A decorative header featuring several black feathers of varying sizes and orientations, scattered across the top of the page. One feather in the lower right quadrant has a small white number '1' on it.

*The* heavy blade hung high above the prisoners, glinting against the stars, and then the Razor came down, a wedge of falling darkness cutting through the torchlight. One solid thump, and four more heads had been shaved from their bodies. The mob around the scaffold roared, a sudden deluge of cheers and mockery that broke like a wave against the viewing box, where the officials of the Sunken City watched from velvet chairs. The noise gushed on, over the coffins, around bare and booted feet crowding thick across the flagstones, pouring down the drains and into the deep tunnels beneath the prison yard like filth overflowing the street gutters. The city was bloodthirsty tonight.

Sophia dropped her gaze from the prison yard drains, where the din of the mob cascaded from high above her head, and squinted into the gloom of the subterranean passage. The tunnel was one of dozens like it, long and narrow, a mausoleum of rough rock and stink and rows of heavy, locked doors. It was why they called it the Tombs. Sophia pulled the door to prison hole number 1139 shut behind her, letting the iron lock clank quietly back into place.

She had planned for five prisoners to be in hole 1139, not thirteen, and there were not enough coffins to smuggle them out. Not all of them. She needed a new plan. She needed to think. She turned her head toward the echoing creak of hinges. A point of yellow light

had entered the far end of the tunnel, descending step by step from the higher levels of the Tombs. Sophia looked down at the child that was standing on her boot top, clinging hard to her right leg. The little girl stared back up at her with solemn eyes.

“Quiet,” she hissed in Parisian, “and hold tight! Do you understand?” The child nodded, and Sophia dropped the long, dark robes of a holy man she was wearing over the blond head. The child disappeared beneath the voluminous black cloth. The little girl was tiny but still miraculously strong, her small hands digging into the back of Sophia’s thigh. She’d gone rigid and still, like a rabbit in the shadow of a hawk.

“Good girl,” Sophia whispered.

A woman was begging in the prison yard above them, screaming for her life before the Razor sliced the sound away. The scorn of the mob fell like rain. Sophia narrowed her eyes at the yellow light swinging down the tunnel, the Sunken City blue of the gendarmes’ uniforms now clearly visible. One of them was whistling. She stepped back into the shadows, the little girl beneath her robes, and drew up the black hood of the holy man, darkening her face.

Gerard followed the lantern light, whistling as he picked his way through the tunnel muck of the Tombs. Three more gendarmes of the Sunken City marched with him, blue uniforms making black shadows on the rough-hewn stone. One had his sword propped on a shoulder, fraying cloth at the point of his elbow just on the verge of becoming a hole. The sight made Gerard shake his head. He felt almost sorry for these men. They were not like him; they were not going to impress LeBlanc. He tugged on his jacket, brushing a hand over the space where his commandant’s badge would be sewn. It was a fine night for an execution, and an even finer night for a promotion.

The ropes of the Razor were straining in the prison yard above them, pulleys creaking as the finishing team hauled the gigantic blade back to its full height. The chanting of the mob matched them pull by pull, demanding more heads. Demanding the head of Ministre Bonnard. Gerard picked up the pace. It had taken weeks to have Ministre Bonnard denounced as a traitor, and then more weeks after that, scouring the countryside where the family had scattered, hiding their children like rats will hoard scraps. But LeBlanc had ferreted them out. LeBlanc had found them; Gerard had held them; and now they would die. The last of the ministres of the old Sunken City. A triumph of the new. A triumph of Gerard. LeBlanc would make him a commandant before the sun rose.

Gerard stopped, the gendarmes around him only just avoiding a collision. Prison hole number 1139. He straightened his back, put his key to the lock, and then stepped to one side as the holy man materialized from the murk of the narrow passage. Gerard tipped his hat. The holy man bowed slightly. There was something wrong with his leg tonight, Gerard saw. He was limping as he shuffled past, face half-hidden in an overlarge hood, the blue and white of the Allemande government pinned across the black robes. The holy man had been in the Tombs three nights this week. But if the condemned wanted to buy their final blessings from a priest who had replaced his vows to the saints with an oath to Allemande, then why should he, Gerard, be deprived of the bribes for letting the young man in? LeBlanc didn't need to know everything.

