
Letters to the Executioner

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CHAPTER I – THE FIRST LETTER

The cold of the Conciergerie was a constant companion, a damp hand clutching at Étienne Voclair's throat. It seeped into the stone, into the threadbare fabric of his coat, and deeper still, into his bones. Every morning, the same ritual began: the clanging of the outer gates, the shuffling of the guards' boots on the wet cobblestones, and the endless pile of papers awaiting his meticulous hand. Today, however, the monotonous gray routine was about to be interrupted by a single, disturbing piece of parchment.

Étienne dipped his pen, the scratch of its nib against the rough paper a familiar sound in the vast, echoing room of the archive. Dust particles danced in the anemic light filtering through the dirty window, illuminating the piles of prisoner files, confessions, and execution orders that were his daily bread. He was a copyist, a silent cog in the grinding machine of the Revolution, transcribing the last words of those condemned to the guillotine. He saw their fear, their defiance, their desperate pleas, all reduced to ink on paper, then filed away to await the inevitable.

His current task was the file of citizen Henri Dubois, a former baker accused of royalist sympathies. The charges were vague, the evidence scant, but in those days, that was often enough. Étienne had already copied the initial indictment, Dubois's bewildered testimony, and the hasty verdict. All that remained was the formal sentencing document and the final petition, usually a plea for clemency or

a last letter to the family. He reached into the folder, his fingers brushing the rough paper, and then paused. Something else was there, something thin and crisp, tucked beneath Dubois's official papers, as if it had been slipped in on purpose.

It was an envelope, unmarked, unsealed. Étienne frowned. This was irregular. All correspondence was supposed to be registered, stamped, and often censored. This envelope bore none of those marks. Curiosity, a dangerous trait in these paranoid times, pricked him. He glanced over his shoulder, even though the archive room was usually empty at this hour, except for him. The heavy oak door was closed, its iron hinges creaking softly in the silence. He took out the letter.

The paper was of good quality, not the cheap, recycled stuff common in prison. He turned it over. No stamp, no return address. The handwriting on the front was elegant, precise, almost artistic, in stark contrast to the hurried scribbles and official stamps that usually covered prison documents. It read:

To the Executioner of Paris.

Étienne held his breath. The Executioner. Antoine Sanson. The name alone sent a chill down his spine. Sanson was a figure of fear and grim fascination, a man whose hands guided the blade that separated life from hope. Why would a letter for him be hidden in a prisoner's file? And why was it here, in the archive, instead of being delivered directly to Sanson's chambers or to the prison warden?

He hesitated for a long moment, his thumb tracing the elegant calligraphy. He knew he should report it, or at least hand it over to the warden. But an invisible force, a whisper of intrigue, held his hand back. He carefully unfolded the single sheet of paper inside. The ink was black, crisp against the cream-colored page. The date at the top made his blood run cold:

14 Messidor, Year II of the Republic

Today was 12 Messidor. The letter was dated two days in the future. Étienne's eyes scanned the words, his heart beginning to beat frantically against his ribs:

My dear Antoine,

**I write to you not as a plea, but as a prophecy. On the morning of Messidor 14, you will be summoned to the Rue Saint-Honoré, near the Fountain of the*

Innocents. A man named Jean-Luc Moreau, a former silk merchant, will be found dead in his apartment at number 17. He will have been poisoned. His wife, Céleste, will be weeping beside his body, claiming an intruder, but she will be lying. It will be a slow, agonizing death, bitter tea served with a smile. She sought her fortune, her freedom from a marriage that had grown cold. You will find traces of arsenic in his morning coffee. The Revolution may claim his life, but his wife will have already stolen his breath.

Étienne reread the passage, his fingers trembling slightly. Poison. A specific address. A name. A future date. It was no joke; it was too detailed, too precise. He felt a cold dread spread through his stomach, like a frozen spider web. Who would write such a thing? And why? Was it the fantasy of a madman? A cruel joke from a prisoner who had nothing left to lose? Or something much more sinister?

He folded the letter carefully and put it back in the envelope, then slipped it deep into the pocket of his own coat. His usual meticulousness vanished, replaced by a frantic need to hide this disturbing discovery. He couldn't bring himself to return it to Dubois' file. He couldn't report it. Not yet. The idea of a murder, described in such detail before it had even happened, was too disturbing to simply hand over to the indifferent machinery of the prison. He needed to understand. His conscience, however, was already reproaching him.

For the rest of the morning, Étienne's pen moved across the paper, but his mind was elsewhere, replaying the words of the letter. *14 Messidor. Jean-Luc Moreau. Poison. Céleste.* The names felt real, the details vivid. He tried to dismiss it as a macabre fantasy, a trick of the mind, but the chill that had settled in his chest refused to go away. The very air of the Conciergerie seemed to whisper the prophecy.

He ate his lunch in the common room, a tasteless gruel that offered little comfort. His gaze darted around, scrutinizing the other copyists, the guards, even the kitchen staff. Could one of them be the author? The elegant calligraphy of the letter suggested someone educated, perhaps even refined. Most of the men

Étienne worked with were rough, their hands more accustomed to a musket than a pen.

The next day, the 13th of Messidor, passed in a haze of apprehension. Every shadow seemed to hold a secret, every whispered conversation a hidden meaning. Étienne found himself staring at the calendar on the archive wall, counting the hours. He felt a foolish hope that the day would pass without incident, that the letter would turn out to be nothing more than a morbid piece of fiction. However, a darker part of him, the part that had become cynical under the weight of the Conciergerie's despair, suspected otherwise.

He returned to his cramped, cold room that afternoon, the letter still a heavy weight in his pocket. He took it out again, the parchment rustling softly. He read it once more, the words now etched into his memory. He tried to rationalize it, to find a logical explanation. Perhaps it was written by someone who *pretended* to commit the murder, a confession sent in advance. But why send it to the executioner? And why hide it in a prisoner's file?

Sleep offered him little comfort. Étienne's dreams were a jumble of shadowy figures, elegant calligraphy twisting into grotesque shapes, and the metallic taste of poison. He woke with a gasp, the first pale light of dawn barely visible through his dirty window. It was the 14th of Messidor.

He dressed quickly, his hands trembling slightly as he buttoned his coat. He felt a strange compulsion, a need to know. He knew he couldn't just leave the Conciergerie and go to the Rue Saint-Honoré. As a copyist, his movements were restricted, his identity tied to the prison. But he knew people, he heard things. The prison was a hub of information, a place where rumors, both true and false, circulated like a disease.

He spent the morning trying to appear normal, copying documents with a diligence he did not feel. His ears, however, were attentive to every conversation, every scrap of news. He heard the guards discussing the latest arrests, the rise in the price of bread, the endless stream of carts heading for the Place de la Révolution. Nothing about a silk merchant, nothing about poison.

Just after noon, a different buzz began to spread through the prison. It started as quiet whispers among the jailers, then turned into more open discussion. Étienne saw a group of guards gathered near the main gate, their faces somber, their voices low. His heart hammered. He tried to look busy, meticulously aligning a stack of papers, while straining to catch their words.

"Another one," muttered one guard, shaking his head. "Found this morning."

"Poison, they say," added another, his voice tinged with disgust. "The wife, naturally."

Étienne felt a wave of cold wash over him. His pen fell to the floor with a clatter. He bent down slowly to pick it up, his mind reeling. *Poison. The wife.* It couldn't be. It couldn't be possible.

"Rue Saint-Honoré," confirmed a third guard, his voice barely audible. "Near the Fountain of the Innocents. Number 17."

Étienne stood motionless, the pen forgotten in his hand. Every detail. Every tiny detail of the letter. It was true. The murder had happened. Just as the letter had predicted.

He felt a sudden, suffocating panic. This was no joke. This was real. And he had held the knowledge of a future murder in his hands for two days. He had done nothing. He had allowed it to happen. Guilt, sharp and cold, pierced his initial shock. He, a man who prided himself on his moral compass, had been complicit in a death by inaction. The roar of the crowd over the poisoned merchant was a drum in his ribs.

He forced himself to breathe, to regain some semblance of composure. He had to think. He had to understand. He couldn't go to the authorities now. How could he explain how he knew? "I found a letter, dated in the future, hidden in a prisoner's file, describing a murder that would happen today." They would call him crazy, or worse, accuse him of involvement. In the Reign of Terror, suspicion was a death sentence.

He retreated to the relative solitude of the archive room, his mind racing. He took the letter out of his pocket again, his gaze fixed on the elegant calligraphy

that now seemed to mock him. "My dear Antoine, I write to you not as a plea, but as a prophecy." The words had taken on a new and terrifying weight.

He sat down at his desk, staring at the pile of prisoner files. His hand trembled as he reached for Dubois's folder, the one where he had found the letter. He opened it, searching for any clue, any hint he might have overlooked. But there was nothing. Just the usual grim paperwork.

Who could have put it there? A prisoner? Perhaps an outgoing prisoner who had access to the files? But how would they know about a murder that had not yet happened? A guard? A clerk? Someone within the prison system, someone with access to the files, someone who could move around unseen.

He thought of Antoine Sanson, the executioner. The letter was addressed to him. Did Sanson receive other letters like this? Was this common? Sanson was a stoic, inscrutable man, weighed down by his grim duty. Étienne had seen him many times, a tall, imposing figure, always impeccably dressed, even when overseeing the most gruesome tasks. He carried himself with a quiet authority that commanded respect, or at least fear. Could Sanson be involved? The idea seemed absurd. Why would the executioner need such a warning? Unless... unless the writer of the letter was trying to communicate something to Sanson that could not be said openly.

Étienne felt a deep moral conflict. His conscience was screaming at him. He had to do something. But what? The fear of defiance, of attracting unwanted attention from the revolutionary authorities, was a heavy burden. He had seen too many innocent people condemned, too many lives extinguished for the slightest whisper of dissent. His father, a liberal-minded man, had disappeared in the early days of the Revolution, devoured by the very ideals he had once defended. Étienne had learned to go unnoticed, to blend into the background, to survive. But this... this was different. This was a direct challenge to his passivity.

He thought of his mother, devoted and unyielding, who had always taught him the difference between right and wrong. She would tell him that silence in

the face of injustice was a sin. But his father's disappearance had taught him the harsh reality that speaking out could lead to oblivion.

The afternoon dragged on. Étienne copied a final confession, the words of a man pleading for the safety of his children, his voice echoing in Étienne's mind. He felt a deep kinship with the condemned, a shared sense of powerlessness in the face of the overwhelming forces of the state. But now, he possessed a different kind of power, a terrible knowledge.

As the shadows lengthened, Étienne made a decision. He couldn't ignore this. He couldn't. The letter was too specific, the event too real. He had to find out who was writing these letters. He had to understand why. It was a dangerous path, he knew, one that could lead him to the same fate as the unfortunate souls whose papers he copied. But the image of Jean-Luc Moreau, poisoned in his home, haunted him, a silent accusation.

He would start slowly, quietly. He would look for clues in the archives, in the patterns of prisoner arrivals and departures, in the handwriting of other documents. He would listen, observe, piece together the puzzle without drawing attention to himself. It was a desperate hope, a fragile plan, but it was all he had.

He folded the letter once more, slipping it into a hidden pocket he had sewn into the lining of his coat. It was a secret, a burden, and a driving force. The Conciergerie, once a mere workplace, now felt like a labyrinth, and he, Étienne Voclain, was trapped inside, holding a thread that could lead him to the truth, or to his own doom.

As he prepared to leave for the day, the heavy door to the archive room creaked open. A guard, Citizen Lemoine, a burly man with a permanent frown, poked his head in. "Voclain," he growled. "Citizen Sanson requests your presence. In his office. Now."

Étienne held his breath. Sanson. The Executioner. Had he already received a copy of the letter from some other source? Had his own inaction been discovered? Or was this a terrifying coincidence? He nodded, his heart pounding, a cold knot forming in his stomach. He clutched the letter hidden in his pocket, its presence

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a burning secret against his skin. The maze had just narrowed, and Étienne knew, with chilling certainty, that his quiet obedience had begun to crack.

CHAPTER 2 – NAMES WITHOUT FACES

The call to Sanson's office had been nothing more than a chilling coincidence, a cruel twist of fate. The executioner had simply wanted him to copy a specific legal precedent, a grim instruction for an upcoming mass trial, his stoic face revealing nothing beyond weary professionalism. Étienne had left his presence that afternoon feeling both immense relief and growing unease. Sanson knew nothing of the letter, or if he did, he hid it behind an impenetrable mask. This left Étienne alone with his terrible secret and the gnawing guilt of inaction. The cold stone walls of the Conciergerie, once a familiar backdrop to his quiet life, now felt like the interior of a tomb, each corridor a path leading him deeper into a mystery he felt compelled to solve.

He began his silent search immediately, even though the oppressive atmosphere of the prison seemed to conspire against him. The archive room, his usual sanctuary, now felt like a cage. He spent hours, his fingers stained with ink and dust, sifting through piles of documents, searching for a ghost. The elegant calligraphy of the letter, so distinctive and precise, was etched in his memory. He compared it to prisoners' confessions, to guards' reports, to the endless stream of administrative paperwork. Each stroke blurred into the next, an exasperating uniformity born of haste and indifference. The hand that wrote the prophecy

was not among those rough and hurried scribbles. It was a hand that took its time, a hand that cared about presentation, a hand that denoted an education far superior to that of the common inhabitants of the Conciergerie.

He looked for anything unusual: a misplaced document, a strange annotation, a name that seemed out of place. He examined the files of newly convicted prisoners, wondering if any of them, in a final act of twisted defiance, had crafted the macabre prediction. But the files were all the same: accusations, testimonies, verdicts, all leading to the same inevitable conclusion. No hidden letters, no cryptic messages. The bureaucracy of death was exhaustive, if anything, leaving little room for personal embellishments. Frustration was a slow burn, turning his initial urgency into weary persistence. He found nothing, absolutely nothing that hinted at the origin of the letter. It was as if the parchment had simply materialized, a dark seed planted in the heart of the prison.

His search extended beyond the archive room, though he had to be careful, his movements casual, his questions veiled. He began to observe the prison staff with a new intensity. The jailers, with their rough manners and calloused hands, seemed incapable of such refined calligraphy. The scribes, hunched over their ledgers, produced only hasty, practical writing. He watched the guards, the kitchen staff, even the occasional visiting official, trying to discern a subtle gesture, a knowing glance, anything that might betray a connection to the sinister correspondence. But the faces he encountered were masks of indifference or exhaustion, marked by the daily routine of the Conciergerie. Among the guards, he remembered Gauthier, a new man on the night shift, with disturbingly piercing eyes, who never spoke but seemed to miss nothing. Étienne dismissed the thought, attributing it to exhaustion, but the image of Gauthier lingered.

He tried to discreetly inquire about someone with unusual talents, or new arrivals with a penchant for the dramatic. "Have you noticed any new scribes recently?" he might ask a fellow copyist, as if engaging in idle conversation. "Or perhaps a prisoner with a particular skill for writing?" The responses were always the same: a shrug, a grunt, a dismissive wave of the hand. "They all write the

same when they're begging for their lives, Voclain," one guard had snapped, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What difference does it make?" Étienne withdrew quickly, his heart sinking. His curiosity, he realized, was a beacon in the pervasive gloom, and he needed to dim its light.

The bureaucratic maze of the Conciergerie was designed to swallow individuals, not reveal them. The records were incomplete, often contradictory. Prisoners were numbers, not names. The staff were interchangeable, their faces blurring into a grim collective anonymity. He found no one who seemed to fit the profile of the letter's author—no one with the quiet intelligence, the philosophical bent, the chilling precision that the letter displayed. Every inquiry, however carefully worded, led to a dead end. The prison was a fortress of secrets, but it was also a fortress of apathy. No one cared about a strange letter, not when the guillotine awaited its daily harvest. The Revolution had dulled their senses, hardening them against anything that did not directly threaten their own survival.

He felt the weight of their indifference, a heavy cloak that threatened to suffocate his fledgling investigation. How could he find a perpetrator when everyone was too scared, too busy, or too insensitive to notice anything out of the ordinary? The memory of Jean-Luc Moreau, poisoned in his bed, returned with chilling clarity. He had been a real man, with a real life, now reduced to a grim anecdote shared among guards. And Étienne had known it was coming. The burden of that knowledge weighed on him, fueling his determination even as it deepened his despair.

