, he stalked over to Roland’s still form, and drove the blade deep into his eye. Straight to the brain. He was dead. Jeoffroi should be free from his liege oath. Leaving it there, he knelt over Jeoffroi, and in a clear voice, rescinded his command to kill Margot.

Jeoffroi stopped shaking, and Alexandre quickly added a series of commands to serve and protect himself, and a prohibition against deafening himself or any other Magician. Of course Alexandre would make sure there was no gaps in the Obligations controlling the man.

“And Adele?”

He straightened, glaring at her, but he complied, speaking through clenched teeth. “Adele, I rescind all Obligations to myself, my father, and my family.”

She too relaxed.

Margot nodded sharply. “Give me a carriage and see that no one prevents us from leaving the castle, and I’ll have the books delivered to you by next dark hour.”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Okay, sis. You win this one.”

Margot knelt by Adele, fumbling to feel her narrow neck for a pulse. “Adele – I rescind the order to kill my brother.”

The entire carriage ride out of the city, she’d been terrified of some final attempt to kill her and take Adele, but apparently, her brother had actually chosen to be decent and let them go. Adele was sleeping – *just* sleeping, she hoped.

²⁰ Since I don’t know how, why, or how many “regents” Din’s been killing, I left this unnamed, but my head canon is that it was Din. Working for who knows who. _ (“,) _ / xD *Well, Res knows, but she’s not telling.* (I kinda like picturing her mother and Stabitha engaged in a long distance game of deadly chess. xD)

The dark hour had long past when they'd emerged into the daylight. How long before someone found Adele's tunnel. She smiled, enjoying the image of Alexandre finding out days later that his fortress had a new back door. Jeoffroi shouldn't have too much trouble closing it up.

She hated trusting the driver, but she didn't have a choice while she waited for Adele to recover. She'd told the driver to keep driving down the road until she said so.

Now they were swaying along a rutted road passed farmland.

Adele stirred, then groaned.

Finally, her eyes opened. She smiled. "Well. I didn't expect *that* from you."

Margot opened her mouth to reply, shut it, then opened it again. "I'm sorry Adele. I couldn't think of any other way. And I release you from all Obligations as well."

Adele pushed herself up to sit in the cushions.

"I appreciate the gesture, but unless I'm mistaken, we're not safe yet. So some standing Obligations to defend us would be greatly helpful."

Margot blushed. "Right. Protect both of us, but if you have to choose, protect yourself first."

Adele rolled her eyes. "Okay. Good enough."

They called for the carriage to stop, and told the driver to return to the city. After the royal carriage had disappeared, they hired a ride to the next town from an old farmer with a wagon, using funds Adele had in her armory.

"I'll have to stop using this soon," she said, thoughtfully. "Alexandre knows where it is, physically. After siding with Lorraine, he's not going to be welcome in Roucy, but he'll find a way to cut me off from it eventually. Or Roucy will finally remember the walled off chamber they gave Alexandre. Now that he'll be the crowned king of Lorraine, they won't want him to have access."

But for the next few days, they should be fine.

They rented a small, bare, not totally clean room in an inn they found in a small town.

The windows held about twenty years of grime, the floorboards creaked ominously, and the bed comforters were a mysterious faded grayish color. It was no palace, but it was anonymous, and it was shelter.

Margot knelt in front of the hearth, building a fire, as Adele sat on one of the hard beds. She raised a hand, which glowed purple, and the books dropped one by one into her hand. She piled them beside her on the bed.

As Margot started a small blaze, she felt a sudden desire to feed these books into the flames. To try and forget what she knew about them. To pretend she'd never found them, never knew what they held. But she'd given her word to Alexandre, and she didn't want to spend her life running from his assassins, especially not Jeoffroi.

"Now I have to figure out how to get those to my brother. Safely," she muttered.

Adele raised an eyebrow. "After all that? You're not even going to keep them? Even read them?"

Margot sat back, resting against the edge of a bed as the fire took hold, dancing and crackling through the wood. She sighed. "I believed – I wanted to believe – that my mother was good and kind. Now – I think about all my memories – I think about what she'd say, and I wonder. I – I wanted to believe that – somehow – not everyone in my family was tainted by evil." She swallowed. "So – what does that make me, then?"

Adele snorted.

"What?"

"Just – you're actually talking to me."

Margot gave her a thin smile. "When I was little, I was taught to never ever speak to my father's Magician. Never. I'd get a beating if I said the smallest thing. I get it – it wasn't safe to send me away while he and maman were fighting her half brother. And Roland. And, half the Dusk. Apparently." She shook her head. "But Jacques – he secretly taught me that I could talk to him without hurting him."

"My father."

Margot nodded. "He taught me the difference between commands and just – talking. He taught me to not fear my words. Just, respect their power." Something painful and tight closed around her throat.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and buried her face, trying to regain control of her voice. Finally, she looked up and met Adele's gaze.