A hint of a smile showed from beneath the holy man's hood, the heavy robes just brushing Gerard's knees before melting slowly back into the dark maze of the Tombs. Gerard waited until his gendarmes had brought their swords into position. Then he turned the key and thrust open the door of the prison hole.

“Family Bonnard! You have refused the oath of Premier Allemande and have been found guilty of treason against the Sunken City. You are sentenced to . . . you . . . you are . . .”

The well-practiced words caught in his throat like bones. Gerard snatched the lantern from the gendarme behind him and ran inside the fetid hole, turning a full circle before bringing a sleeve up to his nose. The cell was empty. Thirteen prisoners, including LeBlanc’s prize, all of them gone.

He kicked through the thin layer of rotting straw, as if some of the smaller ones might be hiding beneath it, strands of human hair sticking to his boot. And then he froze. The men who had come to cut the hair, to bare the necks for the blade. Gerard spun around.

“Go!” he bellowed. The three gendarmes in the doorway wore matching stares. “Seal the doors, you fools! Quick!”

They ran. The Razor thumped and the mob in the prison yard chanted again for the Bonnards. Fear seeped into Gerard’s chest, like the blood traveling down the scaffold, pooling in the cracks of the paving stones. There would be no promotion, and LeBlanc was not going to be impressed. LeBlanc was going to have his job. Or an ear. Or maybe his head.

Gerard took three steps to run for the messengers, to have the tunnels and the muddy streets of the Lower City searched, the gates blocked, and the roads watched. But his boot brushed a bit of color, something alien in a world of stench and rot and stone. He bent down. A single black feather lay in the straw, its tip a brilliant red.

And then there was an explosion in the prison yard.

Sophia hunched down in the seat of the haularound, the holy man’s hood obscuring her face, and handed a stack of papers to the gendarme in charge of the gates. The horses’ sides were heaving, their

flanks dark with sweat. She held the reins loose in her hands. Behind her was the steep, zigzagged road cut into a leaning cliff face, the only way up and out of the chasm that was the center of the Sunken City. Behind the gendarme rose the gates, part of the miles of barrier fence running along the edge of the cliff tops, encircling the enormous hole, keeping the tall, stone-carved buildings of the Upper City safely away from the mud and shanties of the Lower City far below them. There were explosions somewhere down there, beneath the reek and fog, bright flashes of color and short, sharp pops—like the bedtime myths mothers told of guns. Sophia took no notice of them, and neither did the gendarme in charge of the gates. He was drunk. He tossed back the papers with barely a glance.

“This delivery will be searched,” he slurred, beckoning to the other guards.

Sophia glanced behind her, putting a hand on the small lump that had squirmed once beneath the robes. Thirteen large sacks, bulky and tied with string, lay in the open bed of the haularound.

“Is it necessary?” she asked in Parisian. She made her voice raspy, full of stones. “I need to be on my way before nethermoon.”

But two gendarmes were already climbing over the wooden rails and into the haularound, swords glinting in the light of a bonfire. Before Sophia could protest further, one of them raised his arms above his head and thrust his sword straight down into the nearest sack, piercing the thing inside it with an audible *snick*.

Sophia turned away, smoothing the voluminous black robes while the gendarme grunted, twisting, trying to pull the blade back out again. The other guard stabbed sacks with abandon, ripping at the coarse cloth. When they had finished their search thirteen sacks lay in shreds, and the bed of the haularound had become a sea of rolling potatoes.

The more sober guards were at the cliff's edge now, pointing down into the fuming hole, the people of the Upper City doing the same from their balconies, dark figures many stories high, calling to one another across the air bridges. The iron gates swung open. Down in the chasm, a fire bell tolled.

"Long may you rise above the city," Sophia said in the voice of the holy man, smiling at the swaying gendarme as the haularound rattled through the gates.