One afternoon, as he made his way through the bustling laundry area, another kind of observation caught his attention. He had often seen Léna, the prison laundress, a woman whose sharp eyes seemed to miss nothing. She was older than Étienne, her face weathered by hardship, her hands strong from years of scrubbing. She moved with practiced efficiency, her movements economical, her gaze perceptive. Unlike the rest of the staff, who often looked away or stared, Léna faced the world head-on, her expression a mixture of cynicism and weary amusement.

Today, she was bent over a large wooden tub, her arms submerged in soapy, foamy water, scrubbing a bloodstained shirt with furious energy. Her sleeves were rolled up, revealing wiry forearms. A strand of dark hair had escaped from her cap and clung to her damp forehead. As Étienne passed by, he noticed her quick, intelligent eyes moving around the room, observing every face, every movement. She wasn't just working; she was watching. She paused, pretending to adjust a loose button on her coat, her gaze lingering on him.

"Did you lose something, Citizen Voclain?" Léna's voice cut through the humid air, surprisingly clear and sharp. She hadn't even looked up from her scrubbing. Her words weren't cruel, but direct, with the biting tone of someone who had seen too much.

Étienne startled, taken aback. He cleared his throat. "No, citizen Léna. Just... admiring your diligence." The lie sounded clumsy on his tongue.

She finally looked up, her dark eyes piercing, a slight, knowing smile playing on her lips. "Diligence is for those who believe it will save them. Here, it just keeps the bloodstains from piling up too much." She wrung out the shirt with a practiced twist, the crimson water swirling down the drain. "You seem to have a lot on your mind these days, for a copyist. More than legal jargon, I suspect."

Étienne felt a blush rise to his neck. Her insight was disconcerting. "The paper-work is... tedious," he offered vaguely.

Léna snorted, a dry, humorless sound. "Tedious, yes. It always is, when it's weighing on a man's soul." She leaned against the tub, drying her hands on her apron, her gaze unwavering. "You're looking for something, aren't you? Something that isn't written in the official records."

His heart hammered against his ribs. He wanted to deny it, to pretend he was simply a diligent copyist, but her eyes held a depth of understanding that made pretense seem futile. "I... I just observe," he stammered.

"Observation is a dangerous pastime within these walls," she said, her voice dropping slightly, though still clear. "And curiosity? Curiosity kills people, Citizen Voclain. Especially when it concerns things that should not see the light of

day." She picked up another garment, a faded tunic, and began inspecting it for tears. The Conciergerie has its own kind of truth, Étienne. And it rarely matches what they write.

"What kind of truth?" Étienne asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Léna stopped working, her eyes fixed on his. "The one that whispers in the shadows. The one that makes men disappear. The one that knows more than it should and says nothing. She has seen enough execution orders to know what happens to those who speak out of turn or ask too many questions." With a nod of her head, she pointed to the bustling laundry room. Everyone here has a reason to keep their head down. Even me. Especially me.

Her words were a clear warning, a mirror reflecting his deepest anxieties. He had seen the swift and brutal justice of the Revolutionary Tribunal. The disappearance of his father, a wound that had never truly healed, was a constant reminder of the price of dissent. Léna's cynical statements, born of years of grim observation, felt like a cold dose of reality. The Conciergerie was not a place for seekers of truth, but for survivors. His search for answers, however noble it seemed to him, was also reckless folly, a gamble with his own life.

He knew she was right. Every instinct of self-preservation screamed at him to stop, to forget the letters, to return to his quiet, anonymous existence. But the image of Moreau, the poisoned merchant, gnawed at him. The idea of another innocent life, foretold and then extinguished, while he stood by, silent and fearful, was unbearable. Léna's words, intended to dissuade him, instead solidified his determination, albeit with a new layer of dread. He would be careful. He had to be careful.

"Thank you, citizen Léna," he said in a low voice. "I will remember your words."

She gave him another knowing look, a hint of something like pity in her eyes. "Be sure you do. Some secrets are better left buried." She returned to her scrubbing, the rhythmic splash of water filling the silence between them. Étienne walked away, the weight of her warning pressing down on him, heavy as the stone above.

The seeds of doubt Léna had sown about his safety began to germinate into full-blown paranoia. Every shadow seemed to harbor a watchful eye. Every whispered conversation among the guards felt like a veiled threat. He found himself jumping at sudden noises, his heart pounding at the casual brush of a shoulder as someone passed by. Was the author of the letter watching him? Did they know he had the letter? Did they know what he was looking for? The thought was a cold knot in his stomach. He was no longer just an observer; he was a participant, drawn into a dangerous game.

He spent the rest of the day in a fog of apprehension, his mind replaying Léna's words, trying to decipher whether they contained any hidden meaning beyond their obvious warning. Had she seen something? Did she know more than she was letting on? He dismissed the idea. Léna was a survivor, a pragmatist. She wouldn't get involved in such a dangerous affair, not openly. But her sharpness, her uncanny ability to see beyond the surface, lingered in his mind as a potential resource, if only he could find a way to tap into it without endangering them both.

As twilight fell, painting the narrow windows of the Conciergerie in shades of gray and purple, Étienne returned to his cramped, cold quarters. The room was barely larger than a cell, furnished with a narrow cot, a small wooden desk, and a rickety chair. He lit the wick of a candle, its flickering flame casting dancing shadows on the rough stone walls. He felt exhausted, the mental effort of his occult research more exhausting than any physical labor. He sank into the chair, rubbing his temples, longing for a moment of peace.

He reached into the inside pocket of his coat, his fingers brushing against the rough paper of the first letter, a constant and unsettling presence. He pulled it out, intending to reread it, to examine its details once more, searching for any clues he might have overlooked. But as his fingers closed around the familiar parchment, he felt something else, something thin and crisp, tucked right next to it. His breath caught.

It was another envelope. Identical to the first. Unmarked, unsealed, made of the same high-quality paper. His heart skipped a beat, a nauseating sense of dread washing over him. He knew, with a certainty that chilled him to the bone, what it was. The author of the letter knew. They knew he had the first letter. They knew he had kept it. And now, they were communicating directly with him, or at least, making sure he found their next prophecy.

His hands trembled as he took it out. The calligraphy on the front was the same elegant, precise handwriting:

To the Executioner of Paris.

But this time, beneath the address, a small, almost imperceptible symbol had been drawn in one corner: a small stylized feather. *His* feather. A personal touch, a direct acknowledgment of his involvement. The message was clear: *I know you have the letters. I know you are watching.*

He unfolded the single sheet inside, his eyes scanning the date first:

17 Messidor, Year II of the Republic

Three days away. The cold dread intensified, tightening his throat. He forced himself to read, the candle flame flickering, making the words dance on the page like malevolent spirits:

My dear Antoine,

*Another thread unravels, another life frays. On the morning of 17 Messidor, near the Place Dauphine, a man named Citizen Pierre Delacroix, a minor official of the Committee of Public Safety, will be found hanging from the rafters of his own study. It will appear to be suicide, brought on by the pressures of his office, the weight of revolutionary justice. But do not be fooled. He will have been strangled first, his neck broken before the rope touched him. His "suicide note" will be a forgery, a clumsy attempt to divert suspicion from the real culprit: Citizen Auguste Fournier, his ambitious cousin, who envies his position and covets his small but growing influence. The Revolution devours its own, Antoine, but sometimes it needs a little help.

Étienne's vision blurred. Suicide. Strangled. A forged note. A cousin. The details were even more chilling, more intimate than the first letter. This was not just a prediction; it was a revelation, a detailed plan for a crime, exposing the dark side of ambition and betrayal. And the victim was a minor official, someone connected to the very machinery of the Revolution, someone whose death could easily be dismissed as another victim of the Terror.

He reread the letter, his mind racing, trying to process the implications. Pierre Delacroix. An official of the Committee. This was not just any citizen; he was someone with power, however small. And the motive was clear: ambition, envy. The author of the letter seemed to possess intimate knowledge not only of future events, but also of the hidden desires and resentments brewing beneath the surface of Parisian society.

The first murder had been a shock, a terrifying confirmation of the letter's power. This second one was a statement. The author was not a casual prankster, nor a madman whose ramblings coincided with reality. He was a deliberate and calculating individual, orchestrating or foreseeing deaths with chilling precision, and drawing Étienne deeper into his game. The small symbol of the pen, a silent acknowledgment, confirmed it. He was no longer a passive observer. He was a chosen recipient, a witness. He spent a sleepless night, the second letter clutched in his hand. The hook, sharp and cold, had been set.

CHAPTER 3 – THE SERPENT'S TRAIL

The cold of the Conciergerie, once a mere physical annoyance, had become a shroud wrapped around Étienne's very soul. The second letter, with its chilling prophecy of Pierre Delacroix's orchestrated suicide, burned in his mind, a constant, flickering flame of dread. The small stylized feather drawn beneath the executioner's address felt like a mark, singling him out as an unwitting participant in a macabre play. The guilt over Jean-Luc Moreau's death, predicted and then fulfilled while he did nothing, was a leaden weight in his stomach. He could not remain silent. Not again.

The morning of 17 Messidor arrived, gray and relentless. Étienne forced himself to continue with his tasks, his pen moving across the paper with a mechanical precision that belied the frantic chaos in his mind. He tried to think of a way to warn Pierre Delacroix, the victim. Could he send an anonymous note, slipping it into the hands of a guard? But the guards were suspicious by nature, their loyalty to the Revolution absolute. Any deviation from the norm would be met with scrutiny. His world, confined by stone walls and iron bars, offered few avenues for intervention.

The hours dragged on. Each tick of the invisible clock in the warden's office seemed to echo the relentless march toward the predicted tragedy. Étienne's

stomach churned with a mixture of fear and growing despair. He kept his ear open, straining to catch any snippet of conversation. But the prison hummed with its usual somber rhythm.

Just after noon, a sudden, urgent bustle broke the monotony. The guards moved with a new sense of purpose, their faces grim. A messenger, breathless and pale, arrived at the main gate, speaking in a low, agitated voice with the warden. Étienne, positioned near the door to the archive room, pretended to be absorbed in a particularly dense legal text, but his senses were on high alert.

He caught fragments of their conversation, words that pierced the general hubbub like shards of ice: "Place Dauphine... Committee official... hanged... suicide note..." His blood ran cold. It had happened. Again. Every detail. The prophecy in the letter had been fulfilled with terrifying precision. He had known it. The weight of his inaction oppressed him, suffocating him.

He retreated to the archive room, his hands shaking so violently that he could barely hold his pen. He took out the second letter, its elegant calligraphy now a testament to pure, raw evil. *His "suicide note" would be a forgery, a clumsy attempt to divert suspicion from the real culprit: citizen Auguste Fournier, his ambitious cousin.* The casual cruelty of the words, the intimate knowledge of the victim's family dynamics, sent a new wave of dread through him.

At the end of the day, a new figure appeared at the Conciergerie, a man who moved with an unsettling grace, his presence immediately drawing the attention of the guards and officials. Citizen Mathurin Clouet, the new Internal Observer. Étienne had heard the rumors. Clouet was a rising star in the Jacobin ranks, a man known for his eloquent speeches and his ruthless devotion to the revolutionary ideal. He was here to "purify" the prison staff, to root out any disloyal elements. His arrival sent a wave of unease through the already anxious Conciergerie.

Étienne watched him from the shadows of the archive room as Clouet moved through the main hall. He was a striking figure, tall and slender, wearing an impeccable dark blue coat and a crisp white tie. His face was sharp and intelligent, framed by dark, well-groomed hair. However, what really caught Étienne's

attention were his eyes: they were dark, intense, missing nothing, observing the staff with a calm, appraising gaze. There was a theatrical touch to his movements, a studied charm that was disturbingly artificial.

Clouet stopped near the warden's desk and struck up a conversation. Étienne couldn't hear the exact words, but he saw the warden nodding deferentially, a nervous smile on his face. Clouet was clearly a man of power, and he wielded it with a natural authority that chilled Étienne more than any brusque order from a guard.

Then, to Étienne's surprise, Clouet's gaze swept over to the door of the archive room, seeming to pause for just a moment, as if he knew Étienne was there, watching. Étienne quickly looked away, pretending to reorganize a stack of files, a sudden chill running down his spine. Had Clouet been looking for him?

A few minutes later, a guard appeared at the door of the archive room. "Citizen Voclain," he announced, his tone more respectful than usual. "Citizen Clouet requests your presence."

Étienne's heart was pounding. This was it. He stood up, forcing himself to appear calm, and followed the guard.

Clouet was standing near a window. He turned as Étienne approached, a barely perceptible smile playing on his lips. "Ah, Citizen Voclain," he said, his voice surprisingly warm, though with an undertone of steel. "I have heard much about your diligence. The Revolution, Étienne, not only devours its own, but molds them for a new future.

"Citizen Clouet," Étienne replied, his voice firm despite the tremor in his hands. "I am simply doing my duty.

"And you perform them with exemplary precision," Clouet continued, his smile widening slightly. "The Republic values that unwavering commitment. Especially in these hallowed halls, where the very essence of justice is transcribed." He gestured vaguely toward the stacks of documents. "You handle the last words, don't you?"

"Yes, citizen," Étienne confirmed, a knot tightening in his stomach. The conversation felt like a cat playing with a mouse, Clouet circling, probing.

"A heavy burden, I imagine," Clouet mused, his gaze drifting to the window and then back to Étienne. "To witness so much despair, so much... truth. It must take a strong constitution not to be swayed by the emotional currents of such documents. I, for one, believe that true strength lies in shaping those currents, in ensuring that the future is written with firmness.

Étienne felt a chill. Was this a test? Was Clouet implying that he was too sensitive? "I am a copyist, citizen," he said. "I simply record the facts."

Clouet laughed softly, a sound that contained no warmth. "Facts, yes. But facts can be interpreted, can't they? And sometimes the most dangerous truths are those hidden between the lines. Do you ever wonder, Citizen Voclain, about the deeper meanings behind the words you copy? About the true motivations, the invisible hands that guide the destinies of men?

Étienne's breath caught in his throat. This was too close to home. "I am no philosopher, Citizen Clouet. My duty is clarity, not conjecture."

Clouet's smile did not waver, but his eyes seemed to harden. "A prudent answer. Very prudent. And commendable. The Republic does not need philosophers, only loyalists. But allow me to offer you some advice. Loyalty, true loyalty, requires vigilance. It requires seeing beyond the surface, identifying those who may harbor doubts." He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. "And sometimes, Citizen Voclain, those doubts begin with a simple misplaced piece of paper. Or a question asked at the wrong moment."

The veiled threat in his words was unmistakable. Étienne felt cold sweat break out on his forehead. Clouet knew. He knew about his curiosity. Léna's warning echoed in his mind: "Curiosity kills people." And now, the new Internal Observer, a man of immense power, was conveying the same message to him.

"I understand, Citizen Clouet," Étienne said, his voice slightly hoarse. "My loyalty to the Republic is absolute."

"I trust it is," Clouet replied, his eyes piercing. "For the sake of your continued good health, I trust it is. We are all soldiers in this great cause, Citizen Voclain. And a soldier who questions his orders or strays from the path becomes a liability. A danger to himself and to the Revolution. He placed a hand on Étienne's shoulder, a gesture that felt more like a press. Continue your excellent work. And remember, I will be watching you. Not with suspicion, of course, but with great interest.

He squeezed Étienne's shoulder once more, then let go. Clouet turned and walked away, leaving Étienne standing stiffly, his heart pounding.

Étienne retired to his room, shaken. Clouet's words were a chilling confirmation of his fears. He was being watched. His discreet inquiries had been noticed. He was no longer invisible. He was a target.

That night, Étienne couldn't sleep. Clouet's voice, Léna's warning, the faces of the poisoned and strangled victims—it all swirled around in his mind, a tormenting cacophony. He took out the two letters, placing them side by side on his small desk, illuminated by the flickering candle.

He stared at the tiny feather symbol on the second letter. A direct message. A personal invitation to this deadly game. He was no longer just a recipient; he was a designated witness, perhaps even a pawn. The author knew him, knew he would keep the letters, knew he would be curious. And now, Clouet knew of his curiosity too. He was caught between two dangerous forces.

He reached into his hidden pocket, seeking the comfort of the familiar parchment, the weight of the previous letters. But his fingers brushed against something new, something unexpected. His breath caught in his throat.

