

# **Burning Silk**

A novel

by Destiny Kinal

410 pages, 120,000 words

**The Duladiers**

**Hannah and August** Duladier: Parents of Catherine and Elisabeth and head of Duladier Silk Enterprises

**Catherine** Duladier- Head of silk enterprise in new world, sister to Elisabeth and mother of

Killy (6-8) and the infant Lischen. Wife of Philip Sechinger.

**Philip** Sechinger - married to Catherine, her second husband. Father of Lischen and architect of the family's new silkworm incubator, the magnanerie.

**Elisabeth** Duladier -Elder daughter of Hannah and August. Steward to silk enterprise.

Wife of Wilhelm Shaffer. Mother of Catya (18-20) and Kristiana (12-14.)

**Wilhelm** Shaffer - husband to Elisabeth Duladier. Father of Catya and Kristiana.

Duladier head cultivator of mulberries.

**Catya** Duladier - Daughter of Elisabeth and Wilhelm. Apprentice steward.

Mother of Annamaria, The Plum. Married briefly to Magnus for legitimacy of child.

**Kristiana** Duladier - Daughter of Elisabeth and Wilhelm. Apprentice maitresse.

### **The Millers**

**Regina** Miller - social activist with Quaker community. Married to Moritz Miller.

Mother of Wilhelmina Miller (18-20,) and Eugenia Miller (6-8.)

**Moritz** Miller - Husband of Regina, father of two girls. Prosperous Quaker farmer.

### **The Montours/Lazars**

**Marguerite** Montour - Proprietor of small tavern. Clan mother of Lenape band.

**Delphine** Montour - Daughter of Marguerite. Engaged to Blaise Lazar.

**Blaise Lazar.** A French trader. Engaged to Delphine Montour.

## **Epilogue**

July 1, 1840: Newtown, PA

Catherine had a presentiment of chaos, of things unravelling inside her and out, episodes of careening interleaved with moments of chiselled clarity, coming to, as if surfacing from a long dive underwater, gulping air, wondering where she had left her petticoat, missing her stage coach connection, helplessly wandering around the Trenton-Philadelphia rail terminal, possessions scattered. Where had she set the baby down? She glimpsed her dog through a window, not at home but in the alley outside the terminal, snuffing about the dim storage hall of portmanteaux, eyes gleaming. *I don't have a dog.*

What had actually happened? When she woke from a night of war and dreams of chaos, sorrow, displacement, she had not missed a stage or rail connection. Her home lay intact and peaceful around her. Peaceful more so, now that Wilhelm had gone west, deranged enough to turn against his blood and become a fortunehunter, deranged enough to justify his testimony against her and the family's silk venture.

His wife, her sister Elisabeth, calm steward of their silk enterprise, barely held herself from running after her husband into that primeval fastness, through displaced natives furious as hornets, across implacable mountain passes devouring settlers. Into the maw of the violated continent, those gentle people went, used to European climes, famished mother and child locked in death's embrace, inviolate.

But nonetheless dead. While she, Catherine, together with her sister Elisabeth, were alive with their children about them, and all of them well. *Regina. Regina is gone.*

*I have my life, health, children and home,* Catherine told herself. She had figured that her training would teach her to suffer the bonejarring shock of being the last of a long line of *maitresse de la soie*. *Surely it must.* She had the presence of mindfulness to comfort herself, and yet none of the certainty—faith or denial?—that this could pass, and life yet continue.

Those who have lived through terrible times talk about the white muffling, the cotton batting that quilts you tight against the chill of knowing, so only afterward do you recall the details that should have told you that “we are at war,” “we are entering a time of great famine,” or “I have lost my mind.”

But nature numbs us, gentle Mother, bending over us, feverish in our bed, (finger-raving our multiplication tables, who can be milking Daisy?) her cool hand hiding her shaking, spooning sweet opium into us, so we imagine life as drifting river, unchanged.

Catherine hugged her arms around herself, tried to still her tremors with deep draughts of air. She punched her quill into the inkwell and etched the terrible final words on the vellum of her personal journal.

“August 1, 1840”

“I am struck mute but at least I can write. We have failed. Quickly, decisively. Held down by a primal hand, reaching out of the soil of this continent, from its forests, one that will not permit the old calm ways, that kills all *krafft*, demands we sacrifice our children. Even as our men imagine they are having Her, She is swallowing our story, our steady knowledge of who we are, stuffed into Her hungry craw, Mother herself a Beserker.”

“How we have wronged Her, dragging in our old ways to this virgin place, the plague of it passing through our handshakes, our currency. Harnessed by class, sex,

worship, scarcity and greed, we plow our dreams of pasturage and sawmills into Her belly, hitch fences across Her breasts like tattooed calligraphy, horned curses riven into Her skin.

Our blasphemous innocence—phaw! it disgusts me—good Christian men taking their due, riding Sunday service on their harlot horse.

Never mind the original People, the ones who keep Her sweet secrets.” *How shall I face the Montours; how shall I face my role in this?*

“This finality will shiver through my last breath, for I am become Cassandra, alone and seeing with terrible eyes the slow payment being extracted, flesh of our flesh, stricken doubly by the curse of having no one to believe me, breath yanked from my lungs. Oh Mother, I pray you, bring the soothing hand of pretense over my eyes once more. I will be happier, if only I am able to forget who I am.”

She wiped her nib, laid down her quill, snapped her inkwell shut, blotted the vellum of her journal pages and closed the pages between the journal’s covers. She would write more before the darkness exhausted itself but for now, she stared out her window, unable to interpret whether she was watching the sun rise or set.



## Part One: fifteen years earlier

### Sowing the Seeds of Seduction

April-May 1825

Catherine threw open the shutters from her bedroom. Maternal folds of grey-green *garrigue*, the dry land of the south where aromatic herbs thrived, fell away toward the ocean. Shadows of evening obliterated the deepest creases. The glancing sun from behind the chateau gave the crenellated land the appearance of rippling silk. The last rays of the April sun warmed the girl's wintery flanks; an evening breeze from the Mediterranean lifted her hair and stroked her naked skin. She marvelled at the good fortune that had landed her in Grasse on this assignment for her family.