LeBlanc leaned back in his chair, a slow smile curling the corners of his mouth. Gerard had not screamed. LeBlanc was impressed.

He gave the man a moment, in case he should retch, but Gerard merely panted, leaning over the puddle of blood on the table. The end of Gerard's forefinger now lay several inches from the rest of his hand. Two of the gendarmes released their tight grip on his arms while the third, a man with a wispy brown mustache, thrust a bloody knife back into his belt. LeBlanc twirled a black-red feather between a finger and thumb, his voice soft, almost pleasant.

"Do you know rooks, Gerard? Survivors of the Time Before, a symbol of those who have lived and overcome. The divine spirit who took the form of a rook during the Great Death, leading the sick and dying to the safety of the hidden catacombs beneath the city. The rook that became a streak of light, flying across the night sky to light their way. Surely you were told that story as a child? We all were. But do you know the true story, Gerard? That the light was only what was called a satellite, a machine of the Ancients, burning and falling to its ruin near the entrance of the catacombs, the emblem of a bird still visible on the metal of the wreckage. Fate struck down the satellite, Gerard, so that what would be would be, to show her strength as a Goddess, and in so doing she showed her

mastery over the weakness of technology. Those with wits enough to use the Luck that Fate sent found their way to the underground and survived. That is how the world works. But the people now, Gerard, they think only of the myth. Of the benevolent, saintly rook leading them from death into life.”

LeBlanc tsked, his eyes on the red-tipped feather. “Forty-eight we have lost to this thief, this ‘Red Rook.’ Forty-eight prisoners who rejected our revolution, refused the oath of Allemande, and are subverting his justice. And now the Red Rook makes fools of us again, this time with fire and noise. The people in the streets are talking of magic, and the divine power of the saint. But revolution replaced the holy man as well as the government, Gerard. Allemande is in charge now. The Goddess Fate has decreed it.”

LeBlanc discarded the feather and stood, sighing as he went to stand before a tall stone window. The nethermoon lit the odd streak of gray running pale through his hair, and beamed light down every story of the white stone building, all the way to the cliff edge, through its fencing, and straight across the flat expanse of fog stretching over the massive chasm that was the Lower City. The spreading fog looked almost like the land that must have once been there, when the city was Paris and on one level, before the streets collapsed and sank into the tunnels and quarried caverns beneath it. Now lamps and candles twinkled yellow from Upper City buildings on the encircling cliffs, some too distant to be seen, while beneath the cloud bank one place pulsed with intermittent splashes of lurid green. The Red Rook’s fire, still exploding in the Lower City. It mirrored the green of the north lights, swirling in multicolored swaths around the stars and moon. LeBlanc turned on his heel.

“Fate is our true Goddess, Gerard, and Luck is her handmaiden. Luck has been with the Red Rook tonight and not with you. The

next time you allow traitors to walk out of the Tombs, you shall be unlucky indeed. One piece of you for each prisoner that is lost, one inch at a time. Do you believe that I will do this?"

Gerard nodded, his eyes closed, round face beaded with sweat. His hand lay exactly where it had been, bleeding onto the polished wood.

"Then we have an understanding."

Gerard nodded more vigorously, breath hissing from between his teeth.


"Good. That is good. You will begin at dawn, with the cells that are the closest. One of them will have seen. And if they do not tell me what they have seen, I will make them beg for the blade. They will run up the steps of the scaffold."

LeBlanc moved smoothly across the room to the door. "You should see to that wound, Gerard, so you do not lose the hand. Heat would be best, I think." He paused before a gilded mirror, amending a slight deficiency in his neckwear. "And do clean up the desk," he added.

When LeBlanc shut the door of his office he found Renaud, his secretary, emerging from the far end of the corridor.

"They will be in boats, Renaud," he said. "Have the gendarmes ready and send a courier to our ships on the coast. He has taken too many this time. They will be difficult to disguise."