Another envelope. Identical to the first two. Same high-quality paper, same elegant handwriting. His heart skipped a beat, and a nauseating feeling of dread washed over him. He knew, with a certainty that chilled him to the bone, what it was. The author was relentless. They weren't waiting for him to act; they were simply continuing their macabre countdown, dragging him deeper into their world of prophecy and murder.

He took it out, his hands shaking. The address:

To the Executioner of Paris.

And underneath, the small stylized feather. His mark. He unfolded the single sheet, his eyes immediately drawn to the date:

20 Messidor, Year II of the Republic

Three days away. The cold dread intensified, tightening his throat. He forced himself to read:

My dear Antoine,

*The shadows within the Conciergerie itself will soon claim another life. On the morning of 20 Messidor, in the prison kitchen, a man named Citizen Alain Marchand, one of the cooks, will be found dead. He will have been stabbed, his life draining away on the stone floor among the remains of the morning porridge. His death will be attributed to a kitchen accident, a knife slipping in the dim light of dawn. But it will not be an accident. It will be the work of Citizen Gerard Leblanc, another cook, who has long resented Alain's seniority and his meager but consistent rations of meat. A petty betrayal, Antoine, but one that will serve to remind us that even within the walls of justice, hunger and envy breed their own brand of terror. The Conciergerie, too, devours its own.

Étienne gasped, a cold, sharp sound. *Within the walls of the prison.* This was different. The previous victims had been outside, in the city. This one was here, among them, a cook. Alain Marchand. Stabbed. Gerard Leblanc. Envy. Meat rations. The details were agonizingly precise, terrifyingly intimate. A new level of dread washed over Étienne. The walls of the Conciergerie, once a familiar boundary, now felt like the walls of a trap, closing in on him. He was no longer safe, not even in his own quiet corner.

He had to act. He had to warn Alain Marchand.

The next morning, on the 18th of Messidor, Étienne sought out Sanson. He knew it was a risk, but he couldn't shake the feeling that the executioner had a piece of this macabre puzzle. Sanson was the intended recipient of these letters.

He found Sanson in his small office. The executioner was sitting at a heavy oak desk, polishing the gleaming blade of a small ceremonial knife. "Citizen Voclain," he growled, his voice deep. "To what do I owe this unexpected visit?"

"I have a matter of some urgency," stammered Étienne. "It concerns... certain irregularities within the prison. Communications predicting events of a violent nature."

Sanson raised an eyebrow. "Predict events? Are you suggesting prophets or madmen among us?"

"Not madmen, citizen," insisted Étienne. "Rather, someone with astonishing knowledge of future crimes. Murders."

Sanson stopped polishing. "And how would a copyist come to know of these... predictions? This sounds like dangerous talk, citizen."

"I have proof," Étienne blurted out. He took out the first two letters, keeping the third hidden. He placed them carefully on Sanson's desk. "These, citizen. Addressed to you."

Sanson took the first letter, read it, then the second. His face remained unreadable, but his eyes lingered on the dates, a fleeting hint of interest masked by habit. "And you found these, Citizen Voclain? Where?"

"The first was in a prisoner's file," Étienne explained. "The second, I found in my own pocket. There was a small pen drawn on the second envelope, citizen. Like the pen I use."

Sanson examined the corner. "A pen. Indeed." He looked at Étienne. "And you kept these?"

"I was afraid," Étienne confessed. "Afraid of what they implied. And when the first prediction came true, I felt terrible guilt."

Sanson leaned back in his chair, his fingers drumming softly. "Guilt. A heavy burden." He paused. "I have not received such letters. These are... new to me, but I am not blind." His voice was lower, more serious. "And I deal in facts, not fantasies."

"But the predictions came true," Étienne insisted, his voice rising with desperation. "Jean-Luc Moreau, poisoned. Pierre Delacroix, hanged. Every detail, just as it was written."

"Coincidence, citizen," said Sanson, standing up. "My duty is to ensure the swift and orderly execution of justice. Not to chase ghosts." He threw them back on the desk, but his fingers lingered just a second longer than necessary on the seal. A twitch in his jaw betrayed what his voice did not say.

"But, citizen," Étienne pleaded, "there is another. This one concerns someone within the Conciergerie itself. A cook, Alain Marchand, who will be murdered by Gerard Leblanc on the 20th of Messidor."

Sanson paused, turning his back on Étienne. His shoulders seemed to tense. "Another Marchand. And within these walls? Do you have this letter too?"

Étienne nodded. "Yes, citizen. It arrived yesterday."

Sanson stared at him for a long moment. "You are deeply involved in this, Citizen Voclain. More than you realize." He returned to the desk, picking up the two letters. "Leave these with me. And don't mention this to anyone else. Not the warden, not your colleagues, and certainly not Citizen Clouet. Do you understand?"

Étienne nodded, a glimmer of hope stirring inside him. Sanson wasn't dismissing him entirely. He was taking the letters.

Étienne spent the rest of the day observing the kitchen staff. Alain Marchand was a small, stooped man. Gerard Leblanc was burly with a red face and a quick temper. He had heard Gerard complain about Alain's favoritism. The motive fit perfectly with the letter.

He decided on a more subtle approach. He convinced jailer Fournier to send both cooks to clean the storeroom early on the morning of 20 Messidor, citing a rat infestation and Clouet's concern for hygiene. It was a desperate gamble.

The night was long and restless. He woke up gasping for breath. It was the 20th of Messidor. The day of the predicted murder.

Hours later, a sudden, piercing scream tore through the silence of the prison. It came from the direction of the kitchen. Étienne froze, his blood turning to ice.

He pushed his way through a growing crowd. Alain Marchand lay on the stone floor, a kitchen knife clenched in his hand. But it was not Alain Marchand who was dead. It was Gerard Leblanc, with an open wound in his chest. Alain, the predicted victim, was alive, hysterical, muttering incoherently about self-defense.

Étienne staggered backward. His intervention had failed, or rather, it had twisted the prophecy. The victim was different, but the perpetrator and the method were strangely linked. It was as if the author knew the *intention*, the *actors*, but not the exact outcome.

Suddenly, Clouet appeared, his face a mask of contained fury. He surveyed the scene. "What is the meaning of this?" Clouet's voice was low, dangerous. "A fight between cooks? This is an outrage!"

Fournier stammered out his explanation, detailing Étienne's suggestion for early cleaning. Clouet's eyes settled on Étienne. "So, Citizen Voclain," Clouet said, his voice dangerously soft, "you took the liberty of interfering with the kitchen routine?"

Étienne felt himself blush. "Citizen, I simply observed an unsanitary condition."

Clouet laughed, a chilling sound devoid of humor. "A concern for public health? Or perhaps a desire to meddle?" His eyes narrowed. "I warned you, Citizen Voclain. Curiosity, left unchecked, can lead to... unforeseen consequences." He pointed to Gerard's body. "Like this." For the Revolution to progress, order must be absolute, even in the smallest details.

The implication was clear. Clouet was blaming him. Étienne felt a wave of despair wash over him. His attempt to save a life had only resulted in another death, and had brought Clouet's suspicion even more directly upon him.

"This is not a simple kitchen brawl, Citizen Fournier," Clouet announced. "This is a failure of vigilance. A sign of disloyalty. Take Citizen Marchand to a cell. And I assure you that those responsible, directly or indirectly, will face the

full weight of revolutionary justice." His gaze swept over Étienne again, a clear and unmistakable threat.

Étienne withdrew, his mind a whirl of confusion and terror. The letter had been almost right, but subtly wrong. Or had it been a deliberate distraction, designed to lure him into action, to expose him? The author, whoever it was, seemed to be playing a much more intricate game than he had imagined.

He returned to his room and updated his notebook: *20 Messidor. The murder occurred. But Gerard Leblanc, the predicted perpetrator, is dead. Alain Marchand, the predicted victim, is alive, claiming self-defense. My attempt to intervene... Clouet suspects my involvement. The author not only predicts; he manipulates. Or his knowledge is so profound that he can foresee my attempts. This is a trap. I am trapped. The author knew I would try to intervene. The symbol of the pen was not just recognition; it was an invitation to a deadly game where my actions are anticipated and twisted against me.*

Just as he was about to close his notebook, a faint scratching sound came from outside his door. A piece of parchment, identical to the other letters, slipped underneath. Étienne's breath caught in his throat. This was no ordinary note. He opened the envelope, his hands trembling. The handwriting was the same. The date was today's. And the contents:

Citizen Voclain,

Your interference has caused more bloodshed. Citizen Henri Lemoine, a guard, has been found dead in his quarters. His throat slit. A tragedy, no doubt. But not an accident. A consequence of your actions, copyist. This letter was found on his person. A warning. The executioner, a man of action, has ignored your fantasies. Now you will pay the price. And you, citizen, are becoming increasingly entangled. Your curiosity is your downfall. Be warned. For the Republic does not tolerate dissent, and the guillotine awaits those who weave webs of lies.

The letter was not signed with the usual pen. Instead, it bore an ominous signature: *The Observer.*

Étienne stared at the note, his blood running cold. A new letter. A new victim. A guard. Henri Lemoine, but this time, a guard. And a direct accusation against him, Étienne. The author was not only predicting; he was incriminating him. They were using him as a scapegoat, twisting his attempts to save a life into proof of his guilt. "The Observer." A chilling new signature. There was a coldness and precision in the words that made him shudder.

Suddenly, a knock sounded at his door. "Citizen Voclain," stammered a young guard, "Citizen Clouet wishes to see you. Immediately."

Étienne held his breath. This was it. He stood up and followed the guard.

Clouet's office was larger and more opulent than Sanson's. Clouet sat behind a polished desk, his face grim. Two burly guards stood by the door. "Citizen Voclain," Clouet began, his voice now sharp and cold as ice. "We have just received a report. A guard, Citizen Henri Lemoine..."

Étienne felt a cold dread spread through his stomach. "A guard? Henri Lemoine? I know nothing about this, citizen."

Clouet leaned forward, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "No? Because we found something else, Citizen Voclain. Tucked into the pocket of Citizen Henri Lemoine's uniform. A letter. No signature. No date. But with a most peculiar symbol. A small stylized feather."

Étienne's blood ran cold. The author. They had struck again. And this time, they had implicated him directly, leaving a letter with *his* symbol on a dead guard.

"This letter, Citizen Voclain," Clouet continued, his voice dripping with menace, "describes the death of a guard named Henri Lemoine, his throat slit, found in his quarters. It also speaks of a 'copyist, whose meddling will cause more bloodshed.' And it is signed, ominously, 'The Observer.' What do you have to say about this, Citizen Voclain?"

Étienne stared at Clouet, his mind reeling. A new letter. A new victim. A direct accusation against him. The author wasn't just predicting; he was incriminating

him. They were using him as a scapegoat, twisting his attempts to save a life into proof of his guilt. "The Observer." A chilling new signature.

"I... deny any involvement, citizen," Étienne stammered, his voice trembling despite his efforts to control it. "They are framing me. Someone is trying to implicate me, to use me."

Clouet rose slowly, his eyes burning with cold fury. "Framed? Or exposed, Citizen Voclain? You have been asking questions. You have been 'observing.' You have been 'meddling.' And now, a guard is dead, and a letter bearing your personal mark is found on his body, warning of your 'meddling.' It seems that your curiosity has, indeed, led to bloodshed, citizen." He signaled to the guards. "Take him to a holding cell. He will be questioned. And I assure you, citizen Voclain, that we will uncover the full extent of your 'meddling' in this prison. The Revolution has no patience for those who conspire against its order. No patience at all.

The guards grabbed Étienne, their grip like bands of iron. He offered no resistance, his mind numb with shock and terror. He was no longer a witness, no longer a pawn. He was a suspect. The author of the letter had orchestrated this, not only the murder, but his downfall. The maze had indeed narrowed, and now Étienne Voclain, the silent copyist, was trapped, his own life hanging by a thread. The sound of the blade, once a distant hum, now seemed to resonate directly in his ears, a chilling and personal prophecy.

CHAPTER 4 – FIRE IN THE ARCHIVES

The detention cell was a colder, darker version of Étienne's own cramped room. The air was thick with the stench of unwashed bodies and despair, a primal smell that clung to his clothes and permeated his entire being. He sat on a rough wooden bench, his back against the damp stone, the events of the morning replaying in a horrifying loop in his mind. Gerard Leblanc, dead. Alain Marchand, hysterical. The new letter, with *his* pen mark, found on Henri Lemoine, the murdered guard. Clouet's cold fury, his accusation of "meddling," his chilling promise of revolutionary justice. Étienne was no longer just a copyist caught up in a dangerous game; he was a suspect, a conspirator in the eyes of the Republic. The author of the letters had not only predicted deaths, but had skillfully woven Étienne into the fabric of his crimes, twisting his desperate attempts to save a life into damning evidence against him. "The Observer," the new signature, felt like a personal mockery. They were watching him, indeed, and manipulating his every move.

The hours passed in a haze of fear and exhaustion. Étienne tried to reason, to find a logical explanation, but the more he thought, the deeper he sank into the quicksand of paranoia. Who was this Observer? How did they know his actions before he carried them out? How could they place a letter on a dead guard

with such precision, incriminating him so completely? It felt like a malevolent intelligence, always several steps ahead.

The door to his cell creaked open, and a guard, a man named Jean-Pierre, a familiar face from the archives, poked his head in. His expression was grim, a mixture of pity and fear. "Citizen Voclain," he said in a low voice, "Clouet wants you back in the archives. He's furious about the mess. And... he wants you to start the inventory. Immediately.

Étienne felt a wave of confusion wash over him. The archives? After being accused of meddling, they were sending him back to his post? It seemed counter-intuitive, almost a cruel joke. He stood up, his legs stiff, and followed Jean-Pierre, his mind racing. Was this a reprieve? Or another trap?

As he walked through the familiar corridors, the prison seemed to vibrate with a new and heightened tension. The guards spoke in hushed tones, casting suspicious glances. The news of the two deaths—Gerard Leblanc and Henri Lemoine—had spread like wildfire, fueling the omnipresent paranoia. Étienne felt every gaze on him, every whisper a potential accusation.

He reached the archive room, and his breath caught in his throat. It was not as he had left it. Documents were scattered everywhere, shelves had been torn from the walls, and a thick layer of dust covered everything. It looked as if a frantic search had taken place. Clouet stood in the center of the room, supervising two other guards who were throwing files randomly onto the floor. His immaculate coat was now slightly rumpled, his expression angry. "Ah, Citizen Voclain," Clouet said, his voice sharp as a razor. "Back among your precious papers. I trust your brief confinement has given you sufficient time to reflect on the consequences of your... independent actions.

He gestured toward the chaotic room. "We are searching for something. Something that may shed light on this morning's unfortunate events. Specifically, any other 'misplaced' documents, or perhaps, any other letters bearing your unique artistic signature." His gaze was cold, piercing.

Étienne felt a chill. They were looking for the letters. His heart pounded against his ribs. He had hidden his secret diary, with the transcribed letters, under a loose board in his bedroom floor. It was safe, for now. But the letters themselves, the originals, he had given to Sanson. Would Sanson admit to having them? Or would he deny it, leaving Étienne even more exposed? "I assure you, Citizen Clouet," said Étienne, trying to keep his voice steady, "I have no other letters of that kind. And I have no knowledge of any conspiracy."

Clouet merely sneered. "Your denials ring hollow, citizen, considering the evidence. A murdered guard, a letter bearing your mark, and your ill-timed suggestion that led to another death. The Republic is not so easily fooled. Ambitious men like you believe they can weave their own narratives."

He turned to the guards. "Continue the search! Every nook, every cranny! These walls harbor traitors, and we will root them out!"

The guards resumed their chaotic search, throwing more files onto the already overflowing floor. Étienne watched, a knot of dread in his stomach. The archive, his sanctuary, was being desecrated, its order destroyed. But it was more than just disorder. If they found his secret diary, or if Sanson denied having the original letters, Étienne would be truly lost.

Clouet then turned to Étienne. "Your new task, Citizen Voclain, is to meticulously inventory every document in this room. Every file, every ledger, every scrap of paper. I want a complete accounting. And I want you to look for anything unusual. Any anomalies. Any name that seems out of place. Any... prophecy." His lips curled into a sneer. "And if you find anything that implicates you further, I advise you to report it to me immediately. It might save you some pain during your next interrogation."

The task was immense, designed to be both punishment and surveillance. Étienne had to clean up the mess Clouet's men had made, while under constant scrutiny. He was a de facto prisoner, confined to the archives, his every action monitored.