Reluctantly she turned from the window, braiding her hair then twisting it around her head, securing her signature corona with a few well-placed pins. She carefully dressed; she wouldn't be late for her first meeting with this influential client.

Catherine, eighteen and vain, with a *soupcou*—a misleading pinch—of sophistication, had been trained from an early age to become one of the Duladier family's legendary *maitresses de la soie*, mistresses of the silk. Their household took for granted gifts from their partners in the Orient—oolong tea, lush carpets, scrolls of art, books of erotica—gifts that set them apart irredeemably from their Hessian neighbors. "We may have lived among the Germans for over a century," her mother Hannah was wont to say, "and yet we are still French." Catherine was determined not to be impressed or intimidated by anything that occurred in Grasse, the *parfumeur* capital of the world. *Hauteur*—that arrogance the French are born with—would be her shield.

Houbigant had contacted the Rothschild, the Duladier family's banker, in their

Frankfurt office. “Their chief *parfumeur* refuses to move on to the next project” were the exact words their banker Rothschild told Catherine’s father. “Houbigant says ‘Le Fournier is obsessed.’” Indeed the Great Man had a quest: to replicate the perfume of the female silkmoth and more...to strengthen it for detection by the human nose. Their Rothschild hoped that one of Hannah’s *magnanarelles* from Duladier Soie et Cie. might be able to travel to Grasse in the south of France to consult with Le Fournier.

Catherine, being her mother’s chief apprentice and freer than Hannah herself, was dispatched *tout seul*, that is to say, she was unchaperoned. Was it contempt for Le Fournier’s hypothesis or careless haste on their part? That spring--every spring--the Duladier family disappeared into their confinement *en magnanerie*, a building, yes, but also a state whose mysterious alchemy would create bobbins of silk a kilometer long. They couldn’t say “no” to their Rothschild, banker to both their family and the *parfum* giant.

Furthermore, Catherine was betrothed. Her family endorsed the match with young Kilian, a distant cousin. So while she was eager to spend a fortnight in Grasse, to let their passion for each other deepen into a fire that would last, she had no plans to linger in the south. At eighteen, she knew herself to be overripe, and was ready to refine the fire she and Kilian had awakened in each other, so they could begin to enjoy the unfoldings of their life together.

Monsieur Fournier had arranged to meet her in the drawing room of the Houbigant mansion before dinner. *A strange room*, she thought when she was shown in, *entirely without flowers or decorations, the furniture bare, the ambience austere, and not at all in the way French elegance can appear austere. Impersonal.* Of course she had not yet seen a Quaker household.

Houbigant's reputation, which had been made from the gloves for Napoleon and Josephine's court, was now based on the complex floral perfume *Quelques Fleurs*. It was clear to everyone involved that Houbigant had better unveil a new scent sensation soon to an expectant world. Moving their chief parfumeur off his obsession proved to be a heated topic of discussion among the shareholders of Houbigant's future: Perhaps he was onto something!" one speculated. "On the other hand," another granted, "wasn't that hypothesis of his more than a bit cracked?"

When he walked into the room, it was clear to Catherine that Le Fournier had been watching her from a peephole, a not uncommon practice stolen from houses of ill-repute and used by merchants and bankers to observe their customers. She noticed a telltale red ring from pressing his eye against the lens and concluded that Le Fournier was not a facile player of the social game, though he worked hard at it. That meant he had seen her go to the mirror to adjust her hat. Pick her teeth! She had just risen for what she determined would be the final time, and was looking out the window, when he entered.

When Catherine first saw Le Fournier, his bushy eyebrows called to mind the furry antennae of their *imago*, the male silkworm. His Gallic nose was almost a *bec*, capable of sucking volumes of air in when he was classifying a scent, on the trail of a missing ingredient. She knew how the French correlated nose size and genitalia. *Bouf!* *It meant nothing*, she suspected. Although Le Fournier was still young, mid-thirties to early forties in her estimation, he had a bald spot that showed when he bowed his head. She resolved not to underestimate this man, and yet the air of ridiculousness that hung over him—so at odds with his self-importance—already presented her with a challenge to take him seriously.

He had clearly been briefed for her French accent, debased, as he would consider it,

by Hessian gutturals. “Please sit down, Mademoiselle.” He spoke his native tongue slowly for her benefit, displaying his vulgar Burgundian accent.

He bent over her hand, pretending to kiss it, while his large practiced nostrils flexed and drew in the scent from her wrist, from the skin on her hand, from her lap. She knew what he was doing and almost laughed, he was so obvious. He kept his eyes closed for a fraction of a second when he lifted his face from her hand, computing her sexual state, her menstrual cycle, and the messages of the natural smell of her skin. She felt like a specimen, a moth impaled on a pin.

She decided not to take insult, concluding—correctly—that he was completely besotted with bringing nearly undetectable smells to the threshold of human experience. Like many prodigies, he was flagrant in exercising his gift. She lifted an eyebrow, considered the man. *It is not that he can tell so much about me as a human animal in this very moment*, she thought. Though young, she already knew that humans count on much of our essence being opaque to others. No, that didn’t bother her: *it is his immense arrogance that irks me*, she concluded, *his imagining that I don’t know what he is up to*.

He sat across from her, face so ugly as to be almost attractive. *Like a Turk*, she thought, large lower lip, good hazel eyes, with thick *lunettes* hung from a string around his neck or kept tucked atop his head, so they would be at hand. His hair was drawn back in a small queue. Young, to be so bald on top. And that...*prehensile* nose. In a country of noses. In a sudden flash of insight, she saw that he was an Arab, of a pale freckled Levantine strain.

“Were you instructed not to wear perfume of any kind, Mademoiselle?” Le Fournier asked.

“But of course I am wearing no perfume or cosmetics of any kind, Monsieur.” She gave him her approximation of *hauteur*.

He observed her over his fingertips for much more than a minute. She could see he wanted to call her a liar, then—recalling her credentials—he realized fully who he would be calling a liar: her prestigious family along with the extended silk guild and Rothschild besides. Having made these calculations, he had to come to the inevitable conclusion: she was telling the truth. Upon which M. Le Fournier became very animated.