The words had been muted, but Renaud had good ears. He bowed and slid away as LeBlanc tilted his head toward the office door, waiting. When the sizzle of hot metal on wounded flesh finally reached his ears, he smiled. This time Gerard had not held back his scream. And it had been impressive.





Sophia ran the horses down a dirt road through the land the Parisians called The Désolation. The haularound rattled and bumped beneath her, the fading nethermoon a passing glimpse of white through entwining limbs, the north lights twisting like green and purple smoke in the sky. Finally she turned onto a grassy track, loose potatoes rolling from side to side, until the forest opened into a small clearing that was almost perfectly square. It was probably a ruin, this clearing, like most of them, a thick layer of concrete or asphalt close enough to the surface to discourage the trees. The haularound rolled to a stop, and behind the sudden silence ebbed a distant rush and boom. The sea.

Sophia lifted the edge of the holy man's robes and found the little girl, soft blond hair shorn ragged about the ears, still clinging to her leg. She'd fallen asleep. Sophia disentangled the child's limbs, ignoring her protests as she slung her over a shoulder and climbed down from the seat.

She hurried to the back of the haularound. A latch clicked, a long board went clattering to the ground, and a jumble of two dozen feet was revealed in the narrow, hidden space beneath. Moans fell from mouths like the potatoes to the ground. She'd had the space made for weapons and supplies, not people.

"Out!" Sophia commanded, voice gruff and in Parisian, one arm full of a child who was done with being still. Marie Bonnard scooted out from the space, wearing a dress possibly held together by its own dirt, tugging out her two older children before stumbling over to snatch up her little girl. When the haularound had emptied there were thirteen faces turned to the holy man, all showing differing levels of desperation, hope, and inquiry. And then, like puppets on the same string, every head jerked to look back down the grassy

track. Another rhythm had joined the remote sound of surf, a thunder that resolved into the harsh tattoo of hoofbeats, coming fast and closing in on the clearing.

Panic moved through the group like contagion. Ministre Bonnard's hollow eyes darted to the woods and back, chest heaving beneath a once-fine vest, then five gendarmes burst from the trees, sword hilts winking in the moonlight. Ministre Bonnard let out a yell like an animal. He went for the holy man's throat with surprising speed, crying out as an even quicker hand shot from beneath the black robes, catching the man's wrist and twisting. The ministre gasped, clutching his wrist to his chest.

"Friends," Sophia whispered. "They are friends."

Ministre Bonnard gaped incoherently while his wife sank to her knees, trying to bounce and shush their little girl. The gendarmes dismounted and without a word began putting the former prisoners of hole 1139 in the saddles. One of them, tall, blond, and with broad shoulders only just stuffed into the short, tight coat of an officer, tossed his reins around a limb and approached the holy man.

"You've left your feather behind you, then?" he asked, Parisian accent thick.

"Of course," Sophia replied, grinning as the heavy robes came off, showing a slim figure in leather breeches and a vest. A wig of thick, dark hair was thrown with the robes into the bed of the haularound.

"The Red Rook!" they heard one of the thirteen whisper. "*Le Corbeau Rouge!*" Their murmurs of fear had shifted instantly to excitement. Sophia glanced once in their direction and switched to a softer voice and the language of the Commonwealth.

"Is all well? You got my message?"

The gendarme who was not a gendarme stepped closer, taking

his cue for the change in language. “Yes, and it scared the life out of us. Cartier agreed to man the second boat. How did you manage?”

“Waited until the alarm sounded and the gendarmes had gone running, then took them all out Gerard’s office window and left the coffins behind. We were lucky to switch the wagons. The child came out under the robes. The poor holy man developed an abscess in his leg, I’m afraid. A horrible infection. The watchman at the prison said he must have sinned.”

The tall man’s face broke into a brief, perfectly formed smile, then fell back into worry. “We’re late, and there are too many. You shouldn’t have taken them all. I don’t think we can be out of sight of the coast by dawn.”

Sophia frowned, running a hand through curling brown hair still damp from the wig, shaking it out once like a dog. A girl of seventeen or so, one of the Bonnards, had been watching this intently, her eyes large and staring through shorn strands of dingy blond hair that was much like her little sister’s. She stood so close, the starlight showed a spatter of freckles through the prison dirt on her nose.