The days blurred into a monotonous cycle of fear and forced labor. Étienne sifted through mountains of paper, his hands constantly stained with ink and dust. He cataloged, sorted, and reconstructed the chaotic archive, all while keeping a wary eye on the guards who occasionally checked on him. He felt the weight of Clouet's gaze even when the Internal Observer was not physically present. He knew he was being tested, pushed to his limit.

He found nothing. No other letters, no cryptic messages, no hidden clues. The archive, once a source of possible answers, now felt like a vast, indifferent tomb of paper. All he found was the overwhelming weight of his own despair. Sanson remained silent. Clouet remained suspicious. And Étienne remained trapped.

The memory of Léna's words often came back to him: "Curiosity kills people." He had ignored her, and now he was paying the price. He longed to talk to her, to confide in someone, anyone, but the risk was too great. He couldn't drag her into this.

One evening, as dusk fell and the prison lamps cast long, dancing shadows, Étienne remained alone in the archive, trying to organize a particularly rebellious pile of outdated tax records. He was exhausted, his body aching, his mind numb. The air was unusually heavy, and a faint acrid smell seemed to cling to the old paper. He dismissed it as the usual prison stench, or perhaps dust.

Then, a flash of orange caught his attention.

He looked up, his heart clenching in his chest. From a distant corner of the archive, near a pile of unused firewood and old rotten lumber, a thin wisp of smoke curled upward. And then, a small, hungry flame licked at the dry wood.

Fire. In the archive.

Panic, cold and sharp, pierced Étienne's exhaustion. The archive was a powder keg, filled with centuries of dry parchment, brittle wood, and dusty fabric. A fire here would be catastrophic, consuming not only the prison records, but potentially the entire wing.

He sprang into action, shouting for help, his voice hoarse. He grabbed a heavy canvas cloth, usually used to cover documents, and tried to smother the growing

flames. But the fire was already too fierce, too voracious. The dry wood caught quickly, sending sparks flying, and a column of thick, black smoke rose, suffocating him. "Fire! Fire in the archives!" he shouted, his voice hoarse, but the stone walls seemed to swallow the sound. The prison was quieting down for the night, its usual bustle silenced.

He knew he had very little time left. The fire was spreading quickly, consuming the old shelves, licking at the piles of paper. He had to save something. Not just for the Republic, but for himself. His secret diary was in his room, but the original letters he had given to Sanson were gone. He needed to find other copies, any evidence, anything that might still exist.

He knew the layout of the archive intimately. He knew where the most important documents were kept: prisoner records, legal precedents, official decrees. He also knew where the less important, darker files were kept, the ones that often went unnoticed.

He fought his way through the smoke, coughing violently, his eyes stinging. He knocked over piles of documents, throwing them away from the spreading flames, trying to create a firewall. But it was useless. The fire was a living beast, consuming everything in its path.

His gaze fell on a small, dusty corner, usually overlooked, where old and incomplete files were sometimes stored before being officially discarded. It was a place of forgotten papers, of loose ends. Suddenly he remembered the first letter, found tucked into a prisoner's file, a file that might have been destined for this very corner. What if the author had a secret hiding place here? A place to plant his deadly prophecies, knowing they would go unnoticed?

Driven by a desperate impulse, he threw himself into the smoke-filled corner. The heat was intense, burning his skin, and the air was thick with the smell of burning paper and wood. He tore at the shelves, knocking down files, searching frantically. His lungs burned, his eyes watered, but he pressed on, driven by a terrifying urgency.

He found nothing. Only more burnt paper, more smoke. Despair threatened to overwhelm him. He was going to die there. Just as he was about to give up, his fingers brushed against something hard, something metallic, hidden behind a crumbling pile of old tax records. He pulled it out. It was a small, ornate metal box, heavy and cold to the touch. It had been deliberately hidden behind the oldest and most forgotten documents. His heart leapt. This was it.

He tried to open it, but it was locked. There was no time. He clutched it to his chest, the metal burning through his thin tunic. At that moment, the first cries reached him, faint but growing louder. Guards. They had finally noticed the smoke. "Fire! In the archives!"

He staggered out of the archive room, coughing violently, his face smeared with soot, his hair singed. The entire hallway was now filled with smoke, and guards were rushing toward the archives, buckets of water in hand, their faces pale with alarm. "Citizen Voclain! What happened?" Jean-Pierre shouted.

"Fire! It started... I don't know how!" gasped Étienne, collapsing against the wall, the metal box still clutched tightly in his hand.

Chaos broke out. The guards formed a desperate chain, but it was a losing battle. The fire was too fierce, too widespread.

Clouet appeared, his face contorted with rage, his elegant coat now singed. He surveyed the scene, his eyes flashing, then fixed on Étienne. "What is the meaning of this, Voclain?" roared Clouet. "Negligence! Incompetence! First you meddle, and now you allow the Republic's own records to burn? The Revolution seeks order, not anarchy!"

"I tried to stop it, citizen," Étienne gasped. "I don't know how it started!"

Clouet grabbed him by the front of his tunic. "You don't know how it started? Or perhaps you do know? Perhaps this is another one of your 'interventions'? A deliberate act to destroy evidence?" His eyes narrowed. "You were the only one here, Voclain! Now, tell me, what have you done?"

Étienne felt a wave of cold fury wash over him. "I was trying to save what I could, citizen! This is madness! Why would I burn the very records I work with?"

"Madness? Or desperation?" Clouet growled. "You are already implicated in two deaths, citizen. A useless tool for justice, or a threat to it."

He shoved Étienne, then turned to the guards. "Secure this man! He's under arrest, again! And search him! Thoroughly! If he's managed to hide any incriminating documents, I want them!"

Étienne's heart sank. He had saved the box, but now it would be discovered. As the guards approached, a new voice cut through the chaos. "What's all this commotion?"

It was Sanson. He stood at the edge of the hallway, his face grim. The smoke seemed to part for him.

Clouet turned, his eyes still burning. "Citizen Sanson! This man, Voclain, has proven himself a traitor! He was found alone in the archives when the fire started!"

Sanson's gaze swept over the burning archives, then settled on Étienne. "A fire in the archives. A grave loss. But to accuse a man without evidence, Citizen Clouet, is to preempt justice. I spoke with Citizen Voclain just yesterday. He was deeply concerned about recent... irregularities. And he presented me with certain documents suggesting a wider conspiracy."

Clouet's eyes narrowed. "Documents? You didn't mention any of this, Sanson."

"My duties are my own, Citizen Clouet," Sanson replied. "I am simply stating that Citizen Voclain brought a matter of grave concern to my attention. To accuse him of causing this fire now, without further investigation, seems... hasty."

Clouet stared at Sanson, a silent battle of wills. Finally, with visible effort, he restrained his anger. "Very well, Citizen Sanson. But understand this: if Citizen Voclain attempts to escape, or if he is found to be lying, you will both face the consequences. And I will personally ensure that the Tribunal is made aware of your... interference."

The guards moved again, grabbing Étienne. They quickly found the hidden metal box. "Aha!" exclaimed Clouet, snatching the box from him. "What is this, Citizen Voclain?"

"It was hidden in the archives, citizen," Étienne gasped. "I found it just before the fire got too big."

Clouet sneered. "A convenient story. We'll see about that." He tried to open it, but it remained locked. "Bring me a crowbar!"

Étienne was taken, hands bound, to a small, isolated room. Hours later, Clouet entered, holding the now-open metal box. His face was grim, a mixture of triumph and something Étienne couldn't quite decipher.

He held up a single folded sheet of parchment, its elegant calligraphy instantly recognizable. "Inside this box, we found not only a collection of old and insignificant papers, but *this*." Étienne's heart sank. It was another letter. The author had used the archive as a drop-off point. "Addressed, as always, to 'The Executioner of Paris,'" Clouet continued. "And dated for tomorrow, the 21st of Messidor. It speaks of a poisoning, a betrayal in the prison kitchen, and implicates a laundress named Léna as the perpetrator."

Étienne felt a wave of cold wash over him. Léna. They were targeting Léna. The author was now not only predicting, but actively incriminating. And the letter was found by him, in a box that he had retrieved. It was a perfect trap.

"I deny this, Citizen Clouet," said Étienne, his voice surprisingly strong, driven by a sudden and desperate urge to protect Léna. "This is a fabrication! Léna is innocent! Someone is trying to frame her, just like me!"

Clouet merely smiled, a chilling, humorless expression. "An invention? Or a convenient truth? This letter describes a conspiracy to poison the gruel distributed to political prisoners. And it names Léna, the laundress, as the principal agent. And you, Citizen Voclair, have been seen talking to her quite often in recent days. He paused. It seems that your "meddling" goes far beyond the kitchen, doesn't it? Perhaps you are part of this conspiracy. Perhaps you are the liaison, the orchestrator, the true "Observer" among us.

Étienne felt a wave of pure terror wash over him. He was trapped. The author had not only predicted this, but had laid such an elaborate trap that it was impossible to escape.

Clouet approached, his eyes burning with a cold, triumphant light. "Indeed, citizen. A deadly game. And it seems you are losing. We will thoroughly investigate this 'plot.' And if it is discovered that citizen Léna is involved, she will face the full wrath of the Tribunal. And you, citizen Voclain, will answer for your part in this sedition.

He turned to the guards. "Take him back to his room. No one is to speak to him. No one is to enter."

Étienne was led away, his mind numb. Léna, innocent, now caught in the author's web. And it was he who, unwittingly, had tightened the net around her. His attempts to save lives had only led to more deaths and more accusations. The author had used fire, had used his curiosity, to implicate them both.

The next morning, on the 21st of Messidor, Étienne was awakened by a loud knock. The guards entered and took him away. They brought him to the main hall, where a small crowd had gathered. In the center, Léna stood with her hands bound, her face pale but defiant. She met Étienne's gaze, and for a moment, her perceptive eyes held a silent accusation before hardening into a mask of resignation. Clouet stood before her, holding the letter.

"Citizens!" Clouet's voice boomed. "We have uncovered a heinous plot! A conspiracy to poison our brave political prisoners! And the culprit, this viper among us, is none other than citizen Léna, the prison laundress!" He held up the letter. "We have a confession, a detailed account of her vile intentions, found among the ashes of the archive! And it was citizen Voclain, a man already implicated in recent atrocities, who discovered this damning evidence!"

Étienne felt nauseous. A confession? The letter was a prophecy! Clouet was twisting the narrative. "This is a lie!" Léna shouted, her voice harsh but strong despite her fear. "I am innocent!"

"Silence, traitor!" roared Clouet. "Your lies mean nothing! The evidence is clear! And your co-conspirator, Citizen Voclain, stands before you, his guilt plain for all to see!"

Étienne tried to speak, but a guard silenced him. He could only watch, helpless. "This poisoner, this enemy of the Republic, will face justice!" declared Clouet. "She will be taken to court immediately! And citizen Voclain, her accomplice, will follow her!"

Léna was dragged away, her eyes still burning with defiance, but an expression of deep despair settled on her face as she passed Étienne.

Étienne was dragged back to his room, his heart heavy with guilt and despair. He had failed her. The fire had not only destroyed the archives; it had consumed his last hope. As night fell, Étienne heard a faint scratching outside his door. A small piece of parchment slid underneath.

He picked it up, his hands trembling. It was a small folded note, written in hurried, familiar handwriting.

Étienne,

*Don't believe what they say. I'm innocent. But Clouet is distorting everything. The letters... he knows more than he admits. He saw me transcribing conversations. He's been watching me, just like you. He's looking for the author, but I think... I think he also wants to control the prophecies. Be careful. They know more about us than we think. The fire... it wasn't an accident. And the box... I saw someone put it there. Not the author. Someone else. Someone with high-level access. I saw him. He works for Clouet. Stay alert. Find the truth. For both of us.

L.

Étienne felt a surge of hope, then a new wave of terror. Léna was innocent. And she had seen something. She had seen someone put the box there. Someone who worked for Clouet. The fire was no accident. The box, with the letter implicating Léna, was a trap. And the person who planted it worked for Clouet. Clouet wasn't just investigating; he was manipulating. He was using the letters, and the fire, and Étienne's own actions, to eliminate perceived threats, to consolidate his power.

He quickly hid Léna's note. He had to find out who that "someone" was, the person who worked for Clouet and had placed the box. This was his last chance. The Watcher was out there, but there were other hands, red hands, manipulating

the black ink of the prophecies. And Étienne was now looking not only for a ghostwriter, but for a very real and very dangerous enemy within the walls of the Conciergerie. He knew what he had to do. He had to find Léna. And he had to expose Clouet. Before the next letter, the next prophecy, sealed the fate of them both.

CHAPTER 5 – THE WASHERWOMAN AND THE BLADE

Léna's note, slipped under his door in the darkness of the night, was a spark in the suffocating darkness of Étienne's despair. Her words, hurried and urgent, cut through the layers of fear and self-blame that had enveloped him. Léna was innocent, a keen observer. And she had seen something: a new player, a manipulator, working for Clouet, planting evidence. The real horror was not just the Observer's prophecies, but the insidious web that Clouet was weaving around them both.

Étienne spent the rest of the night in a feverish state. He reinterpreted every interaction with Clouet, every veiled threat, every chilling smile. It all took on a terrible meaning. Clouet wasn't just investigating; he was actively shaping events, using the prophecies as a tool, and Étienne and Léna as convenient scapegoats or pawns. The thought ignited a cold fury in Étienne, a determination that cut through his paralyzing fear. He had to find Léna. He had to know what she knew. And together, they had to expose Clouet, or whoever was pulling the strings behind the Inner Observer.

The next morning, on the 22nd of Messidor, Étienne was confined to his room. Guards stood outside his door, their presence a constant, suffocating reminder of his predicament. He was a prisoner awaiting trial, his fate tied to Léna's.

Injustice burned inside him. He paced the small room, his mind racing, trying to come up with a plan. How could he reach Léna, who was probably in a holding cell, awaiting interrogation or worse? The guards remained impassive. "Orders, Citizen Voclain," one said curtly. "No communication. No exceptions."

Despair threatened to overwhelm him again, but Léna's note, hidden under a loose floorboard, pulsed with desperate hope. "Work for Clouet." That was the key. He had to identify that person. But from his confinement, how?

The days passed. On the third day of his confinement, the 24th of Messidor, Étienne heard a commotion outside his door. The heavy bolt slid back, and Clouet himself entered, flanked by two new and unfamiliar guards. There was a predatory gleam in his obsidian eyes. "Citizen Voclain," Clouet began, his voice soft. "I trust your solitary confinement has given you time to reflect. We have discovered more truths."

Étienne remained silent.

"Citizen Léna, the laundress," Clouet continued, his voice devoid of emotion, "has, after... exhaustive questioning, admitted her involvement in the plot to poison the political prisoners.

"That's a lie!" Étienne exploded. "She would never! You forced her!"

Clouet merely laughed. "The truth, like a river, always finds its way to the surface. Your name, I regret to inform you, featured prominently in her testimony. She spoke of your shared 'curiosity,' your mutual 'observations,' and your growing 'disillusionment' with the Revolution. For the Republic, loyalty is a weapon, and dissent is poison.

Étienne felt a wave of despair wash over him. Léna, broken, had implicated him. "She's innocent!" insisted Étienne. "And so am I! You're distorting everything!"

"Protests are useless, citizen," Clouet said, his voice hardening. "The Tribunal is set for tomorrow. For both of you. Unless you have something new to offer. Something that might mitigate your guilt, or perhaps shed light on the *real* mastermind." His eyes bored into Étienne. "Tell me what you know. And maybe, just maybe, your life, and Léna's, can be saved."

That was it. A deal. But a trap. "I know nothing, citizen," Étienne said, forcing the words out. "I am as much a victim as anyone else."

Clouet's smile faded. "Then you are a fool, Citizen Voclain. Very well. Let justice take its course." He turned to leave, but paused. "Ah, one more thing. We found something else in Léna's laundry cart. A knife. Very sharp, very well hidden." It seems your innocent laundress was more prepared for violence than she let on.

The door slammed shut. A knife? In Léna's cart? That was impossible. This was another trap, another piece of planted evidence. And it confirmed Léna's suspicion: someone was actively working for Clouet. The court hearing was set for tomorrow. He had less than a day. He had to find Léna. He had to discover the truth about the knife and the man working for Clouet.