“Are you terribly hungry?” he asked, hovering over her.

“Not particularly.’ She had taken some bread and cheese with wine before her bath. And, if his housekeeping staff was as good at reporting back to him as she suspected, he knew this already.

“Would you consider coming directly to the laboratory to begin work?” he asked. “I will tell them to leave a cold supper in your room.” At her assent, he rang the bellcord that hung at the edge of the room. After giving orders about supper to the butler, he added, “Please ask M. Bouffier—*ma chimiste*,” he said, in an aside to Catherine—“to join us in the laboratory.”

“The Houbigant labs,” he explained as they crossed the veranda of the guesthouse and stepped onto a gravelled drive, “are built in a circle, with the center open, like a millwheel.”

“How curious,” she replied. It was becoming clear to Catherine that this man wanted nothing more in conversation with women than to flatter him with little *moues* and curtsies and squeaks at the right moments in his orations. It was not terribly flattering, to be so reduced, so quickly, and without reason...except for her being a woman.

“Shaped like a millwheel,” he repeated when they reached the legendary *laboratoire parfumerie*. “Twelve *parfumeurs* occupy each thirty percent of the circle. Our pie-shaped office,” he said, as he showed her through a main door, and along a platform that encircled a raked Japanese garden, “is divided again in half, one half for the *parfumeur*, who composes...”

They moved into his office, where he gestured toward a window set into an interior wall. “The other office—separated from me by a full window that opens and closes—“ He demonstrated it in his enthusiasm. “...is reserved for the *chimiste* and his library of ingredients, his stills, burners, retorts...”

At that moment, the *chimiste* arrived, breathless and huffing. After a perfunctory introduction, Monsieur Bouffier. went in to his *laboratoire* by a separate door and sat behind the window, tinkering with his equipment while The Nose began to compose. Swept away by the newness of the experience, Catherine resolved to do her best to appear aloof yet *engagee*. It wouldn’t do, she reminded herself, to show these two men the measure of her inexperience.

M. Le Fournier offered her a light chair that reclined if she chose while he sat in his own chair, on wheels, in front of the bare surface of his rock maple worktable, which he told her he had imported from the Americas. She studied the satiny straw-colored wood as closely as proximity would allow, as if the wood might tell her something about its native continent.

This worktable overlooked the exterior lawn through a large window, so she was able to observe that—as far as the eye could see across the grounds—the scythed grass was broken only by a large rock. She didn’t recognize the dry climate shrubs and grasses they

were using in their borders and remarked how strange it seemed to see no gardens here in Grasse, Europe's center for growing lavender.

“By design, Mademoiselle,” Le Fournier explained. He pointed out the window at the narrow end of his laboratory, which was set in the wall beside the office door that let out onto the garden, where the sound of running water could be heard. “Even the meditation garden is planted without any strongly scented grasses, shrubs or trees. We cannot afford to be distracted or confused by gratuitous fragrances.” He cleared his throat and arched his fingers against each other, a spider dancing on a mirror. “Now Mademoiselle. I have a... hypothesis. I'm sure Rothschild has told your father about it. He has spoken with you?”

She shrugged, giving nothing away.

He pursed his wide lips, an interesting effect with that protruding lower lip and beetling brow, summoning up all of his seriousness about him, even hunching his shoulders until she imagined their moth's velvety cape. She almost burst out laughing.

He cleared his throat again. “My hypothesis,” he said, and began nervously tugging on his lower lip. “Let me be clear, Mademoiselle Duladier,” he began again, flexing his hands out in front of him.

*Can I be making him nervous?* she wondered. *I'm just a girl.*

“We”—he began, using the collegial ‘we’—“have evidence to suspect that the *maitresse* of the *magnanerie* mimics the chemistry of the worm. And—by extension—the female moth. La Phalene.”

The hairs lifted on her arms. She had thought they were going to have an intellectual *discursif*, a civilized rapport over flasks and essences. He had taken it so far from what had originally been stated: that a *maitresse* would be able to help him recognize

the scent of the mating moth as he drew closer. But no, he was telling her that he thought the maitresse becomes so much like the worm during the time *en magnanerie*, that after, she might smell like the female moth, La Phalene. Where had he gotten this dangerous idea?

“What are you proposing, Monsieur?” she asked curtly, ready to walk out. But then she recalled the contribution her generous honorarium would make to the family’s future venture in the Americas, a venture she would head. *You’re in charge here, Catherine*, she reminded herself. Despite evidence to the contrary, she told herself that she was not a young maiden who could be swept along without her consent!

“Only this, Mademoiselle,” he responded equally stiffly, hinting at the possibility he might take offense. “No one is as familiar with and sensitive to the perfume of the female silkmoth as you. The assignment is a simple one and should be able to be concluded in a fortnight. I will compose my closest approximation of the silkmoth scent, then send my composition through that window.”

He had restated his hypothesis, and yet he had revealed his hand. *He knows*, She spoke in Dialog, asking for help. *But how?*

Dialog, legacy of the women’s secret devotion to the Black Madonna, silent communion from mind to mind, had developed over centuries, a gift, an artifact of mothers passing on their laden esoterica to daughters, at distance.

No answer came. Was everyone preoccupied, being *en magnanerie*? Or were they leaving her to her own devices?

He gestured to the wall he shared with his partner. “...where M. Bouffier will compound the fragrance and pass it back to me. Then I correct, change some relationships,

ask him to add certain subtleties. He compounds the latest version and passes it back to me. And so on.” He lifted his brow, giving her the signal that he was certain he had covered his original offensive words with this avalanche of actions he had described. “That’s where you come in, Mademoiselle Duladier. You will smell the compounds, and when you think we are close, you will help us feel our way to the elusive *melange*. Is that what you had understood?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied. “Do you wish to begin now?”

He nodded his head once. “I am preparing a formula which Bouffier will synthesize. I would like you to evaluate our work. Tonight. Mademoiselle.” He rose, bowing slightly, then swiveled his chair to face the desk, his back to her.