"I – my father – we killed him." Suddenly, she was sobbing. Great, heaving sobs, as she choked out the story as best she could. She'd failed him. And he'd chosen to die. Because she couldn't keep a promise. Because she'd been frozen.

Adele stared into the fire for a long time after Margot ran out of things to say.

Finally, she spoke. "You – as a Nobleman – you have no idea – no concept of what it feels like to be compelled to do something, when every fiber of you is equally horrified by the action. When something inside is screaming no, while you follow the order like some mindless dog. And papa had a line he determined he wouldn't cross. No matter what you did, Lafarge – your father – would've found a way to use mama to hurt my papa." She clenched her hands into fists. "It wasn't your fault. That was why Lafarge held mama there. A constant threat – a way he could hurt and control papa without ever risking damage to his precious Magician."

"I'm sorry" Margot whispered. "You're right. I don't know."

"But," Adele added quietly. "When I look into your eyes, I know you're seeing more than a tool or a dog to whistle for. When you talk about my papa, I can see you adored him. As a human, not a favorite pet. And he must have cared about you, too."

"He – he did?"

"He had no other reason to risk talking with you." She stared at her hands, her voice dropping to just over a whisper. "You probably knew him better than I did. For me, my papa was a dream who came infrequently in the dark hour, or at unexpected moments. Mama tried to explain the Obligation to me. But I didn't really understand. When papa showed up one day with Lafarge, and my life turned upside down, I – I hated him. I

blamed him. I *willingly* betrayed him to Alexandre when I got his message. And when I finally understood, he was dead.”

“I’m sorry.” What else could Margot say?

They sat, gazing into the softly crackling fire for several long minutes. At some point, Adele had started to cry, quiet tears sliding down her cheeks.

She finally spoke again. “You wanted to know what the truth about your mother means for you. I don’t think it makes any difference to who you are. I don’t think she taught you empathy or to care. I think that was my papa.” She rubbed a shaking hand across her cheek, brushing away tears. “I had my mama. But you had no one. I’ll bet he wasn’t willing to leave you like that – to grow up cold and hard and loveless like your brother.”

Margot frowned. It was Jacques who’d been there. Who held her when she cried. Who deflected papa’s rages from her. Who’d taught her to ride. To swim. To play. Saints – she’d forgotten how much fun she’d had, playing with him.

“Speaking of mama,” Adele asked in a halting voice. “There’s one question you haven’t answered. How did she die?”

Margot frowned. “I – I don’t know. I know several of papa’s staff died when Roland’s people attacked us, but, I –”

Adele lurched forward. “Wait. Lafarge didn’t kill her?”

“What?” Margot shook her head, thinking. “No, no he didn’t.”

“And you never saw her dead.”

“I – no.”

“So she could still be alive?”

Margot nodded. “I – yes. She could.”

They gaped at each other. Adele always talked about Tess as if she was dead, but, that was because Alexandre had said so. And what did he know? He wasn’t there.

Margot grinned. “You need to find her.”

Adele raised an eyebrow. “I do, but magic would make it a hell of a lot easier. And I need a Nobleman’s commands to do anything. Care to join me?”

“You – want me? But – you’re free.”

Adele sat beside her on the floor. “Margot – dear. Freedom’s pretty lame without magic. I mean, most people live happily without it, but magic sure makes life easier, and I’d miss that aspect. Hell, I’ve been living without magic for some time, and I tell you – I’m really tired of wiping tables for coin.” Her voice dropped, and she added, quietly, “I think papa would want us to be friends – you know?”