Sophia turned away, quickly tying her brown curls back in the way of an Upper City man as the girl was bundled onto a horse. “It was not possible to take some and turn the key on the others, Spear,” Sophia hissed.

“Not possible for you,” Spear sighed, clicking the loose board into place across the back of the haularound. The horses with the Bonnard family and two other prisoners cantered away from the clearing. The other six residents of hole 1139 clung to one another on the ground, family or no, waiting for their turn.

“Send the twins to lay the usual false trail,” Sophia said, climbing up into the seat, “though it may not help us this time. If LeBlanc

is clever, he'll ride straight to the coast. And I think he is clever. Don't try to leave together. Push off and get them out to sea as soon as you can. Have them lie down in the bottom of the boats. And tell Cartier to use the fishing nets. Maybe LeBlanc won't know what he's seeing. You'll . . .”

“Wait.” Spear's chiseled face, level with her own despite the climb into the haularound, narrowed to a scowl. “You're not coming in the boats?”

“No room.” Sophia lifted a brow at his expression. “You think I can't get back to the Commonwealth on my own?”

He stepped closer to the haularound. “I know you can. I just don't like that you have to, that's all.”

Sophia picked up the reins. “As if I'd be late to my own engagement party!” she whispered. “What would the neighbors say?” But this only made the young man's face darken further. “Move them as fast as you can, Spear. LeBlanc will be on your heels. Be careful.” Leather snapped, and the horses jerked forward. “And save me some cake!” she said over her shoulder as the haularound lurched away down the track.

When the woods ended, Sophia took the turning to the sea and picked up speed. The Désolation had not been desolate for many generations, not since the turbulent centuries following the Great Death, and for two miles the horses ran past harvested fields on one side, cliff and booming sea on the other, any ruins long ago hidden by time and turf. Then the haularound turned back inland, drove through a small, sleeping village and straight into the open shed behind a wheelwright's house. It was not dawn but the sky was paling over the roof tiles, the north lights gone, a sea fog wisping past dark and silent windows. Sophia hurried.

The horses were left to hay and water on one end of the shed, where a fresh, bridled mare stood waiting, already hitched to a tradesman's cart. The robes of the holy man came out of the haularound, now turned inside out to show a soft green cloth, and the pins of the wig were pulled, releasing a woman's long, dark curls.

Soon after the arrival of a haularound full of potatoes, a trader's daughter drove out of the wheelwright's shed with a cart full of lettuce. Long, dark hair, honey-colored skin, wearing the distinctive green of one with permission to barter in the Sunken City. Sophia clucked to the mare and took the fast road to the coast.

LeBlanc ran his lathering horse down the road to the coast, lifting two pale eyes to a sky that had become a gold-red glory, an escort of gendarmes jangling fast behind him. It was dawn, and they were nearing the sea. Then his gaze came back down to the road and he jerked the reins to one side, only just missing the small cart driven by a girl in trader green, coming at him fast from around the bend. The cart carved a path through his galloping escort like a ship's prow, the young woman at the reins winking boldly at his men. Then they were off again, never slowing until the road ended suddenly with a cliff.

Horses fanned right and left, but LeBlanc brought his heaving mount to the edge, its breath steaming the air, bending sideways in the saddle to peer down at the rocks and empty beach below. He straightened, pulling an eyescope from his pocket and yanking it to full length. The glass end of the eyescope roved, searching the sea and thinning fog, pausing at the sight of two small boats riding the waves near the horizon. A single figure sat in each bow. One was

rowing, the other throwing a casting net, a spiderweb of black against the glowing, orange sunrise.

LeBlanc clicked the eyescope shut against his palm. Then he reached into his pocket and removed a single potato he'd found in a clearing in the woods. He tossed the potato up and down, up and down, a thin smile creeping out from the corners of his mouth.

There would not be many places they could land. Luck had been with him. The Red Rook, it seemed, was only a man after all.