*Has he dismissed me?--when he has given me no idea what I am to do or where I am to work!*

He lifted a hoop from his desk much like an embroidery hoop meant to stretch and hold silk taut. But smaller...as broad across as a teacup rim. She noticed a cupboard to the left of his worktable, whose trays appeared to be made of heavy metal screening, where many of these hoops were stored, labels facing front. There she read “amber, balsam, bergamot, blackberry, cedar...” Running her eyes along, she picked out “gardenia, hyacinth, heliotrope, nicotiana.” Then codes, “PX#147A, PX#147B” and so on.

“Aren’t essences often volatile, losing themselves in the air?” she asked, pointing to the storage trays of rings.

He appeared to be surprised that she was still there, and said, “Of course many are volatile and degrade very quickly. These are all samples prepared over the last week. I work from the freshest samples, always, which our assistants collect from a sort of shopping

list we give them. Certain other fragrances are more stable, particularly those from resins or powerful oils: cedar, ambergris. *Les disques* allow me to assess two or more fragrances together, *comme ca.*” He lifted two disks, marked “jasmine” and “Chinese musk,” smelled them and then leaned over to waft them under her nose. ‘See?’

She did. The combined fragrance transported her.

‘What is your favorite scent, Mademoiselle Duladier? May I guess?’ He handed her the disc labelled ‘gardenia,’ his forehead lifted inquiringly.

“*Bien sur*, gardenia is one of my favorite scents,” she told him, reaching for the disc, still enthralled by the jasmine and musk, all the while aware that gardenia must be every woman’s favorite. “I haven’t smelled it since I was in Provence last,” she gushed, wishing she could control herself as she drank in the rare aroma, marvelling that chemistry had been able to extract the essence of this flower, of any flower, without losing its defining characteristics.

This time she took a sharp look at the gauge of silk they were using, by habit, thinking that it must represent a small but significant market for the weaving guild in Lyons. The silk was an expensive specialty silk, eiderdown-proof. More than 500 threads per inch, she estimated, and of a finish meant to wick and hold moisture for a long time in ideal conditions.

“You like jasmine. Love gardenia...what woman doesn’t,” he was saying. ‘But trust me—before you leave, we will find out what your *favorite* scent is, Mademoiselle. We will edge closer to it each day. Now this...’ He picked up the disc that had been lying on his desk when they came in. “...steps close to mine.” He lifted the silk to his nose, and taking several short draughts, held in the accumulated breath before releasing it, eyes closed.

“Many fragrances can only be smelled the first time,” he said, huskily. “The brain becomes saturated with it, exhausted, but this...” And then, putting his nostrils against the taut silk again and distending the silk with the probe of his nose, he breathed, this time deeply and fully.

“Ah, forgive me, Mademoiselle Duladier,” he said. “I am an artist and cannot help myself.” With a wry smile, he gave Catherine another courtly bow and then, turning his back to her, picked up a piece of manuscript paper, stuck his quill nib into his inkpot, and began writing a cryptic formula across the bright expanse of vellum in purple ink.

She wondered whether he expected her to disappear? She would insist on her contractual right to be informed. “May I?” she asked, reaching for the disc.

His hand closed protectively over it. He put up his quill and appeared to think. “Yes, why not.” And then, turning his back to his desk and the beginnings of his formula, he gave her his close attention.

*As if I were the experiment.* She raised the disc to her nose to sniff as he had demonstrated, anxious to capture any essences that, like violet, would only manifest on the first smelling. And as she held it in front of her face, she saw the silk. The fact was, no one could hide anything from her regarding silk. She had seen every silk manufactured in the entire world, since she was a child. When members of the Duladier family looked at a piece of silk, it stood naked before them; they saw all of its qualities: dernier of the thread, conductivity of the strand, threads per inch, luster.

So who would doubt her?--the circle of silk had been cut from the crotch of her underdrawers that she had removed before her bath, and sent, along with the rest of her travelling attire, to the laundry for cleaning and refurbishing.

Giving not the slightest hint that Catherine might have found him out, Le Fournier said, “There’s a faint odor of ammonia at the front of the fragrance. But when you smell through the sharp alarm of that, what lies beneath is quite complex.”

She was so mortified, she dropped the disc, which rolled under the desk.

As he got down on his hands and knees to retrieve it, his buttocks—tightly encased in those pants French men wore—faced her as the tails of his coat parted. She felt like kicking him, but stifled the impulse. *Does he imagine I wouldn’t recognize my own scent?*

He used the fact that he had broken out in a sweat to cover the moment, drawing out his handkerchief as he sat down again, wiping the broad expanse of his forehead. “The night is warm,” he said, placing the disc back on his desk, beside his vellum and quill.

Stalling for time, conflicting emotions at war with each other, she opened her mouth to say something and closed it again, her training as an apprentice *maitresse de la soie* exasperating her: *better say nothing than have nothing to say*. She rose, filled with fury and utterly confounded. *How can this have begun so wrong?*

He turned his back to her and hunched over his manuscript, though he had yet to pick up the quill. “We will be arranging various outings during the fortnight that you are here, Mademoiselle Duladier,” he said over his shoulder, as if negotiating a price with a *putain* he couldn’t bear to see in the light of day. “I hope you will understand,” he went on, “that spending a great deal of time with us both in the laboratory and outside, at meals and at leisure, is part of your assignment. We don’t intend to send you home to Frankfurt without showing you more of this part of France.”

She understood that he wanted to study her in every situation, at every hour of the day. *Smell me that is*, she thought to herself. *So he can use me...to find his treasure.*

Then he said—as if to himself—“Let’s begin right there,” and with that he took up his quill again.

Catherine made it to the door and slammed it shut. She stepped down from the boardwalk surround into the meditation garden itself and looked up. *Mother!* she cried in Dialog. No response. *Have they abandoned me here?* Cassiopeia and the Seven Sisters, the same that shone down on her family’s home along the Marne River, were framed by the large hoop of the walls of this inner circle. *It was a mistake coming here.* She felt trapped. ‘Like a millstone indeed,’ she said aloud, as she stepped back up onto the platform to the doors that let out of the complex.