Suddenly, a wild and desperate idea sparked in his mind. The laundress's cart. It was usually left in the main laundry area. If he could get to it...

He began to observe his guards more closely. They were two new men, unfamiliar faces. He had heard that one of them, Citizen Dubois, was particularly nervous about the recent fire in the archives, his face still pale from the shock.

He waited until the dead of night. When the guards were bored and tired, Étienne threw himself against the door, shouting, his voice strained and loud. "Smoke! Smoke in the hallway! Help!" The guards, startled, struggled with the bolt, their faces pale from the recent memory of the fire in the archives. Citizen Dubois, the younger of the two, panicked and ran down the hallway. The other, older and more cautious, grabbed Étienne. "There's no smoke, Voclain! What are you playing at?"

"But I saw it!" Étienne shouted, still pointing. "Go, quickly!"

The senior guard, though suspicious, pushed Étienne back toward his room. "Go inside, you fool! I'll check it myself!"

As the older guard turned to follow his colleague, Étienne seized his chance. He ran out, not toward the archives, but in the opposite direction, toward the laundry area. He could hear shouts approaching. He didn't have much time.

He reached the laundry area, a large, damp room. It was deserted. Léna's cart was in a corner. He ran towards it. He had to find the knife. He plunged his hands into the piles of dirty laundry, the smell of soap and old blood mixed together. He felt something hard and cold, wrapped in a stained cloth. He pulled it out. It was a knife, indeed. A long, slender blade, sharp and gleaming brightly. It was not a kitchen knife, but a finer, almost ceremonial weapon. It was carefully hidden, tucked deep inside a bundle of uniforms.

He examined it. This wasn't Léna's. She would use a simple kitchen knife. He looked more closely at the handle. There was a faint, almost invisible engraving on the pommel. It was a small three-pointed symbol. Not a feather.

A new thought struck him. The letters had a feather symbol. This knife had a different symbol. Was there more than one person involved? Or was this a distraction, a clever trick by the Watcher to implicate Léna with a different "mark"?

He heard shouts approaching. He quickly wrapped the knife again, tucking it back into the bundle of clothes, precisely where he had found it. Then he grabbed a handful of dirty laundry and tucked it under his tunic to simulate a harmless theft attempt.

He heard the guards burst into the laundry room. "Voclain! There he is!"

Étienne didn't hesitate. He ran toward the back exit, a small door leading to the prison courtyard, normally kept locked. He hoped that in the chaos, they had left it ajar. With desperate luck, the door was slightly open, as if a careless guard had left it that way. He rushed through the door. The courtyard was empty. He could hear the guards shouting behind him, closer now.

He saw a familiar figure emerge from the shadows near the executioner's quarters. Sanson. The executioner stood there, impassive, watching the commotion.

Étienne hesitated, then changed direction, running toward Sanson. "Citizen Sanson!" he gasped. "They're framing Léna! They planted a knife in her cart! And they're going to condemn us both tomorrow!"

Sanson's gaze remained unreadable, but he did not move. He simply watched Étienne approach.

The guards burst into the courtyard, led by Clouet, who was seething with rage. "There he is! Grab him! He's trying to escape!"

Étienne reached Sanson, desperate. "Citizen Sanson, you must believe me! The knife was planted! Léna saw someone who works for Clouet put the box in the file! This is all a trap!"

Clouet stopped, his eyes burning. "Citizen Sanson, step aside! This man is a traitor!"

Sanson finally spoke, his voice deep. "He came to me, Citizen Clouet. Seeking sanctuary, perhaps. Or perhaps, seeking justice. He speaks of a planted knife. And of a man who works for you, planting evidence.

Clouet sneered. "Desperate lies! His guilt is clear! And his accomplice has already confessed!"

"He confessed under duress, perhaps," Sanson replied, his voice surprisingly firm. "The Conciergerie has its own methods for extracting 'truth'. And I have my own methods for discerning it." He paused. "I will take citizen Voclain into my custody. He will remain here, in my chambers, until a full investigation can be conducted."

Clouet stared at Sanson. "This is highly irregular, Citizen Sanson. You are interfering with a direct order from the Committee!"

"I am ensuring justice, Citizen Clouet," Sanson replied, his voice calm but with an underlying steely edge. "The Republic values truth above all else. And I believe Citizen Voclain may possess a truth that has not yet been revealed."

Clouet, with visible effort, restrained his anger. "Very well, Citizen Sanson. But if Citizen Voclain attempts to escape, or if he is found to be lying, you will both face the consequences.

Sanson merely nodded. "As you wish. The guillotine awaits all who betray the Republic. Even its most zealous servants.

Étienne felt a deep sense of relief. He looked at Sanson, who remained impassive. "Come, Citizen Voclain," said Sanson. "My chambers are no sanctuary, but

at least they are quieter than a cell. Start with this 'knife' you speak of. And be precise."

Étienne followed Sanson. He began with the first letter, the death of Jean-Luc Moreau, then the second, the death of Pierre Delacroix, and the chilling detail of the feather symbol. He spoke of Clouet's arrival, his veiled threats. Then he recounted the third letter, the predicted murder of Alain Marchand, and his desperate attempt to intervene, which had resulted in the death of Gerard Leblanc and Clouet's direct accusation.

Sanson listened silently, his eyes fixed on the void. Étienne then moved on to the fire in the archives, his discovery of the metal box, and the new letter implicating Léna. He described Clouet's triumph and his own confinement. "And then," Étienne continued, his voice thick with emotion, "the note from Léna. She saw someone plant the box, citizen. Someone who works for Clouet. And she suspected that Clouet wanted to control the prophecies, not just stop them. And then Clouet told me about the knife. Found in his cart.

Sanson raised an eyebrow. "Did you examine this knife? Did you see it?"

"Yes, citizen," Étienne confirmed. "I created a distraction, escaped, and went to the laundry. I found it, wrapped up, deep inside his cart. It wasn't a simple kitchen knife. It was... elegant. And it had a symbol on the handle. A three-pointed symbol. Not a feather."

Sanson's eyes narrowed. "A three-pointed symbol. That's what I thought. This, Citizen Voclain, is the mark of the *Fraternity of the Black Hand*. An ancient secret society, rumored to have existed in the shadows of Paris for centuries. They consider themselves the true executioners of Paris, deciding who lives and who dies, long before the blade of the Republic falls.

Étienne stared at the knife, then at Sanson, a cold dread washing over him. "The Brotherhood of the Black Hand? But... what does that mean?"

"It means," said Sanson, his voice low and solemn, "that these letters, these prophecies, are much more intricate than I imagined. The symbol of the pen, that of the letters, is the mark of a single author. The Observer, as Clouet called

him. But the knife, the one that was planted in Léna's carriage, bears the mark of a completely different hand. The Black Hand. Someone is using these two symbols, these two entities, to weave a complex web of murder and manipulation.

"But why?" whispered Étienne. "Why implicate Léna with a knife from a secret society? Why plant it in her carriage for me to find, knowing that Clouet would use it against her?"

"To sow confusion," Sanson replied. "To discredit Léna, yes. But also, perhaps, to send a message. To you. Or to the Observer. Or perhaps to both of you. The Black Hand is known for its intricate games, its layers of deception. And if Léna really did see someone working for Clouet place that box, then it means Clouet is now a pawn in their game. Or perhaps a willing accomplice, using the Black Hand's methods for his own ends.

"So what do we do, citizen?" asked Étienne. "Léna is doomed. The trial is tomorrow."

Sanson walked over to the window. "Clouet is a dangerous man. And the Black Hand is even more so. To accuse them openly without irrefutable evidence would be suicide. For all of us. But you have given me information. A black feather. This is a start.

"But it's not enough to save Léna!"

"Perhaps not directly," Sanson conceded. "But it buys us time. And it reveals the true nature of the forces at play. We must find this man, this agent of Clouet, who planted the box. He is the key. But for this to work, citizen, you must do something for me. Something that will put you in even greater danger.

"Anything, citizen," said Étienne. "To save Léna. To find the truth."

"Very well," said Sanson. "You will no longer be confined to your room. You will return to your duties in the archives. This will give you freedom of movement, albeit limited. You must find this 'someone' Léna spoke of. The man who works for Clouet, who planted the box. You must observe Clouet's inner circle, his most trusted agents.

"And the symbol, citizen?" added Étienne. "The three-pointed symbol?"

Sanson shook his head. "No. The Black Hand operates in the shadows. But this man, this agent, will be Clouet's shadow. Observe his movements, his interactions. And most importantly, listen.

Sanson secured a three-day postponement for Étienne and Léna's trial. Étienne returned to the archives, feeling the weight of the clock ticking away.

CHAPTER 6 – THE GHOST IN THE HALLWAY

Étienne returned to the archives, a shadow of his former self, but with a mind sharper than ever. Only two days until Léna's postponed Tribunal. He had to find something. He decided to focus his observations on Clouet's personal scribe, citizen Paul Moreau. The man was always with Clouet, always carrying his documents, always whispering in his ear. If anyone was Clouet's shadow, it was Paul Moreau.

He watched Paul Moreau all morning. The scribe was indeed meticulous, almost robotic in his movements. He never seemed to relax, his eyes always darting about, as if expecting trouble. He was not a physically imposing man, but there was a certain intensity in his gaze, a nervous energy that Étienne found unsettling. He noticed Paul Moreau frequently entering and exiting a small, unmarked door near Clouet's office, a door that Étienne knew led to a private storage area for sensitive documents. It was a restricted area, accessible only to Clouet and his most trusted staff. Étienne also saw Gauthier in the hallways, the guard with his eyes always alert, his silent presence a constant on the periphery. A fleeting suspicion, a chill.

During lunch, when most of the staff was in the common room, Étienne saw Paul Moreau slip away from Clouet's side, heading toward that private storage

area. He paused at the door, glanced quickly around, and then slipped inside. This was his chance.

Étienne, pretending to look for a misplaced file, slowly made his way toward the area. He waited until the hallway was clear, then, with a rush of adrenaline, he quietly approached the door. It was slightly ajar. He peered inside. The room was small, filled with tall shelves of neatly organized files. Paul Moreau was at a desk in the center of the room, his back to the door, meticulously sorting through a stack of documents.

Étienne's heart was pounding. He had to get closer. He took a cautious step inside, but the floorboards creaked slightly. Paul Moreau froze. He turned slowly, his eyes wide with surprise, then fear. "Citizen Voclain!" he stammered, his voice weak. "What are you doing here? This area is restricted!"

Étienne forced himself to appear calm. "Citizen Paul Moreau! My apologies. I was simply... looking for a particularly elusive file. I thought it might have been misplaced in this section.

Paul Moreau swallowed hard. "Misplaced? Here? This is a restricted area, Citizen Voclain!

"Indeed," said Étienne. "And I assure you I would not have intruded if the matter were not of the utmost urgency. The warden is very particular about this file: a series of old decrees on prison hygiene. Given the recent... incidents, he wishes to review them." He watched Paul Moreau closely, noting the subtle tension in the man's grip on the files, the way his eyes darted nervously toward a stack of documents on the desk.

"Hygiene?" Paul Moreau scoffed, a nervous laugh. "These are classified documents, Citizen Voclain!

"Of course," Étienne said. "Perhaps you could simply confirm that the file is not here, and I will continue my search elsewhere." He took another step, trying to get a better view of the desk.

Paul Moreau, however, mirrored his movement. "There is nothing for you here, Citizen Voclain. Nothing at all. Now, I must insist that you leave."

"Citizen Paul Moreau," Étienne pressed, his voice losing some of its feigned politeness, "I think we both understand the gravity of the situation. Léna is accused. And so am I. If there is anything in this room, any document, that could shed light on the *real* culprit, it is our duty to discover it."

Paul Moreau visibly cringed. "I... I don't know anything about such things, Citizen Voclain! I'm just a clerk! I follow orders!"

"You, Citizen Paul Moreau?" said Étienne, his eyes narrowing. "Or are you following someone else's orders? Someone who placed a metal box in the archives, a box containing a letter that condemned an innocent woman?"

The accusation hit Paul Moreau like a physical blow. He staggered backward, gasping for breath. "W-what are you saying, Citizen Voclain?" he stammered. His eyes, wide with terror, darted to a small, heavy ledger on the desk. Étienne saw it. A dark leather-bound book with a faint, almost imperceptible, three-pointed symbol embossed on its spine. The same symbol as the Black Hand.

"I'm saying," Étienne said in a low, dangerous voice, "that Léna saw him. She saw him place the box. And that box contained a letter that condemned her. A letter that bore the mark of the Watcher, but was clearly planted by another hand. A hand, perhaps, guided by a different symbol." His gaze fixed on the ledger. "Like the one on that book."

Paul Moreau stared at him, his mouth open, his face a mask of pure terror. He stammered.

Suddenly, a cold, sharp voice cut through the tension. "What is the meaning of this intrusion, Citizen Voclain?"

Clouet stood in the doorway, his face grim, his eyes like shards of obsidian. Two burly guards stood behind him. Clouet had clearly returned earlier than expected.

"Citizen Clouet!" Paul Moreau gasped, visibly shrinking. "I... I just... Citizen Voclain insisted on coming in..."

Clouet ignored Paul Moreau, his gaze fixed solely on Étienne. "Insisted? Or intruded? Have you so quickly forgotten my warnings? The Revolution has no time for your little games."

"Citizen Clouet," Étienne began, his mind racing. "I was simply seeking clarification from Citizen Paul Moreau. I suspected there were... irregularities regarding the contents of this room. And I believe I have found them." He pointed to the ledger. "That book, citizen. I believe it is connected to the conspiracy."

Clouet's eyes flickered to the ledger, then back to Étienne, a flash of something unreadable in their depths. "A book? You accuse a book, Citizen Voclain? Your paranoia reaches new heights." He turned to Paul Moreau. "Paul Moreau, you will account for this intrusion. You are dismissed from my service. Immediately. Paul Moreau gasped. Loyalty, Citizen Paul Moreau, is not simply following orders. Loyalty is foresight. Take him away, guards. Confine him to a holding cell. He will be questioned about his "expenses" and his alleged "knowledge" of secret societies.

The guards grabbed Paul Moreau, who offered no resistance. He cast one last terrified glance at Étienne.

Clouet then turned his attention to Étienne, his eyes gleaming with predatory satisfaction. "And as for you, Citizen Voclain, your antics have gone too far. You are not only a conspirator, but a meddler, a fantasist. Your Tribunal will proceed as planned. And I will personally ensure that your lies are exposed, and your guilt, and that of your accomplice, Léna, made clear." He signaled to his remaining guards. "Take him back to his room. And make sure he never leaves again. Ever."

Étienne was dragged back to his room. His attempt to expose Paul Moreau had failed. Clouet had twisted the situation, using Étienne's own words to get rid of Paul Moreau, while simultaneously reinforcing Étienne's image as a delusional conspirator. He had lost his only potential witness. And now, his fate, and Léna's, seemed sealed.

Hours later, as night fell, there was a faint scratch at his door. Étienne hurried to pick up a small piece of parchment. This time, it wasn't from Léna. The handwriting was elegant, precise, eerily familiar. The same handwriting as the letters. And at the bottom, the small stylized feather. The Observer.

Citizen Voclain,

*Your efforts, though misguided, are noted. Your search for the truth, commendable. But you pursue the wrong ghost. The Black Hand is but a shadow. Clouet, a puppet. The true orchestrator remains hidden. You seek the source of the prophecies, but ignore the whispers in the corridors. The riddles of the madman. He knows more than he lets on. Seek out the Ghost in the Hallway. He holds the key to the past and your future. And be warned, citizen. Your name, Étienne Voclain, will soon be recorded in the annals of the damned. For your curiosity, like a hungry flame, will consume you. The Tribunal awaits you. And the blade, already sharpened, longs for your neck.

Étienne stared at the note, his blood running cold. A new letter. The Observer knew everything. And now, he was directing Étienne to a new target: "The Ghost in the Hallway." The madman. He remembered the rumors, the muffled whispers among the guards about a former priest, driven mad by his confinement, who wandered the corridors muttering cryptic prophecies.

The chilling warning about his own imminent death sent a new wave of terror through him. His Tribunal was set for tomorrow. He didn't have time. But this was a direct clue.

The next morning, on the 27th of Messidor, Étienne was awakened. He was to be taken to the Tribunal. As he was led down the main corridor, Étienne kept his eyes peeled, looking for any sign of the "Ghost." The prison was bustling with its usual activity. He saw Léna being led out of her holding cell, her hands bound, her face pale but still defiant. Their eyes met, a silent exchange of fear and despair. She offered a slight nod.

