

The Company We Keep

-As translated to English

Yannick Depuis took the scenic walk home. A warm evening breeze from the Seine with a view of the Tower was simply too much to pass up as he unwound from a hot day on the rooftops of Paris.

Plus, if the artist selling portraits was set up and still had flowers, he would grab a surprise- a blue Iris- for Serafine. As was the case today. He paid the woman in cash and waved off the change as he held the flower at elbow's distance from his tarred shirt and jeans.

They had only been in Paris a few days, but Yannick liked it here. It had been years since he had last visited, and he had hopes of staying longer if Serafine would hear him out. Paris was central. And busy. Just what they needed.

He followed the river, then cut across the busy street and made his way to the apartment.

Here, the traffic was less, and the silence seemed a world away from the congestion the river brought.

Serafine's shoes were already on the mat, and Yannick hid the flower behind his back. She was in the kitchen, washing dishes.

"What are you doing? I told you I'd get that," Yannick said as he walked towards her.

She turned a half glance. "Hey. I've seen the mess you get in at work. It's better to keep the tar out of here. Besides, I got off early." She didn't look upset, but she didn't smile like she normally did. She eyed Yannick's hand behind his back. "What's that."

"Close your eyes."

She did as he asked.

By the time Yannick told her to open them again, the Iris was close enough for her to smell. Serafine bit her lip a little. "It's beautiful," she said as she gave a little smile and kissed him. Then found a vase for it.

"Been home long?" he asked.

"Not really. It just got quiet this afternoon and Georges said one of us had to go."

"Glad you got at least some down time. Hungry? We can go out."

"Not really, but a walk sounds good."

Once Yannick had changed the two found themselves walking through back streets and eventually through Champs de Mer toward the same river he had just been along an hour before. Neither had much of an appetite, but they stopped to share a croissant and coffee as they continued.

As they walked among the crowds the park was known to have they looked to be something in between locals and tourists- still admiring the scenery, but not enough to take pictures. The lawn had recently been cut where they walked, and the park smelled sweet and sharp. Off to the far side, the distant hum of mowers continued their work.

Yannick and Serafine walked close together, and after the croissant, their hands, being hands of young lovers, soon found themselves intertwined in a noncommittal link.

“I love it here,” Yannick told her.

“Along the river and the park?”

“No, Paris in general. Those things too, but I really like it here. It feels like what a home should feel like.” He looked toward the Tower, its novelty still fresh. “You know you can go up in it-the Tower. I think anyways. Maybe we can check that out sometime. Not now, mind you, but sometime.”

“Yes. So I was told. I believe it was that area there, on the other side of the river, I came to with my friend and her father. His trips to see clients always took us on the other side of the Seine. We would sit along the river at night, eating ice cream in little cups. The Tower, all lit up, looked twice as big back then. Oh, how I had wanted to get close to it. My friend’s father even said his grandfather had met Mr. Eiffel once, on a rail in London. But he could have been telling tales. The river was as close to it as I had ever gotten, until I came back here with you.”

Yannick nodded. “We had talked about all of Europe from Gare du Nord. Now it’s in front of us. But there’s lots of work right here and it’s easy to blend in. Maybe there’s a chance for us to stay longer than we have the other places. Time to breathe and figure out our next move.”

Serafine said nothing at first, her head in thought. “I don’t know what we should do.”

“Well, what would you like? Europe is there for us anytime we want. It’s not going anywhere. We can do whatever we- whatever you- want. Whenever you want.”

“I’m pregnant.”

Yannick stopped walking. “Are you sure?” He had had suspicions but couldn’t fess up to that now. He had smelled it on her for weeks.

“I wouldn’t be telling you if I wasn’t.”

“Wow. Ok.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “So much for being careful,” he offered with a faint smile.

“How much do you know about your- condition.”

Yannick’s smile faded and he thought before speaking. “I’m not sure. Honestly, you know about as much as I do. When it comes, I’m best left alone for three days. I mostly black out- I’m not even sure if I have much control of myself while it’s happening.” He stopped for a minute then continued.

“Afterwards, the migraines eventually go away and a month later the cycle repeats itself. I know we hadn’t discussed something like this. Hadn’t thought that far ahead. At least I hadn’t. But this does tie into what I was thinking about-maybe there’s more of a future here for us.” Yannick looked at her stomach and touched it. “All of us.”

Serafine’s gaze remained on his hand touching her stomach. “What if what I have inside me is what you are. The good AND the bad. What does that mean for me.” She gave an unstable little laugh as she now looked at him. Her faint smile had faded. “I don’t want to die.”

Yannick put his hands on her shoulders. “Whoa. You’re not gonna die. We’ll figure something out. There’s gotta be doctors- a doctor- somewhere we can trust that can help with this.”

“Doctors cost money, Yannick. And trust takes time. Neither are luxuries we have.”

She was right. For the short time they had been together, luxuries of any kind, including peace, had been elusive. They never stayed in one area more than a few months at best. They simply couldn’t. Cash work, untraceable, was key. Someone always needed a waitress or general laborer, and much of the time it was her discounted or free restaurant food keeping them fed. Rooms were rented by the week, and the smaller damage deposit the rooms required were easier to write off if they had to leave in a hurry.