“They are locked when one of us is in here working,” a voice said from the darkness. “For security reasons.” M. Bouffier stood near a small tree in the garden. ‘I would like to have a smoke but it is not allowed here.’ He stepped onto the platform. “Do you smoke?”

“I do,” she admitted. “A clay pipe.”

“*Gutt!*” he said firmly. “I have been looking for a companion to have an occasional smoke with.”

Bouffier began drawing Catherine out in German, easing her homesickness a bit. They found out much about each other in a short time. Bouffier was raised in Lorraine; both his French and his German accents should have told her so from the first. He said that his mother lived in Camargue, at the mouth of the Rhone. He wanted to be near her, as she was aging, so he had taken a position with Houbigant. She told him about her fiance Kilian, about her apprenticeship. Her heart was still beating like a trapdrum.

“‘Would you care to come into the *labo?*’ he asked. ‘The Nose has the only key and we have little choice but to wait it out,’ he said, spreading his hands and laughing, a cynical

yet helpless laugh that allied Catherine with him right away.

Within a few days, she found out he had his own key but, after all, she forgave him. It was a good way to calm her down and establish their friendship. Sitting in his laboratory for the first time, she told him about her trip to Camargue, how she had visited with her parents and older sister six years earlier. He listened carefully, as if hoping to hear the story behind the story she was willing to tell.

“Did you visit nearby Tour de Constance also?” he asked blandly, apparently wanting to establish that her family was Huguenot, among those artisans of the Protestant sect who had fled France after the revocation of their religious rights, taking the secrets of their guilds with them.

She was trembling; he was kind, offering her a drink of water and then, to distract her, a tour of his inventory, ingredients that amounted to a trip around the globe, discovering essences new to her. Ylang-ylang. Attars of rose from Bulgaria, from Persia. Civet from China. His ingredients were stored in valuable glassware and in tight tin boxes. Le Fournier’s discs, he said, were dilutions of essences drawn from Bouffier’s stock.

“And these are my fixatives,” he said, “ambergris, sandalwood, orris root, musks of various types, uretic salts.”

“Extracts from animals with strong scent glands?” she asked.

“Indeed,” he replied. “Like your female silkmoth. Also, quite literally, salts crystallized from urine itself.”

“Uretic salts from what creatures?”

“Civet from a weasel. Ambergris from the male whale. Uretic salts from our human

sisters as well,” he said, with his provocative grin.

When she flinched, he added, “Just as in dyes,” and lifted his eyebrows. “Female urine, and particularly the gravid female, is an exceptional fixative for certain classes of fragrance and dye. But don’t tell me you don’t know that, Mademoiselle Duladier, as versed as you are in textiles.”

*So that’s it, she thought. Le Fournier is looking for a particular fixative.* While humiliation and fury had coexisted side by side up until now, fury began to neutralize her precarious sense of having her personal core violated. *How could I use his avidity for his quest?* she asked, her training beginning to assert itself again, in the midst of outrage.

The window between the rooms flew up and the unmistakable hand of M. Le Fournier (pale and stubby with hair on the knuckles) passed through a formula to M. Bouffier without a word. *Purple ink etched on vellum, screaming storks flying north,* she thought on seeing the characters.

She wanted nothing more than to go to her room and write an urgent letter to her father. August Duladier would send his carriage and a personal escort at once. She calculated: she could be out of here in less than a week. Deflated, she realized that she was only here for a fortnight. It didn’t make sense to leave for home; moreover, she had limited resources to stay anywhere else until her father’s emmissary could arrive.

Bouffier took the vellum between two fingers and without a word, closed the window. He began to scan the equation with a frown, raising the folds of his expansive good humored forehead. ‘Hmm,’ he said. The window raised a moment later and the disc of silk was almost flung in, careening a couple meters before Bouffier stopped it from rolling off his workbench.

*This can't be happening*, she thought, on the edge of panic. *What are my choices?* she asked in Dialog.

At last, a response came through a clear channel: *Stay and fight*.

She made a swift appeal to the Madonna: *For the strength and stature to stay. To fight*.

She was gratified to feel it surge through her, the immediate response a *maitresse de la soie* in good standing could expect from her Earthly Queen. She could feel herself growing out of her hips, her spine lengthening, her breath her tool again.

“What have you done to him?” Bouffier asked, eyes wide, face innocent of any expression. ‘He’s usually so...’ This was the first time she saw M. Bouffier’s mimicry, for without a moment’s transition, he thundered his brow, and—beetling his eyebrows, pulling his lip, flexing his fingers against each other—intoned, “The assignment is a simple one and should be able to be concluded in a fortnight.”

She was amazed at his caricature, eerie and accurate, not to mention the certain knowledge that he had been eavesdropping on them earlier. As her laughter erupted, she had to cover her mouth to avoid spraying the desk with spittle.

Bouffier gravely wiped his desk with his handkerchief, then handed it to her; she wiped her mouth and nose, miming an obedient child. ‘We’re very careful about the contaminants we allow here,’ he said, straightfaced, as he dropped the offending square into a basket beneath his desk.

She dug her own handkerchief from her pocket and placed it on the desk. ‘I can see this is going to be standard equipment for our work together,’ she said, throwing down the gauntlet.

He laughed, but soundlessly, with a little wheeze, his wickedly merry eyes fixed on hers. “That seals it,” he said. “We’re born co-conspirators. Now let’s see what the Nose is up to.” He turned and picked up the disc. He sniffed deeply, then flushed to an alarming dark rose and slumped over his desk. “Oh!” he moaned. “The Nose has gone off into the abyss.” Then he lifted his head, cocked his eyebrow and said, “And I would like to disappear.” Placing the disc to the far corner of his desk, and without looking at her, he said, “You must be terribly affronted. Are you going to go home?”

“No. I’m going to stay and fight.” She amazed herself: could she be saying these words? *Thank you, Madonna*, she remembered hastily.

“Good girl!” he said admiringly, then: “You have no argument with me?”

“Do I?”