He noticed a small group of guards gathered near a little-used side corridor. They were guarding a heavy door with iron bars, usually kept locked. This was where the "madmen" were kept. This had to be it. The Ghost in the Corridor.

As they passed, Étienne stumbled, feigning weakness. "I... need a moment," he gasped. "My heart... is racing."

The guards dragged him away. "There's no time, Voclain! The Tribunal is waiting!"

"But I feel weak!" insisted Étienne, leaning deliberately against the wall, trying to get a better view of the barred door. He saw a shadowy figure pacing inside, muttering to himself.

Suddenly, the figure stopped. He turned, his wild, unfocused eyes seeming to fix on Étienne. He was an old man, his hair long and tangled. A ghost, indeed. And then he spoke. His voice, though raspy, had an unsettling clarity.

"Black ink flows, but red hands guide the pen!" gasped the old man. "The Watcher sees all, but the Serpent twists the truth! He who seeks the light will find only shadows!"

Étienne froze. Black ink, red hands, the pen, the Watcher, the Serpent. These were phrases from the letters, from Léna's note, from his own thoughts! The old man knew.

"What did he say?" murmured one of the guards. "Just the usual madness. Ignore him."

But Étienne couldn't ignore him. He fought against the guards. "Tell me more!" he shouted at the old man. "Who is the Serpent?"

The old man just laughed. "The Serpent wears a mask of righteousness! He speaks of order, but sows chaos! He uses the prophecies, but does not write them! He is the one who dances with the Black Hand, guiding its shadow!"

Étienne's mind reeled. Clouet. The Serpent. It fit perfectly. "He knows about Clouet!" Étienne shouted, trying to explain. "He's not crazy!"

The guards pulled him away roughly. "Enough of this madness, Voclain!"

As they dragged him away, the old man's voice, though weaker, still reached him. "The copyist seeks justice, but finds only his own name on the blade! The last letter arrives, bearing the mark of the condemned! His own death, by his own hand, in the shadow of the guillotine!"

Étienne's blood ran cold. His own death, by his own hand. The last letter. It was coming. And it would be about him.

He was dragged into the main hall, where the Tribunal awaited. Clouet sat at the head of the long table. Léna was already there. Clouet's eyes met Étienne's.

He offered a slight, chilling smile. "Ah, Citizen Voclain. Just in time. Your Tribunal awaits you. Your accomplice, Léna, has already confessed to your shared delusions.

"She's lying!" Étienne shouted. "You forced her! And the old man, he knows the truth! He knows you're the Serpent, working with the Black Hand!"

Clouet merely laughed. "The 'Ghost in the Hallway'? Citizen Voclain, your desperation only breeds more madness. There is no 'Serpent,' no 'Black Hand.' Only the justice of the Republic. The truth is what the Committee decides it to be."

He picked up a document from the table. "And speaking of guilt, Citizen Voclain, a new letter was found. It was in your own coat pocket while they were preparing you for this Tribunal.

Étienne's heart was pounding. The letter about him. Clouet held up the parchment. "This letter, Citizen Voclain, is addressed to 'The Executioner of Paris'. And it describes, in chilling detail, the imminent death of a certain 'Étienne Voclain'. It speaks of his 'meddling,' his 'betrayal,' and his ultimate fate: to die by his own hand, in the shadow of the guillotine.

Étienne stared at Clouet, his mind reeling. The Ghost's words. The Observer's prophecy. It was all coming true.

"And the most intriguing detail, citizen," Clouet continued, "is that this letter bears a unique signature. Not the usual pen. But a small stylized symbol. A three-pointed mark. The mark of the 'Black Hand,' as you so eloquently described it."

Étienne gasped. The Black Hand. The symbol on the knife. The Watcher's letter was signed by the Black Hand. This meant that the Watcher and the Black Hand were one and the same. Or, more terrifyingly, the Black Hand had taken over the Watcher's work, using his prophecies, twisting them for their own ends. And they were using *his* predicted death to finalize their control.

Clouet smiled, a cold, triumphant expression. "It seems that your 'Black Hand' has condemned you. The Court has heard enough. Guards, take citizen Voclain

and citizen Léna to the cells. Your execution will be scheduled for tomorrow. The Republic demands swift justice."

Étienne felt the guards grab him. He looked at Léna, her face now etched with despair. The Black Hand had signed his execution order, using the Observer's prophecy, and Clouet was its willing instrument. His name, Étienne Voclain, was indeed engraved in the annals of the condemned. The guillotine awaited. And the final card, his own execution order, had arrived.

CHAPTER 7 – THE EXECUTIONER'S SECRET

The cold of the Conciergerie stone seeped into Étienne's bones. Clouet's triumphant smile, the letter with the Black Hand's three-pointed symbol, the prediction of his own death—it all swirled in a nauseating vortex. He was doomed. Léna was doomed. The Tribunal was over, quick and brutal.

He was dragged back to a deeper, colder holding cell, intended for those awaiting the final journey to the Place de la Révolution. The air here was heavy with the stench of fear and the metallic aftertaste of old blood. He heard the heavy bolt slide into place. Léna was in a similar cell, he knew, equally trapped. He felt like a marked animal, waiting for his slaughter.

He sank down onto the rough wooden bench, his head in his hands. He had failed. Léna would die because of him. He would die because of his relentless curiosity. The irony was a bitter taste.

The hours passed in suffocating darkness. The next morning, Étienne was awakened by the jingle of keys. A guard entered. "On your feet, Citizen Voclairn," he growled. "You are going to witness an example. A lesson for all who defy the Republic."

Étienne was led through the corridors. He saw Léna briefly as she was also being taken away. Their eyes met, a fleeting moment of shared terror and defiance.

Étienne was taken to the main courtyard, where a makeshift gallows had been erected. Clouet stood on a raised platform, his voice already booming. "Citizens! Loyal servants of the Republic! We gather today for a necessary act of purification! The Revolution demands absolute loyalty!"

Étienne was pushed to the front of the crowd. He scanned the faces, looking for Sanson, but the executioner was nowhere to be seen.

"We have discovered a viper among us!" Clouet continued, his voice resonating with a mixture of fanaticism and self-satisfaction. A jailer, charged with the security of this very Conciergerie, who dared to question the wisdom of the Committee! His personal ambition, his ideological blindness, led him to doubt the justice that the Revolution imparts. Those who sow discord are reaped by the guillotine.

A man was dragged forward, his hands bound, his face pale with terror. It was Jean-Pierre, the guard who had initially brought Étienne back to the archives. The same man who had shown Étienne a fleeting moment of pity. "But... but Citizen Clouet, I didn't do anything!" stammered Jean-Pierre, his pleading eyes fixed on Étienne. "I was just wondering if the charges against Citizen Léna were completely fair!"

Clouet sneered, a cruel smile playing on his lips. "To question the justice of the Republic is disloyalty! To doubt the wisdom of the Committee is treason! Your thoughts, your words, are poison that corrodes the spirit of our nation!" He gestured to two burly guards. "Let this be a lesson to all! The purification must be complete, starting with the minds and hearts housed in this prison."

Jean-Pierre was dragged to the gallows, his pleas dying in his throat, drowned out by the bloodthirsty roar of the crowd. He cast a desperate, pleading glance at Étienne, a last glimmer of humanity. Étienne felt a wave of impotent rage. There was nothing he could do.

"The Republic demands purity!" roared Clouet. "Long live the Revolution!"

The trapdoor beneath Jean-Pierre's feet opened with a sickening thud. His body jerked violently, then lay still. The air filled with the stifled scream of the crowd, an echo of horror and fascination.

Étienne felt a cold, hard knot of fury tighten in his stomach. This was not justice. This was terror. And Jean-Pierre was a pawn in Clouet's grim game. His death was a statement, a warning of what awaited those who dared to doubt.

As the body continued to sway, Clouet stepped forward. "Let this death serve as a reminder. No one is above suspicion. Citizen Voclain. Citizen Léna. Your turn is coming. Let this example be a final warning."

Étienne was dragged back to his cell, the image of Jean-Pierre's lifeless body etched in his mind. He was no longer just afraid; he was filled with a burning, desperate resolve. He had to find a way out. Not just for himself, but for Léna. And for Jean-Pierre's memory.

As dusk fell, Étienne heard a faint scratching outside his door. A small piece of parchment slid underneath. He quickly picked it up. The calligraphy was elegant, familiar. The small, stylized quill. The Watcher.

Citizen Voclain,

Your time is short. The sands of the hourglass are falling fast. You seek answers, yet you ignore the obvious. Prophecies are not mere words; they are the very threads of destiny. They are the future, laid bare. Do not doubt their power. Do not doubt their truth.

His execution is set for tomorrow, the 29th of Messidor, the letter continued. *At the ninth hour, in the Place de la Révolution. The guillotine awaits. The blade, already sharpened, longs for his neck. He will be dressed in a simple white shirt, without ties, carried to the cart by two guards. He will pass through the Rue Saint-Honoré, where a woman, dressed in black, will weep openly for his lost innocence.*

Étienne's eyes widened. This was not just a prediction; it was a horribly detailed script. *His prayer for his lost father.* That was a detail only he knew. How could the Observer know that?

You will climb the scaffold with courage, citizen Voclain, the letter continued. *You will refuse the priest, as is your custom. You will look east, toward the rising sun, and whisper a final prayer for your lost father. The executioner, Antoine Sanson, will perform his duty with his usual solemnity. And as the blade falls, a single black feather will fall from the sky, landing on his chest, a final mark of his departure. This is your destiny, Citizen Voclain. Written in black ink, sealed by fate. Do not try to defy it. For the threads of destiny, once woven, cannot be undone.*

The letter was unsigned, but the symbol of the feather, small and precise, was there. And beneath it, almost hidden, was the faint engraving of the three-pointed symbol. The Black Hand.

A terrifying realization struck Étienne. What if these letters were truly predictive? What if they were glimpses of a predetermined future, a fate from which there was no escape? The Observer's letter had brought forward the date of his execution, a cruel and personal adjustment.

He clenched the card, his knuckles white. He had to believe there was a way out. He had to believe in free will. But the details. The white shirt, the untied hands, the woman crying, his prayer for his father, the black pen. They were so precise. How could he fight something that knew him so completely?

He tried to open the door. It was solid. He shook the bars of his small window. He was trapped. Despair threatened to consume him. If his fate was written, at least he would face it on his own terms.

As dawn approached, Étienne heard the familiar sounds of the prison waking up. This was it. His last day. He folded the letter carefully, hiding it deep inside his robe. He would take it with him. It was his proof, his final testament.

Hours later, the heavy bolt on his cell door opened. Two guards entered. "Citizen Voclain," said one. "Your time has come. The Court has confirmed your sentence."

Étienne stood up, his legs surprisingly steady. "And Citizen Léna?"

"Yes, citizen. Her sentence was confirmed."

He was led out of his cell, his hands untied, just as the letter had predicted. He wore his simple white shirt. The guards did not bother to search him again. He saw Léna ahead of him, dressed in a simple gray dress, her hands also untied. She looked up, and their eyes met. She offered him a small nod, a gesture of shared resolve.

They were led to the prison courtyard, where the execution carts awaited. As they helped him onto the cart, he scanned the faces. He saw Clouet, standing on the steps of the Conciergerie, his face a mask of grim satisfaction. Their eyes met, and Clouet offered him a faint, chilling smile.

But then, Étienne saw another figure. Sanson. The executioner stood tall and imposing, his dark uniform a stark contrast to the pale morning light. His face was unreadable, but his gaze was fixed on Étienne, a deep and unsettling understanding. He held something in his hand, a small, dark object.

The carts began to move, slowly leaving the gates of the Conciergerie. As they passed through the Rue Saint-Honoré, Étienne scanned the crowd, looking for the woman in black who was crying. And then he saw her. Standing apart, her face veiled, her body shaken by silent sobs. The prophecy, chillingly accurate.

A wave of deep despair washed over Étienne. It was all true. He looked at Léna. "Léna," he whispered. "Did you... did you receive a letter?"

Léna turned her head slightly. "No, Étienne," she whispered. "Only the news from Clouet. He said my execution had been brought forward to today. But I saw something. One of Clouet's guards, the one with the scar over his eye. He was whispering to another guard, near the executioner's quarters. He said, 'The old man will be dealt with. He knows too much. The Ghost in the Hallway will be silenced. Before he can speak again.'

Étienne's blood ran cold. The Ghost in the Hallway. The old man who knew about Clouet. They were going to silence him.

"Léna," Étienne whispered. "The Observer's letter... predicted my execution for today. And it said I would die with my hands untied, dressed in a white shirt. And

that a black feather would fall on my chest. It was signed by the Black Hand." He quickly pulled the parchment from his robe.

Léna read the letter. "This is... terrifying, Étienne. But the Black Hand's signature... why would the Observer use their mark? Unless... unless they are one and the same.

"Or," Étienne replied, "unless the Black Hand has taken over the Watcher's work. Or perhaps the Watcher is trying to warn us. To expose the Black Hand's involvement by using its mark on *my* execution order." He paused. "Léna, the Ghost in the Hallway. He knows the truth. He called Clouet the Serpent. He said Clouet uses the prophecies but doesn't write them. He said Clouet dances with the Black Hand. He's the key. If we can get him to talk, to expose Clouet before his execution, before he's silenced..."

Léna's eyes held a glimmer of hope, quickly overshadowed by despair. "But how, Étienne? We're on the wagon."

"We have to buy time," Étienne insisted. "We have to create a distraction. Something to draw attention, to buy us a moment. If we can get to Sanson..." He seemed to believe me.

As the cart rattled closer to the Place de la Révolution, the roar of the crowd grew louder. Étienne knew he had to act now. He looked at Léna. She nodded firmly and resolutely.

"Chaos," Étienne replied. "We need chaos. Something to break the routine, to divert attention from the scaffold to the prison. To the Phantom."

The cart stopped at the foot of the scaffold. The guards began to remove the prisoners. When Étienne stepped onto the cobblestone pavement, he saw Sanson approaching. The executioner was carrying a small leather-bound book in his hand, and something else.

Clouet watched. "Make them move forward!"

As Étienne and Léna were led toward the scaffold, Étienne made eye contact with Sanson. The executioner's gaze was unyielding. Étienne took out the letter from the Observer. He held it up, making sure Sanson could see the symbol of the

pen and the faint three-pointed mark of the Black Hand. Sanson's eyes widened almost imperceptibly.

At that moment, Léna acted. With a sudden, desperate cry, she lunged at a street vendor's cart, knocking it over. Apples and oranges scattered across the ground, and the vendor screamed.

"Citizens! This is a lie!" Léna shouted, her voice cutting through the commotion. "Clouet is a traitor! He framed us! He works with the Black Hand!"

Chaos erupted. Guards rushed toward Léna. "Silence, traitor!" roared Clouet. "This is the madness of the damned!"

In the confusion, Étienne lunged toward Sanson. "Citizen Sanson! The Phantom in the Hallway! They're going to silence him! He knows about Clouet! About the Black Hand! This letter... it's from the Observer, but signed by the Black Hand! They're trying to control the prophecies!"

Sanson took the letter, his face tensing. "The Phantom in the Hallway. He knows about the Black Hand? And Clouet?"

"Yes!" urged Étienne. "He called Clouet the Serpent! They're going to silence him before he can speak again!"

Clouet, having finally subdued Léna, now turned his furious gaze to Étienne and Sanson. "What does this mean, Citizen Sanson? Are you conspiring with this traitor? Return that document!"

Sanson ignored Clouet. His gaze was fixed on the letter. "A black pen," he murmured. "A final mark." He looked at Étienne. "Citizen Voclain, this prophecy... it's frighteningly accurate. But the mark of the Black Hand... this changes everything."

"Exactly!" urged Étienne. "They're trying to control destiny! And they're going to silence the Phantom in the Hallway because he knows too much!"

Sanson's jaw tightened. He looked from the letter to Clouet, then back to Étienne. "Clouet is a dangerous man. To openly challenge them here... would be suicide."

"But the Phantom in the Hallway!" Étienne pleaded. "He's the only one who can expose them!"

Sanson took a deep breath. He looked at the guillotine, then at the agitated crowd, and then back at Étienne, a grim determination settling on his face. He made a decision.