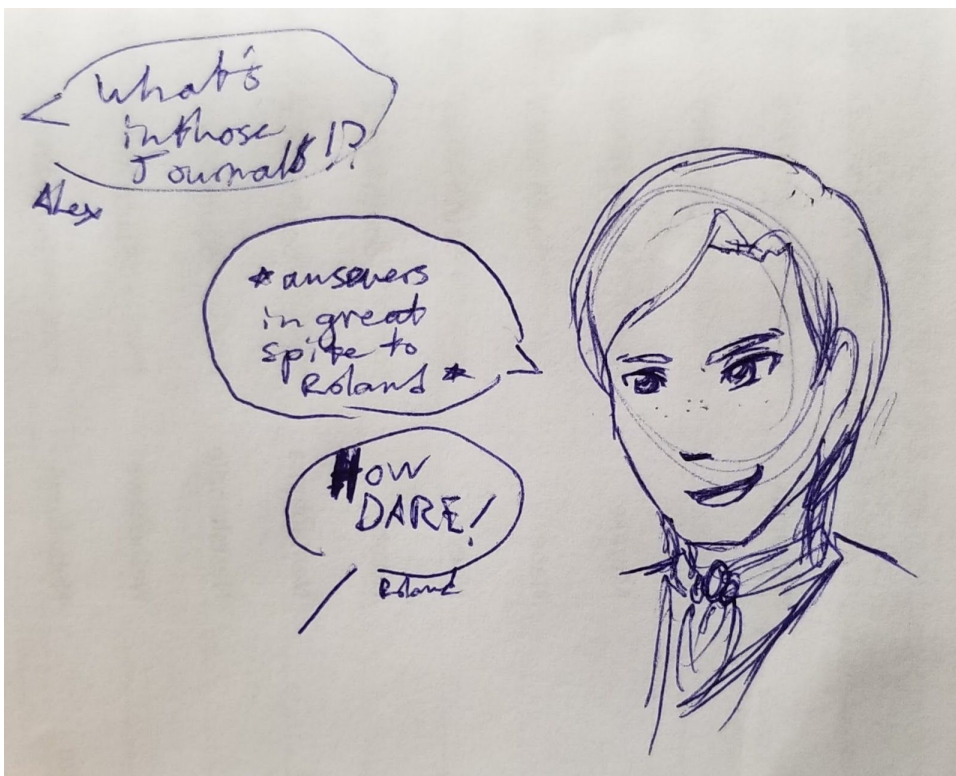
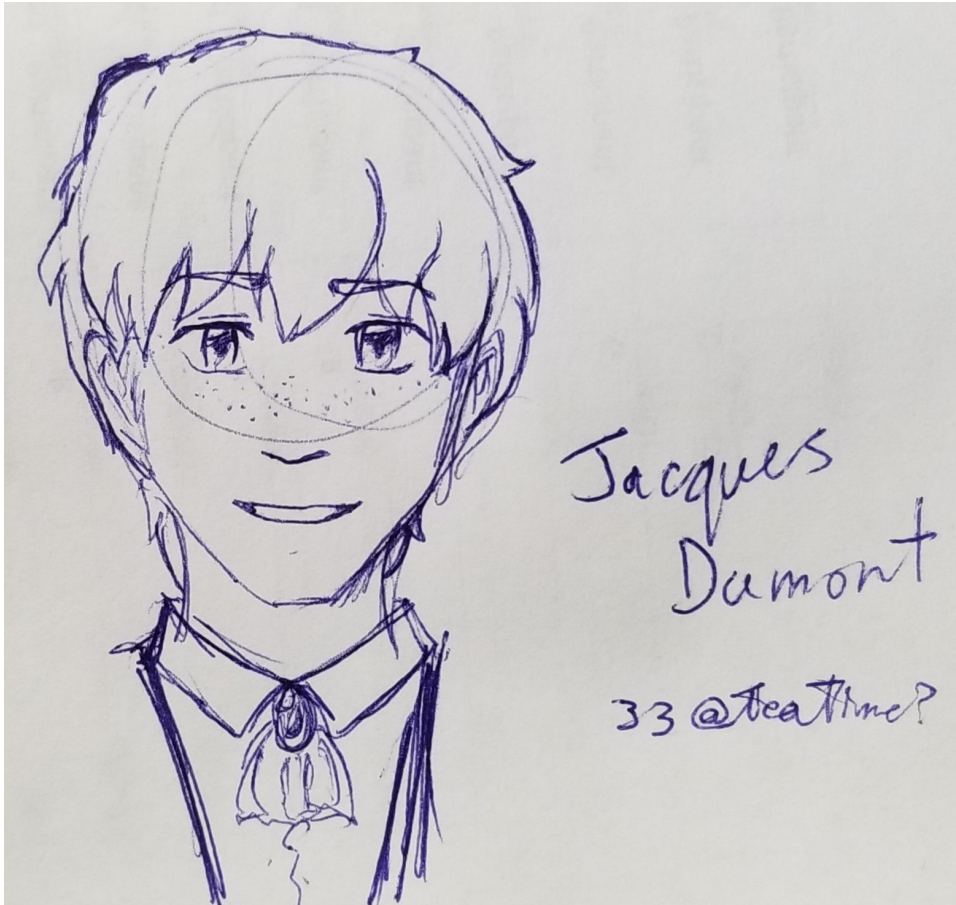
Margot grinned. “Yeah, I think he would.”

Adele reached up and snagged a book, weighing it thoughtfully in her hand. “But first, you’ve got to keep your promise to Alexandre.”²¹

Margot took the book from her. “And we need to rescue Jeoffroi. I have *no* intention of leaving him in my brother’s control without a fight. And while we figure that out, we’ll trace Tess. And.” She grinned. “I still owe you a pile of stolen gems. Now – if you’re not picky, I’m sure there’s other Nobleman out there who could stand to lose a few.”

Adele smiled back. “Sounds good.”

²¹ Maho, one of my lovely copy editors and Galebound Discord friend, really wants Margot to read the journals. Unfortunately, I can’t find a natural place to put that in here – Margot is still feeling too betrayed by her mom right now for that. So: *Adele, the next morning, asks her for an Obligation to read and memorize them, and then reproduces them on some new blank books, since she’s pretty sure there’s some important info in there. And Margot finally reads them at some later point in their adventures together.*



Sketches by Mahotou. Find more of her art at mahotoucreates.tumblr.com
or mahotou.tumblr.com.