He raised both hands, palms out, as if warding her off. “I’m just a paid lackey, like you.” He studied her. “Would you like my help?”

She listened in silence as Bouffier’s rephrased Le Fournier’s research—which had apparently been going on even before Bouffier arrived to assist him—then he concluded, ‘If there’s the slightest shred of evidence that his hypothesis is true, it would make a great difference to the science of fragrance. Just imagine: if we could study you, your natural smells, and through you, approach the ineluctable fragrance of the female, playing out her irresistible bait to the male moth, why...we might discover a whole new ethereal range of smells, attractants...’

She interrupted him. “Bait! For whom?” she threw out. “How could the two of you imagine that the human male might respond to the scent of the female moth?” She heaped scorn on Le Fournier’s hypothesis, a fox hoping to obfuscate the trail for hounds. She

wouldn't tell him how moved those in the silk guild are to witness the moments when the male begins to approach the female, how the air of the room thickens with something that could only be described as a blend of human and insect *punque*. "That smell of a woman who sells herself, dousing with rosewater at the end of the night for one more client," she had overheard her father say.

"I'm on your side, Catherine," Bouffier said, scrutinizing her face. "I am offended by Le Fournier's measures in his pursuit of this Quixotic quest of his! Just tell me what you want to do and I will help." He relaxed in his chair.

Catherine thought about his offer, then basking in the respect he was showing her, decided to take him in her confidence. *I need an ally here*. "It is well known, Monsieur: there are some fragrances you may smell but once in your life. Or, in our case, once a year. That's why the day and night of the moth's mating, usually within a fortnight past May Day, is one of the sacred events of our *krafft*. It's the whole effect, the *melange*: the irresistible smell of the female, the beating and display of the male, then the continuous mating, locked together. Later when both male and female are exhausted, the male slows his...*Restraint, restraint, Catherine*, she cautioned herself, girding herself to do battle.

"That's one of the moments when everyone assembled draws a great draught of air. That's when a human nose may get the strongest whiff of the maddening effluvium. As my father calls it," she said, eyes lowered. "The members of our family, our guild, search the air for one hint while he.... *Alors*, there is simply no way to describe it to someone who has not smelled it. But perhaps the intensity of the moth's passion alludes to its magnitude. He is frenzied by her tantalizing aura, Monsieur." She felt herself begin to blush. She was laying her cards on the table, a gesture of trust. "The male and female stay joined together

for an entire night and into the morning...before he dies and she begins laying her eggs.”

Bouffier slowly let out his pent-up breath. Like a fish, hooked, then released.

Catherine smiled. “Forgive me, Monsieur Bouffier. I’m a country girl; this is second nature to us. There is no way to hide the sexual background of that moment out of time, when members of the guild can smell the moth.” *And smell the moth in the maitresse*, she allowed, but to herself. “But you’ve been in a magnanerie when moths mate, haven’t you?”

“Of course!” he said, and laughed so they would both know he was lying.

*So he has no experience*, she said in Dialog.

*What he lacks, the other brings*, came the swift response.

Then Bouffier upped the ante. “The Nose has female and male moths brought to him daily, during the season.” Bouffier observed her closely. “He watches them mate, then dissects them.”

Her hands flew out in front of her as if warding off a threat. *Impossible...a fish talking out of water*.

Now he had the look of the man who has set the hook. It was late April in Grasse.

“The season is upon us,” she said. “Where...?”

Bouffier told her that Le Fournier’s mother was a maitresse. She kept a small operation going, right there in Grasse. For Le Fournier, he implied.

“So he comes by his obsession legitimately. *His mother is a maitresse*, she said in Dialog. “And the moths for his experimentation?” she asked him, straight out. “Where does he get them?”

He repeated that Le Fournier said he got them from his mother.

“You’re lying...or Le Fournier is lying to you. No maitresse would do that. She would be cursed.”

He studied her. “Why do you find this such an outrage? It’s all in the name of science.”

She would hear these words again but this was the first time. She was quickly convinced that no matter where Le Fournier got the moths, Bouffier couldn’t be making this up: vivisection was taking place. Armed with a crusade—to put an end to this unholy practice—she determined to see the fortnight through to the end.

*It is my duty. I have been brought here for this.* She thought she had an ally, that she wasn’t alone in this. The vague outlines of a plan began to occur to her. With Bouffier’s help, she would tease Le Fournier between now and early May, by which time Madame le Fournier’s moths would be hatching out to mate. Somehow she would get into the maitresse’s magnanerie—it was right here in Grasse!--and... Well, that part would be made clear to her; she was confident that the Madonna would support her in eradicating this vile practice.

Bouffier didn’t have to do anything more to persuade her to work with them.

For his part, Bouffier quickly sketched out his plan, assuring Catherine that he would like to work with her; together, they would tantalize Le Fournier, bringing him close to realizing his end, then snatch it away—repeatedly. Within reach, but elusive: that would be their by-word—*elusif*. In a word, they would drive Le Fournier mad. They agreed; he deserved it.

## **Part One, Chapter Two**

Thirteen years later

October, 1838, Bucks County PA

After the morning's presentation of the silk enterprise to the burgers and fraus of Doylestown, Catherine and Regina—finding themselves with time before the coach back home to Newtown—had settled themselves on a stone wall overlooking the grass of the green. The Commons spilled downhill to the cluster of official buildings and churches, whose spires and domes announced the Bucks County seat. Doylestown was famed for the sweetgum trees they had planted around the margin of the green; at this point in the autumn, the spectacle of crimson leaves stirring against cloudless blue sky had drawn a substantial number of the citizenry out for picnicking and strolling.

Catherine drew a precious object on a chain out of her stomacher, a Swiss watch that she clicked open. “Part of my *equipe* as maitresse of the magnanerie,” she explained to her new friend and distant cousin Regina Miller. “We still have an hour before the coach. Are you willing to sit here? Or shall we walk around?”

“Oh Catherine, if you think I am going to budge before you finish the story of your time at the Houbigant Labo, you are surely mistaken!”