"Citizen Voclain," Sanson said, his voice low. "Your prophecy speaks of a black feather. A final mark. But a feather can also be a message. A sign. Is that not so?"

Étienne stared at him, confused, then a sudden hope ignited within him. A sign.

Sanson quickly folded the letter, tucking it into his own robe. "Clouet," he called, his voice loud and clear. "One moment, please. There is a matter of protocol. One last request from the condemned man. It is our duty to ensure that all such requests are heard."

Clouet stared at Sanson. "Protocol? At a time like this?"

"It's the dignity of the Republic," replied Sanson. "One last word from citizen Voclain. He wishes to address the crowd, to offer a final testament."

Clouet, seeing the expectant faces of the crowd, nodded. "Very well. But be quick."

Étienne was pushed to the base of the scaffold. He turned to face the crowd. He had seconds. He looked at Sanson, who held his gaze. Sanson then subtly took out a small object. It was a single black feather. He held it in the palm of his hand, then gently threw it into the air. The feather rose, then began to float down. It was a signal.

Étienne cleared his throat, his voice trembling at first, then gaining strength. "Citizens! I stand before you today, condemned! Accused of treason! But I tell you this is a lie! I am innocent! And so is citizen Léna! We are pawns in a deadly game!"

Clouet lunged at him. "Silence, traitor!"

But Sanson stepped forward. "Let him speak, citizen Clouet. Let the condemned man have his last words."

Étienne seized the moment. He raised his voice. "There is a man in the Conciergerie! A former priest, driven mad by confinement! He is known as the Ghost in the Hallway! He knows the truth! He knows that citizen Clouet is the Serpent, twisting the prophecies, working with the Black Hand to control the Revolution! They are going to silence him! They are going to kill him today! Before he can speak! You must save him! You must hear his truth!"

His words echoed across the square. Clouet, his face livid, turned to the guards. "This is madness! Arrest him! And proceed with the execution!"

Sanson stepped in front of them. "Wait a moment, guards! The prisoner has made a serious accusation. It demands immediate investigation."

"Investigation?" Clouet sneered. "There will be no investigation, Sanson! Proceed with the execution!"

Sanson's eyes now held a dangerous gleam. He looked at Clouet, then at the black feather, which had finally descended and landed softly on Étienne's white shirt, just above his heart. The prophecy. The sign.

"No," said Sanson, his voice low but resonating with undeniable authority. "Not yet. The Republic demands the truth. And until this 'Ghost in the Hallway' is heard, until this accusation against citizen Clouet is investigated, no blade will fall. Not today. Not for citizen Voclain. Nor for citizen Léna. Clouet stared at him, his face contorted. Guards! Return citizen Voclain and citizen Léna to the Conciergerie. Under my personal custody. And secure the 'Ghost in the Hallway'. He is to be brought to my chambers. Immediately. Unharméd.

A stunned silence fell over the Place de la Révolution. Étienne felt a wave of deep relief, quickly followed by a new wave of terror. Sanson had saved them. For now. But he had openly defied Clouet.

As the guards led Étienne and Léna away, Étienne glanced back at Clouet. The Internal Observer stood motionless on the scaffold, his face a mask of furious disbelief. Sanson met Étienne's gaze, a grim understanding in his eyes. The Ghost in the Hallway. He was their last hope.

CHAPTER 8 – BLOOD AND PAPER

The thick silence of Sanson's chambers hung over Étienne and Léna, a welcome counterpoint to the bloodthirsty roar of the Place de la Révolution. Sanson had intervened, yes, but the victory was fragile. The shadow of Clouet, and the deeper threat of the Black Hand, lingered. Léna, still pale, collapsed onto a stool. Étienne, the Observer's letter still clenched in his hand, felt the weight of the implications. The truth was incomplete.

Sanson, impassive as ever, moved behind his heavy oak desk. "You have stirred a hornet's nest, Citizen Voclain," Sanson said, his voice grave. "Clouet will not forget this public humiliation. And the Committee... will demand answers. Our grace is temporary.

"We understand, Citizen Sanson," replied Étienne, with Léna nodding beside him. "And we are grateful. But the Ghost in the Hallway... he has the truth that can expose Clouet.

Sanson nodded. "Indeed. He spoke of knowing that Clouet uses the prophecies but does not write them. That he 'dances with the Black Hand.' These are serious accusations." He looked at Léna. "And citizen Léna, your own accusations, shouted so publicly, have only added fuel to the fire."

Léna held Sanson's gaze. "I saw his scribe, Paul Moreau, place the metal box in the archive. The box that contained the letter that condemned me. And Étienne

saw the symbol of the Black Hand in Paul Moreau's ledger. Clouet tried to use that against us. It's not just Clouet who's playing games, Executioner. There's a darker hand at work.

Sanson's jaw tightened. "The Black Hand. An insidious network. They thrive on chaos, on fear. If Clouet is truly their instrument, then the danger is far greater than we imagine." He turned to Étienne, his eyes piercing. "And you spoke of the Phantom in the Hallway. Do you believe he can expose Clouet?"

"He knew details of the letters, citizen, before I showed them to him," Étienne explained. "He spoke of 'black ink and red hands,' of the 'Observer' and the 'Serpent.' He said that Clouet uses the prophecies but does not write them. And that he 'dances with the Black Hand.'"

Sanson nodded, a slight twitch in his jaw betraying his concern. "And his words are not merely the ravings of a madman." He stood up, walked over to a small, heavy curtain, and pulled it aside, revealing a hidden door. "The Ghost is here." In a holding cell adjacent to my quarters. I sent my men to fetch him. He is under my protection, for now.

Étienne felt a wave of relief wash over him. "But before we speak with him," Sanson continued, his voice dropping to a grave and serious tone, "there is something else. Something you must know, Citizen Voclain. Something I have kept hidden, even from you. Until now. My duty, my oath to the Republic, bound me to a bitter silence. But the truth has a way of demanding to be told.

Sanson reached into a hidden compartment in his desk. He pulled out a small wooden box locked with a key. He placed it on the desk. He took a key from around his neck, worn from use. He opened the box. Inside were several pieces of parchment, identical to the letters Étienne had been receiving. But the symbols at the bottom were different. Some bore the quill. Others bore the three-pointed mark of the Black Hand. And some... some bore no mark at all, but a simple, clear instruction.

Sanson picked up one of the scrolls. "I have also been receiving letters, Citizen Voclain," he confessed, his voice barely a whisper, but resonating with the force of

a long-held truth. "For many months now. Long before you found the first one. They are prophecies, yes. But they are more than that."

"More than prophecies?" asked Étienne, a lump forming in his throat.

Sanson held up the letter. "This one arrived three days before the execution of a citizen named Pierre Delacroix, a minor nobleman. It indicated, with precise detail, the time and date of his execution. And it concluded with a single, chilling instruction: 'Ensure that the blade falls with maximum efficiency. The Republic demands a clean end for its enemies.'"

Étienne's mind reeled. "Instructions? You mean... these letters are directing executions?"

Sanson nodded, his face grim. "Precisely. They are not just predicting deaths. They are ordering them. Every letter I have received has been a detailed directive for an upcoming execution. Within days, those names would appear on the official lists. And I, the instrument of the Republic, would be instructed to carry out the 'prophecy,' as if it were simply destiny unfolding.

Étienne felt a deep shock. "But why didn't you speak of this before?"

Sanson held his gaze. "Because, Citizen Voclain, to admit such a thing would be to admit a profound subversion of justice. To admit that the Executioner of Paris was being guided by invisible hands. It would be to sow panic, to destabilize the order we so desperately try to maintain. And who would believe me? My loyalty to the Republic is unquestionable, but my duty is to the truth, yes, but also to stability.

"You mean... you followed these instructions?" Léna gasped, her voice barely a whisper.

Sanson closed his eyes for a moment. "I am the Executioner, citizen Léna. My duty is to the blade. And to the Republic. I sought to understand, yes. But I also sought to obey. To maintain the illusion of order. To prevent even greater chaos. The fear of greater anarchy is a powerful motivator.

"But the symbols," insisted Étienne. "These letters, the ones you received, do they bear these marks?"

Sanson opened his eyes, picking up another letter. "Some of them, yes. The first ones, the ones that only predicted deaths, bore the pen. The mark of the 'Observer'. But more recently, especially the letters that gave specific instructions, began to bear the three-pointed symbol. The mark of the Black Hand."

Étienne stared at the letter in Sanson's hand, then at the one he held. "So there are two authors. Or one playing both sides. The Observer, with the feather, predicting. And the Black Hand, with its symbol, directing. And now, the letter predicting my own death, the one I received today, had both symbols."

Sanson nodded. "Exactly. That's what worries me the most. The mixing of symbols. It suggests collaboration, a shared agenda. Or, more disturbingly, that one has supplanted the other. That the Black Hand has taken control of the Observer's prophecies. The future is not predicted, it is induced. With ink. With fear.

"But why?" asked Léna. "What do they gain from such elaborate manipulation?"

Sanson closed the box. "Chaos. And control. The Black Hand believes in shaping destiny, in guiding the course of nations from the shadows. They see the Revolution not as a movement of the people, but as an opportunity to destabilize, to eliminate rivals, to install their own agents of influence. By controlling the very instrument of justice, they are, in essence, controlling the Republic itself. They are writing the history of France, one death at a time, under the guise of destiny.

"And Clouet?" asked Étienne. "Is he the 'Serpent' the Phantom spoke of?"

Sanson's eyes narrowed. "Clouet is ambitious, ruthless. He is certainly capable of allying himself with such a society if it suits him. The Phantom's words about him 'dancing with the Black Hand' suggest a willing association. He is using your prophecies, yes, but he is also using you to further his own agenda. He believes he is at the top, pulling the strings, but he is just another link in his chain.

"So he's not the author, the Watcher," Étienne clarified. "But he's using the prophecies, and he's working with the Black Hand.

"That is my growing suspicion," confirmed Sanson. "The Observer, the one who wields the pen, is a separate entity, or was. A man with his own distorted vision, perhaps, but one that the Black Hand has been able to exploit. Now, it seems that the Black Hand has co-opted the Observer, or they are one and the same, revealing their true colors in their latest letter. A declaration of intent.

Étienne felt a deep despair. "My execution is set for tomorrow. Léna's too. The letter changed the date."

Sanson turned and opened the hidden door, revealing a small, sparsely furnished room. Sitting on a cot, with his back to them, was the old man, the "Ghost in the Hallway." His white, tangled hair looked like a crown of thorns, his body frail, but an intensity burned in his eyes.

"Old man," said Sanson, his voice tinged with respect. "We have brought you visitors. They seek the truth. And they believe you possess it."

The old man turned slowly, his wild, unfocused eyes fixing on Étienne. "The scribe. He seeks the light, but finds only shadows. The blade longs for his neck.

"We know, old man," said Étienne. "But we believe you also know the truth behind the prophecy. You spoke of the Serpent.

The old man laughed, a sound as dry as dead leaves. "The Serpent wears a mask of righteousness, young scribe. He speaks of order, but sows chaos. He uses the whispers of the Watcher, but his own heart is black with ambition. He seeks to control the threads of fate. He believes himself a weaver, but he is only an apprentice to the Black Hand. He looked at Léna. And he sought to silence the washerwoman, for her eyes saw too much.

"Clouet," Léna whispered, the revelation confirmed.

The old man nodded. "Indeed. Clouet. His name is engraved in the ledger of the Black Hand. A willing servant. He believes he is in control, but he is merely a tool. A tool that will believe itself to be a craftsman.

"And the Black Hand?" Étienne insisted. "Who are they?"

"The Black Hand are the ancient architects of chaos, young man. They believe in the purification of society through perpetual unrest. They see the Revolution

not as a glorious dawn, but as a necessary purifying fire. And they believe that only they possess the wisdom to guide its flames. They whisper in the ear of power, sowing seeds of discord. They use the paranoia inherent in the Terror to make men act according to their will.

"And the Watcher?" asked Étienne.

"The Watcher... was a voice of discontent. A man driven by a twisted sense of justice. He wrote the true prophecies, with a moral, albeit distorted, intention. But he was naive. He did not understand that his prophecies could be *used*. That futures are not only predicted, but induced.

"They harvested his seeds of chaos," confirmed the old man. "They saw his power. And they took it. They began to twist his prophecies. They are the true masters of destiny. And you, in your innocence, have become their last and most powerful prophecy."

"But why me?" asked Étienne, fear mingling with a new, cold clarity.

"Because you sought the truth, young man. You became a nuisance that had to be controlled. And now, you are a lesson. Your death, predicted and manipulated, is their masterpiece, a reminder that no one can escape the threads of fate they weave.

Sanson, who had been listening silently, stepped forward. "So, the Black Hand seeks to control the narrative. To make it seem as if fate itself is guiding the guillotine.

"Precisely, Executioner," confirmed the old man. "They wish to install their chosen agents, purge their enemies, all under the guise of inevitable fate. And Clouet, the Serpent, is eager to help them. He believes he will rise to power on the ashes of this designed chaos.

"But if they are so powerful," Léna asked, "how can we fight them?"

"They have a weakness," whispered the old man. "They are meticulous. They keep records. Ledgers of their manipulations, their agents, their planned purges. Paul Moreau's ledger, the one with the three-pointed symbol, is just one of many. Their vanity betrays them."

"Where?" asked Étienne. "Where is that file?"

The old man shook his head. "I don't know its exact location. Only that it exists. But Clouet... he knows. He has access."

Sanson's jaw tightened. "Then Clouet holds the key. He has access to their plans. If we can get to those records, we can expose them all."

"But how?" asked Étienne. "My execution is tomorrow."

Sanson looked at Étienne. "We must create a distraction. A big one. Something that forces Clouet to act, to expose his game. And we must use the prophecy against them."

"The black pen," whispered Étienne. "You threw a pen, Citizen Sanson. As a signal."

Sanson nodded. "Indeed. A signal to my most trusted men. They are preparing. They are loyal to the true Republic, not the puppets." He paused. "The prophecy of your death is frighteningly accurate. But it also presents an opportunity. A way to turn their own game against them."

"A performance?" asked Léna.

"A performance of defiance," replied Sanson. "A performance that exposes Clouet and the Black Hand as the manipulators they are. We will use his own prophecy, his own symbols, his own meticulously crafted 'destiny,' to unmask them. But it will require immense courage, Citizen Voclain."

"I'll do anything," said Étienne, his voice firm and determined despite his fear. "To save Léna. To expose Clouet. For the truth."

Sanson nodded, a rare, almost imperceptible smile playing on his lips. "Good. Now we must prepare. You must remember every detail of the prophecy, every word of your confession. And you must not falter. Because the fate of the Republic, and your own lives, depend on your performance."

He turned to the old man. "Old man, your words have given us hope. Now, rest. Your testimony will be needed soon."

The old man simply laughed. "The threads of fate... are tangled, yes. But they can be woven again. The copyist seeks justice, and perhaps he will find it. But the

Serpent has many heads, young ones. And the Black Hand has many shadows. Be vigilant. Because the game is not over until the last thread is cut.

Sanson spent the rest of the night meticulously reviewing the plan with Étienne and Léna, instructing them on every detail: the design of the scaffold, the likely positions of Clouet's guards, the precise moment when his own men would act. He coached Étienne on the words of his confession, making sure they were damning but plausible. He emphasized the importance of the priest, the subtle change in the prophecy that would be his signal.

As dawn broke, Étienne felt a strange calm. He had faced his terror, accepted his fate, and now he was ready to defy it. He would walk to the guillotine not as a victim but as an avenger.

Sanson stood by the door. "The time has come, Citizen Voclain, Citizen Léna," he said. "Remember your purpose. Remember the truth you seek to reveal. And remember, the blade may fall, but the truth, once spoken, can never be silenced."

Étienne looked at Léna. They were in this together. As the heavy bolt on the door creaked open, Étienne felt the Observer's letter, still tucked deep inside his robe, pressing against his chest. His own death sentence. He would carry it to the scaffold. And he would use it to write a new ending. The game was not over. It was just beginning. The guillotine awaited, but so did the truth.

CHAPTER 9 – THE LAST CONFESSION

The cold of the Conciergerie seeped into Étienne's bones. The guillotine awaited. But Sanson's promise, and the Ghost's words, had ignited one last spark of hope. He needed the truth, the final piece of the puzzle.