They didn’t even know a doctor, let alone one to trust enough to explain Yannick’s- and now Serafine’s- situation to.

Yannick thought things over, and neither said anything as they slowly walked again. This time, their fingers did not find each other.

Serafine broke the silence. “If you or I approach anybody on this, they’ll think we’re daft. If we give details to prove what you’ve done, we’ll be in jail before the day’s end. We can’t tell anyone about this. Any of it. I’ve never fully seen what you’ve become, but I have seen enough. If that’s what’s inside me now, and it’s still in me when the moon takes it like it takes you, I don’t have a chance.”

Yannick looked at the ground as he walked. After a bit he looked up. “What if I try to turn you. In the stories, that’s how it happens. A bite. Bites heal. It’s likely what happened to me.”

“That’s not happening.”

The truth was, Yannick had no idea how he contracted his affliction. He was backpacking in Italy and remembered being on a rough train ride with his friend. Then he woke up one day, weeks later, in a cave south of Rome. He was semi naked and covered in blood with the worst headache he ever had. He had scars of considerable size and quantity on his body he could not account for. His friend was nowhere to be seen, and while Yannick was trying to make his way back home to Bordeaux he had his first transformation.

He had thought he was dying. At one point he hoped death would take the pains of his evolving mutations away, before becoming whatever it was that took over. From the little Yannick could remember during this and any of the following transformations, he thought the term wolf wasn’t the most accurate description of the finished product. Though he himself couldn’t come up with anything better.

He had recurring dreams and the odd wisp of memory of a fortune teller speaking what he presumed was Latin. And of fire and sage and the sound of violin. Some of the images were much darker. Pieces of people and creatures and the screams that accompanied them, and he pushed hard to keep these from his mind. He had little reference on where the line between fantasy and reality was stepped over- only the sparse torn and bloody clothing he found himself wearing when he woke up.

While avoiding Bordeaux as he figured out what was wrong with him, he sought answers to his problem in libraries along the way. He still was trying to prove to himself he wasn’t crazy, when repeated interactions with an innocent librarian from Marseille

ultimately brought them to where they are now. It had been Serafine's idea to come to a city the size of Paris to more easily avoid attention in libraries on such a strange subject.

She hadn't believed him at first. Who would. But weeks of convincing, and a careful plan to watch the first few minutes of a transformation on a closed-circuit video finally convinced her. She'd had intentions of leaving as any sane woman would do, yet she remained.

It wasn't a great system they had- perhaps not even a good system- but every month the two would actively go their separate ways and reunite days later where they currently lived. Afterall, wild and even domestic animals died every day. Why should anyone care about a few more that had crossed Yannick's path.

It wasn't until recently Serafine learned the depths of just what Yannick was capable of.

He had already been in bed at their apartment in Toulouse, coping with his post transformation migraine when she chanced returning. There were times his thrift store clothes, bought just for the occasion, had only a little blood on them and could be salvaged with a good scrub- they were on a budget after all. And she liked to offer the courtesy of having his clothes already tended to or discarded by the time Yannick was mobile again.

His pants were a mess, and she picked them up. While feeling the pockets before throwing them in the trash, she put her hand in to make sure she wasn't discarding anything of value.

Two fingers, red with dried blood were in the early stages of decomposition. They were of the size belonging to a small child.

Serafine knew she shouldn't have stayed. Shouldn't have walked four blocks and put the fingers, which were now wrapped in potato peelings and rotten fish, in a dumpster. But she also knew she should have left Yannick long before it got to this.

For days following the grisly find, she had immediately bought local and nearby newspapers. The best lead she came across was repeated mentions of a boy named Hans Robinson who had vanished while visiting the nearby town of Carcassonne.

Carcassonne was almost a hundred kilometers away, and with Yannick's condition his only possible way of travel, at least to get home, would have been on foot. Serafine wondered how many missing person stories such as Hans Robinson were out there. And, if Yannick had a role in them, was anybody safe. Including her.

Even her parents in Merseille, which had offered her little support in life, offered a more positive outlook than she hoped to have staying with Yannick. But she couldn't bring herself to leave him, and the fingers had never been brought up.

Now, she wasn't even sure if leaving was an option.

Previous concerns for her own safety paled when compared to what she felt now. The rational and sane part of her blamed the discovery of the fingers on the nightmares she had. Horrible dreams of her being ripped open at the stomach, as a monster, her monster, tore its way from the inside out.

Her instincts as a mother, however, were harder to explain. They also told her something was amiss with the pregnancy. She could feel it.

A small part of her that she would never confess to, wondered just how hard Yannick was trying to solve his condition.

There were options for Serafine, but they required help. And with help like this there would also be questions.

“I know things aren’t good with your family, but maybe they could refer you to someone in the medical field,” Yannick wondered aloud.

“Perhaps your family could do the same thing.” Her point made, Yannick stopped talking. The remnants of the coffee cup were now cold and he threw it into a trash bin.

Serafine sat on a bench and looked across the Seine, up to the night sky. A night sky, under which many moons ago, a young girl once sat eating ice cream wanting nothing more than to cross the river. She wished to be that girl still.