*I have never had a friend before, Catherine thought. And perhaps, in telling this story all the way through to its end, I shall see it for the first time.* For the consequences of Catherine's time at the Grasse *parfumerie* still rumbled under the surface of their new life, threatening to break through the floorboards of their home with a muscular refusal to vanish.

Catherine had also been charged with seeing if Regina—a leader in the Quaker community and their programs of abolition, women's enfranchisement, and pacifism—could be recruited into the magnanerie's inner circle.

Regina drew a large shawl out of her bag and, winding one end around her shoulder, passed the other end to Catherine. "It seems cruel to dissect the moths. But I don't understand why it upset you so much. Isn't this kind of thing done in the name of science worth the pain we inflict on invertebrates?"

Catherine observed her new friend keenly. *Is it possible—for all Regina's fine and real sentiments for slaves and for women and young men recruited to war—that she has no feeling for other creatures?* Or had Catherine been reared to ensure that she, the maitresse, would never harm her charges? "Why don't I continue my story and perhaps you will see why."

Regina nodded, "Please." Flickering sun threw shadows from Regina's eyelashes across her freckled cheekbones. The two women were the same age, having just passed from their twenties into their thirties. The palest violet skin under Regina's eyes spoke of the pace at which this firebrand of the Quaker community lived her life. Her hair stood out from her head like a burning bush, each rosy tendril flexing under the constraints of pins and cossetting.

*A losing proposition*, Catherine thought, *taming the willful*. She had a sudden longing to be in her own yard, toweling out Regina's hair after a washing, letting it snake out with its own volition. Yet, as storyteller, she had Regina just as surely under her hands, neck bent to drink from the springs, nature snared, wildness rendered receptive. Catherine felt a glow spreading just below her navel as she played out her story to Regina like a fishing line.

“And so Bouffier and I spent much of the day and many nights in his lab teasing the Nose's sensibilities, a kind of childish revenge perhaps, but one that satisfied a deep vengeance that had surfaced in me. Bouffier was kind, aware that being shut up in a laboratory during the spring was hard for a young maiden. He had baskets of exotic fruits brought to my room, gifts from his mother who received regular shipments from Africa and other parts of the Mediterranean. I gorged each morning on pineapple, dates, bananas, mangoes, fresh oranges, lemons...fruits I had never tasted before and—for the most part—have not seen since.

“A curiosity began to arise in me, to meet these two women, Bouffier's mother and the maitresse, Le Fournier's mother. The powers behind their sons. Because, even as I slaked my fury with Le Fournier for his clear contempt for the”...She stumbled, looking for the right term, not ready to test Regina's sensitivity to the name “*La Madonna Negra*,” “...for the female principle,” she continued, “at the same time, I began to develop compassion for the man—a mistake, I soon realized. But imagine!--he lived with his mother, in Grasse, this *etoile* of the parfum trade.

“And yet he had come to the end of his tricks, stuck finally on the one note that had eluded him from infancy, his mother's smell. Every spring, when she would emerge from

the magnanerie, redolent with this elusive fragrance, it bound him to her even as it expressed her willful withdrawal from him. Her only child. Closeted off in her work, each year for more than a month's time, she would return to him wafting this glandular scent. And then, more maddening still, she would leave him immediately. For...a ritual that comes after," she finished lamely.

"What?"

*Une femme en rut.* "I can't tell you what comes after. Not yet."

"Hmm," Regina observed, as Catherine contemplated the sheer variety of sensual experience that drives men's lives. "You must be suffering under the burden of all the things you can't tell me...yet." She cut her eyes at Catherine. "What makes you so certain I'm not ready to hear certain things? You are asking me to become part of your enterprise, aren't you?"

"All right!-- most boys never see their mother after she comes directly from the magnanerie because she goes to be with her consort," Catherine blurted. "Their sacred rutting—we call it 'spinning'—parallels the worms spinning in their *cocons*."

Regina raised an eyebrow. "That's the way it's prescribed?"

"Yes."

"Now it's you who are blushing. What else?"

"Nothing. How do you worm these things out of me!"

Regina laughed at Catherine's discomfiture. "A pun, Catherine? I was beginning to think you have no sense of humor. Go on."

"At first, Bouffier and I collapsed in smothered laughter when Le Fournier sent back his comments on Bouffier's preparations to which we had added a decoction of my spittle.

‘We have got something in this sample that puts us closer. Please identify the unknown! Could something unexpected be happening between the floral notes and the ambergris that we’ve never seen before?’

“We had started a series of *disques* coded with my initials and the date. Each night at dinner, Le Fournier placed me at his right hand; the next day, after sniffing me all evening, he had a fresh formula to send Bouffier through the window.

“Then Le Fournier organized a trip to the walled village of Saint Paul de Vence. We left in the freshness of the morning, arrived in the unseasonable heat of the late afternoon, as a breeze lifted off the Mediterranean.

For my part, I was enthralled from the moment we began driving along that high promontory above the Mediterranean toward St. Paul de Vence, throwing back the roof hatch of our carriage to let in the warm fragrant sea air. Descending at each stop while the horses rested and drank, I allowed my body and spirit to unfold in the incomparable brushstrokes of the Cote d’Azur, a land that teases each and every sense awake. I reveled in the open accents of Provençal I heard along the way—kin to our people of the Haut Midi, our Languedoc—so close to the language of the silk our own family brought from the Cevennes Mountains to our magnaneries in Hesse.”

“You felt like you had come home,” Regina said dreamily, picking blades of grass with her fingers and letting them fall.

“Yes. That night we were served outside on a patio bright with torches. We dined on a specialty of the region, a small wild boar and black truffles. A kind of mushroom,” she added.

“I’ve heard of them but never tasted them,” Regina said. “My father told me they

taste like woman,” she said, eyes uncharacteristically lowered.

“I wouldn’t know,” Catherine replied. “To me they tasted like earth. We danced with the villagers late into the night. It was their May Day celebration, bonfires on the cobbled streets, boys and girls jumping over the flames, coupling in the alleys.”

“Quite heady for a young girl from Hesse.”

“Yes. The next morning, the sheets were stripped off my bed with an undue haste which I understood only too well.”