At dawn, as the first pale shadows crept through the bars of his cell, Étienne heard a soft, rhythmic tapping on the wall. *Three taps. Pause. Three taps.* It was Léna. There was a crack in the mortar that allowed them to communicate in whispers. He moved closer to the wall, pressing his ear against the cold stone.

"Étienne," Léna's voice whispered, rough with fear and lack of sleep, but with a hint of urgency. "I've been listening. The guards talk. The ones who serve Clouet... one of them, Gauthier. He heard me talking about the box, about the letters. He... he always knows too much. He's always there, in the shadows. He's the protégé."

Étienne held his breath. Gauthier. The discreet guard, the silent observer, the one with the disturbingly piercing eyes. The name resonated with terrible certainty. He was the missing piece. Not just a protégé, but the one who continued the work, the one who wielded the pen.

"Are you sure?" whispered Étienne.

"I heard him brag once, when he was drunk," Léna replied. That he "wrote destiny." That "the truths the old Observer saw, he made them come true." It's Gauthier, Étienne. He's the one who took up the pen.

The irony was a bitter taste in Étienne's mouth. He had solved the riddle, but the solution had come too late to save him, at least by conventional means. His execution was imminent. The last letter, his own death sentence, had sealed his fate. But Léna's message, that final name, had ignited a spark of desperate hope. She was still fighting. He couldn't die in silence. He had to make sure that the truth, Gauthier's name, came to light.

He needed to write a confession, a final testament that would expose the true architect of terror. But he had no paper, no ink, no pen. He was stripped of everything, left with only his thoughts and the corrosive fear that intensified with each passing hour.

He paced the narrow cell, his mind racing. He had to find a way. He remembered his father's words: "Even in the darkest cell, Étienne, the mind is free. Use it. Observe. Deduce. The truth is often hidden in plain sight, if you know how to look."

He looked around, despair sharpening his senses. The rough stone walls, the filthy floor, the small barred window high above, letting in only a sliver of pale, indifferent light. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Then, an imperfection he had ignored before in his cell—a slightly tilted stone—caught his attention. Perhaps desperation was pushing him into fantasy, but after scraping with his fingernails, he felt a hollow. With persistent effort, he managed to loosen the stone. Behind it, he found the impossible: charcoal, dry and forgotten, and a parchment as thin as hope, a yellowed scrap, perhaps from a long-gone prisoner, hidden there for some reason.

A wave of euphoria, quickly followed by the crushing weight of his task, washed over him. This was it. His chance. His last chance.

He sat cross-legged on the cold floor, the tiny scroll spread out on his knee. The charcoal was rough, difficult to control, but he had to make it work. He began

to write, his hand shaking, his thoughts a torrent of words. He wrote about the first letter, the murder it predicted, the chilling accuracy. He wrote about Léna, her warnings, her courage, the knife with the Black Hand's mark on her cart. He wrote about the mad priest, his cryptic words, his revelations about the Serpent. He wrote about Clouet, his ambition, his manipulation, his role as the Serpent, the puppet who believed himself to be the puppeteer. And he wrote about the Black Hand, its insidious influence, its desire to control the Revolution through orchestrated chaos, convinced that this would forge a better future.

But most importantly, he wrote about Gauthier. The discreet guard, the protégé. He detailed how Gauthier, hidden in plain sight, had continued the Observer's work, manipulating events, framing him, Étienne, to divert suspicion. He recounted the knocks on the wall, the terrifying confirmation of Gauthier's name. He poured it all out, every suspicion, every piece of evidence, every chilling detail, his words a desperate race against the ticking clock of his own impending death.

He wrote until the charcoal was a mere stub, until the small parchment was filled with his cramped, almost illegible handwriting. He read it, his eyes clouding with tears. It was raw, honest, and damning. It was the truth.

Now, how to get it out? He folded the parchment carefully, tucking it into a small, almost invisible tear in the lining of his simple white shirt. He knew Léna would be watching, waiting for a signal. He had to trust her. He had to believe she would find a way.

The next morning, the heavy door of his cell creaked open. Two guards entered, their faces grim. Neither was Gauthier.

"Citizen Voclain," said one of them, his voice monotonous. "Your time has come. The Court has issued its verdict. You will be executed this morning."

Étienne felt a wave of cold wash over him, but a strange calm also took hold. This was it. The end. Or, perhaps, a new beginning for the truth.

He nodded, standing up. His legs felt weak, but his resolve was firm. He would not falter. He would face the blade with courage, and with the hidden truth close to his heart.

As they led him out of the cell, through the labyrinthine corridors of the Conciergerie, he saw Léna. She was standing next to a laundry cart, her back to him, folding a pile of coarse linen. But as he passed, she moved subtly, her eyes turning toward him, a flash of fierce determination in their depths. Their gazes met for a fleeting moment, a silent message passing between them: *I know. I will try.*

Étienne nodded almost imperceptibly, a silent acknowledgment. He had done his part. Now, it was up to her. He continued walking, his head held high, the confession weighing on his chest like a second heart.

The main courtyard of the Conciergerie was a hive of activity. Guards, jailers, and a few curious citizens had gathered, their faces a mixture of fear and grim anticipation. He saw Sanson near the prison gates, his imposing figure a silent sentinel, his gaze fixed on Étienne, a subtle nod passing between them.

The cart waited, the rough wood scraping against his simple white shirt as they helped him climb in. Léna was nowhere to be seen, but Étienne knew she was working. He had to believe in her.

The journey to the Place de la Révolution was a blur of noise and faces. The streets were lined with spectators, their expressions ranging from morbid curiosity to fervent revolutionary zeal. The roar of the Parisian crowd, a distant murmur at first, grew louder and louder, a rising tide of sound that promised both chaos and opportunity. Each step toward the scaffold was a drumbeat of blood in his temples. The air smelled of iron, burnt bread, and fresh fear.

As the cart entered the vast cobbled expanse of the square, Étienne saw the guillotine, its imposing silhouette a dark monument against the pale morning sky. It stood like a hungry beast, waiting for its daily meal. And there, on the scaffold, was Clouet, his elegant coat immaculate, his figure radiating an aura of

cold authority. He addressed the crowd, his voice, though distant, amplified by the sheer force of his rhetoric.

"Citizens! Today, we purify the Republic! Today, we purge the traitors!" Clouet's voice boomed, carried by the wind. "These enemies of the people, these conspirators, sought to undermine our glorious Revolution! But justice, swift and true, has prevailed!"

The cart stopped at the foot of the scaffold. The guards began to remove the prisoners, one by one. Étienne was among the last. As he stepped onto the cobblestone ground, he scanned the crowd, looking for Léna. He did not see her. His heart sank, a cold knot of fear tightening in his stomach. Had he failed? Had they caught her?

Clouet watched, a triumphant grimace on his face. "Bring them forward! Let them face the judgment of the Republic!"

As Étienne was led toward the scaffold, he saw Sanson approaching, his face grim, his movements deliberate. The Executioner carried a small leather-bound book in his hand, and something else, a piece of parchment.

"Citizen Sanson," Clouet shouted, his voice sharp with impatience. "Proceed with the final formalities. The Republic demands swift justice."

Sanson ignored Clouet. His gaze was fixed on Étienne, a silent question in his dark eyes. As Étienne reached the base of the scaffold, Sanson subtly raised the parchment he was carrying. Étienne saw it: a letter, identical to the one from the Observer, but with a new date. It was a fake prophecy, designed to lure its true target, Gauthier, into revealing himself.

"Citizen Sanson," Étienne said, his voice low and urgent. "Léna... she found something. A name. Gauthier. He's the protégé. He's the one who continued the letters."

He felt the small folded parchment of her confession, tucked into his shirt, pressing against his chest. He had to give it to Sanson.

Sanson's eyes widened almost imperceptibly as he recognized the name. He gave a subtle nod, acknowledging Étienne's words, then looked past him toward the crowd.

Suddenly, a commotion broke out near the edge of the square. A small group of Sanson's trusted guards, disguised as ordinary citizens, began to create a distraction. A seemingly accidental collision of street carts, a flurry of shouting and arguing, and then a well-timed "accident" that sent a cascade of fruit and vegetables rolling across the cobblestones. The already nervous crowd surged forward, drawn to the sudden chaos.

"Citizens! This is a lie!" shouted a voice, cutting through the growing commotion. It was Léna. She stood atop a nearby overturned cart, her face smeared with dirt, her hair disheveled, but her eyes burning with fierce determination. In her hand, she clutched a piece of paper, Étienne's confession. "Clouet is a traitor! He framed Étienne! He works with the Black Hand! And the real perpetrator... the real perpetrator is one of his own!"

Clouet's face contorted into a mask of fury. "Silence, traitor! Restrain her! This is the madness of the damned!"

He pointed vehemently at his own guards, who moved to subdue Léna, adding to the confusion.

But Léna stood her ground, her voice hoarse, desperate, but perfectly convincing. She held up the crumpled parchment. "This is Étienne Voclain's confession! His last words! He exposes Clouet! He exposes the Black Hand! And he names the true orchestrator of these prophecies!"

The crowd, already agitated by the distraction, now turned its full attention to Léna. Her words, so bold, so damning, hung in the air, causing a wave of confusion, then murmurs of alarm.

Clouet, enraged, pushed Sanson aside, moving toward Léna. "Silence her! Now!"

But Sanson stepped forward, his imposing figure radiating undeniable authority. He raised his hand, a silent command for calm. "Citizens! Let us hear her words! Let the truth be told!"

He looked at Léna, then at Étienne, a grim understanding in his eyes. He knew. He knew about the confession.

Léna, seeing Sanson's nod, took a deep breath. "Étienne Voclain, the copyist, has uncovered a plot! A plot by citizen Clouet to use prophecies to control the Revolution! To eliminate his enemies! But he is not the author! He is merely a pawn! The real author... the protégé... is Gauthier! Citizen Gauthier, a guard at the Conciergerie!

A stunned silence fell over the Place de la Révolution. All eyes turned to the guards, searching for a face to match the name.

Clouet's face was livid, his eyes wide with shock and disbelief. "Gauthier? This is madness! A desperate lie! Gauthier is a loyal servant of the Republic!"

He turned to the guards, his voice trembling with a mixture of rage and fear. "Hang him! Hang them both! And silence this vile slander!"

But before his guards could move, Sanson strode forward, his voice booming across the square, cutting through the stunned silence. "Citizens! The Executioner of Paris has also received a final letter! A letter meant to be read only after the blade has fallen! But in light of these grave accusations, and the challenge from citizen Léna, I will read it now!

He pulled a piece of immaculate, elegant parchment from his robe. It was the Observer's letter, the one Étienne had always feared, the one that had predicted his own death. But Sanson held it with grim purpose, his eyes fixed on Clouet, then scanning the crowd, searching for a familiar face.

"This letter," Sanson declared, his voice resonating with unshakeable authority, "is addressed to the Executioner of Paris. It describes, in chilling detail, the execution of citizen Étienne Voclain. It speaks of his white shirt, his untied hands, his last prayer. And it speaks of a black feather, falling upon his chest. But this letter

also contains a new message! A message that was meant to be silenced! A message that exposes the true orchestrators of this terror!

Sanson paused, his gaze sweeping over the crowd, then settling on a figure near the scaffold, a man in a guard's uniform, his face pale, his eyes wide with the horror that lay ahead. It was Gauthier.

"This letter," Sanson continued, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous tone, "reveals that citizen Clouet has been manipulating the prophecies, using them to serve his own ambition. It details his secret alliance with the Black Hand, a shadowy society that seeks to control the Revolution from the shadows. And it reveals that citizen Clouet, in his arrogance, believed himself to be the master of these prophecies. But he was wrong.

Sanson looked directly at Gauthier, his eyes piercing. "Because the true author, the one who continued the work of the mad priest, the one who wove these deadly prophecies, is not Clouet! It is a man hidden in plain sight! A man who, even now, stands among us, listening to his own doom! It is Citizen Gauthier!"

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd. All eyes turned to Gauthier, who stood motionless, his face a mask of pure terror.

"Gauthier," Sanson declared, his voice booming, "you are accused of continuing the Watcher's prophecies, of manipulating the guillotine, of framing innocent citizens, and of conspiring with the Black Hand to destabilize the Republic! Your own letters, your own meticulous details, have been used against you! You are the protégé! You are the true orchestrator of this terror!"

Gauthier, his face contorted in a mixture of rage and despair, suddenly lunged forward, pulling a knife hidden in his boot. He made a desperate dash toward Clouet, a savage cry escaping his lips. "Fool! You ruined everything! You were just a pawn! I was the master!"

Clouet, stunned, barely reacted as Gauthier plunged the knife into his chest. Clouet staggered backward, a look of shocked betrayal on his face, before collapsing to the ground, his elegant coat stained crimson.

Chaos erupted. The already nervous crowd now surged forward, a roar of outrage and confusion rising from their throats. Sanson's loyal guards, who had been waiting for his signal, now moved quickly, apprehending Gauthier, who struggled violently, still shouting his furious accusations at the fallen Clouet.

Amid the pandemonium, Étienne felt a strange sense of vindication. The truth had come to light. Gauthier, the discreet guard, had been exposed. Clouet, the Serpent, had fallen, betrayed by his own accomplice. The Black Hand's plot was unraveling.

But his own fate still hung in the balance. The crowd was a raging torrent, its anger now directed at the exposed traitors, at the system that had allowed such deception. Shouts of "Down with the Black Hand!" "Down with the manipulators!" filled the air.

Sanson, seeing the growing chaos, knew he had to act. He raised his voice, his powerful lungs cutting through the din. "Citizens! The true enemies have been revealed! But order must be maintained! Justice must prevail! The Republic demands a clean end to this corruption!"

He looked at Étienne, who stood at the foot of the scaffold, still a condemned man, his fate hanging on a single unspoken name: his own. Sanson had exposed Gauthier, he had revealed Clouet's betrayal. But the prophecy of Étienne's death, the one in the Observer's letter, still stood.

Sanson looked at the letter in his hand, then at the blade of the guillotine, glinting ominously in the morning light. The crowd roared, demanding justice, demanding blood.

He knew what he had to do. He looked at Étienne, a silent apology in his eyes. Then he turned to the crowd, his voice resonating with a new and sombre authority.

"Citizens! The prophecy of Étienne Voclain's death, as foretold by the Observer and sealed by the Black Hand, said that he would die untethered, wearing a white shirt, whispering a prayer for his father, with a black feather falling on his chest!" Sanson's voice boomed. "This prophecy, designed to solidify his control, was his

final statement! But the truth, once spoken, cannot be silenced! The future is not predicted, it is induced. With ink. With fear. And today, that fear ends."

He held up the letter, then, with a dramatic gesture, tore it in half, the sound tearing through the air like a gunshot. "The prophecy is broken! The will of the Black Hand has been defied! Étienne Voclair, who exposed the truth, will not die today! Not by the hand of this Republic! Not by the blade of this guillotine!"

A stunned silence fell over the crowd, quickly replaced by a roar of confusion, then a wave of applause, and finally an explosion of jubilant shouts. The Executioner of Paris had defied fate itself. He had broken the prophecy.

Étienne stared at Sanson, a wave of deep relief washing over him, so powerful that his knees almost buckled. He was saved. Léna, still in her carriage, let out a cry of pure joy.

But Sanson was not finished. He turned to Gauthier, who was now bound by his men, still struggling and muttering curses. "As for citizen Gauthier, the protégé, the true architect of this terror, he will face the full justice of the Republic! And his secrets, the ledgers of the Black Hand, will be brought to light! The Conciergerie will be purified! The Republic will be purified!"

The crowd roared its approval, its anger now focused on Gauthier. They had found their true villain.

Sanson then turned to Étienne, his expression grim and weary. "Citizen Voclair, citizen Léna. You are free. You have risked everything for the truth. Go. Disappear. The Republic, for now, owes you its gratitude. But the shadows of the Black Hand are long. And the struggle is far from over."

Étienne looked at Léna, who jumped out of his carriage and embraced him. They had survived. They had defied death.

But as they slowly walked away from the scaffold, Étienne looked back. The guillotine still stood, a dark monument against the pale sky. And although the prophecy of his death had been broken, the memory of the blade, and the shadows of the Black Hand, would live on forever. The fight for truth was not over. It had only just begun. And Étienne Voclair, the copyist who had dared to defy

fate, knew that he would carry the weight of that truth, and the scars of the Conciergerie, for the rest of his life, wondering if his own destiny had simply been rewritten, or if he had finally forged one of his own.