“Le Fournier,” Regina said.

Catherine nodded. “When we got back to the laboratories, we renewed our efforts to tantalize Le Fournier. But I was losing some of my enthusiasm. Was I getting a sense that I was being led?” She shook her head. “With Bouffier’s complicity, I brought my morning urine which he distilled into crystals. We arched our brows at each other in triumph when the Nose’s frantic comments came back.”

“‘We approach, M. Bouffier. What did you used as a fixative? Please have the Mademoiselle comment.’

“And indeed, we were leading Le Fournier closer. The composition had begun to take on some of the delicious beeswax smell of the female silkmoth, as indescribable as the waxy vernix that perfumes a newborn baby’s head. To my surprise, the formula had another note to it as well, evoking the pale shellpink flower that I had smelled once in my lifetime, my *favorite* fragrance.” She smiled, accenting the word in mimicry of Le Fournier’s claim that he would uncover it before she left. “When I was still too small to remember the name, I forced a large taut puff of a bud open and raised my nose to capture a fragrance I have always remembered, but have never smelled since.”

“What did it smell like, Cat’rine?”

“Oh, orange blossom comes close, on a grosser level, several scales down. More velvety. The roasted almond that we identify with the wild silkmoth *Polyphemus*. And yet something so heartbreakingly *fraiche*. ‘Somewhere I will smell that blossom again, sometime before I die, I trust,’ I had told Bouffier during one of the long hours we spent in his *labo*, waiting for the window to slide up and deliver LeFournier’s sensory rejoinder to our latest offering. “It’s not identical with the silkmoth’s fragrance, Regina, but an element of it is similar.”

Regina patted Catherine’s hand. “The smell of wild strawberries sends me into ecstasy.” She paused. “Has a fragrance ever sent you into ecstasy, Catherine?”

*I’m not ready for that discussion*, Catherine retreated. And yet she said this: “Have I told you how your prescience frightens me? You’ve been born in the silk many times over.”

Regina soaked in her friend’s acknowledgment and stretched in the sun. “I am simply asking you to test me, if need be, and then begin to train me. Is that too much to ask?”

Catherine squinted up at the sun, just overhead, and threw off her end of the shawl. “The day is getting warm.” She was not ready to find out what they needed to know about Regina. A sense of shame rolled over her. *Prepared to the hilt...just not for this*, she said in Dialog. “Are you hungry?” she asked, covering up.

Dialog rumbled through. *Intimacy requires taking risks*.

“We have our picnic for the stage. And I can wait to eat.” Regina threw off her end of the shawl and rolled it up to put away. “Are you hungry?”

“No.” Catherine sighed. “I’m pregnant, Regina.” She drew her hand along her

abdomen.

“Really? *Wunderbar*. How far along?”

“Just. I’ve told no one. It’s too early.”

“Philip?”

“Not yet. Let’s walk.” Catherine jumped down from the wall and looked around as if she had just arrived back. Doylestown Green had filled up with people, some simply promenading, others, who couldn’t make it home for the midday meal, spreading blankets, unpacking provisions from baskets.

“Does Elisabeth know?”

“I don’t have to tell her. Don’t you know that I’m part of her breeding program?”

Catherine smiled ruefully, ready to say she was just joking if Regina probed.

They gathered their stuff and headed toward the stagecoach stop. They passed under a sweetgum at the edge of the village green, lit by the noonday sun.

“‘That scarlet!’ Catherine remarked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen its like.”

The two women stood looking up through the leaves. The sense of humiliation that had been building in Catherine all morning as she told her story was filling her. The conclusion to her story—still untold—approached, implacable as a thunderhead. “Maybe we should be getting on to the coach,” she suggested tentatively. “Let’s scuffle through the leaves on the way there.”

Regina agreed, indicating a diagonal path. The two women headed for the stage, not speaking, meandering through drifts of leaves.

*How can I begin to train Regina as an apprentice if I don’t tell her? Our relationship to The Mother, La Madonna Negra seems more foreign here than it did at*

*home. What if I'm wrong and offend Regina's anti-Papist biases? Regina could expose them to the Quaker community. I need never tell her of the ancient art of Dialog, Catherine thought with relief. It's too deep. I don't even know if it can be learned at her stage of life! And, she might laugh, throw us over as fools, fantastes.*

If they were shamed in Newtown, the investor group in Trenton would find out... that was a given. And, as she thought through the slow ripening perfection of the apprentice training methods, mother to daughter, century upon century, she realized that she could do violence to her friend to attempt to pull her through, quickly, to train her in something so subtle as Dialog. To expect her to understand their deep devotion to La Madonna Negra.

*How could we ever have thought that this transplant to the Delaware could work!* she asked in Dialog.

And then a message came through, grounded not lofty, immediate not gazing off across the vast expanse of time: *Reveal more. Test before the end of the day. Remember: despair is the retreat of the coward.*

Regina began laughing then, a deep rolling laugh that renewed itself at every end. Her eyes teared. She shook her head when Catherine asked her to explain, head bent over her knees. Hat in her hand, hair tumbling out of pins, Regina laughed and wept her face clean.

*I would taste her tears.* Catherine waited, touching her arm, watching her face. Between paroxysms, renewed gusts, Regina gasped, "You—don't—TRUST—me!" and then she was off again, laughing harshly, crying, shaking Catherine off.

"I'm sorry," Catherine said. "I'm sorry, Regina. I...care for you. I do!--but I have to know, and you have to know, before I can begin to train you."

This interchange produced an immediate effect on both women. Catherine let out a long exasperated breath and Regina's lips quirked up in a smile, in spite of her tears. Pocketing her handkerchiefs, smoothing her hair, Regina pinned her hat back on her heads, smiling tremulously, and drew her shawl close about her.

"Where is the *pissoir*?" Regina asked, as they approached the stagecoach. "I need to pull myself together. Oh, there it is...behind town hall. I'll be right back."

Catherine watched as her friend sprinted around the corner, occasioning startled glances from passersby. Catherine threw her head back, letting the noonday sun fall on her face, and thought about Regina's exaggerated reaction. *What led her to think I don't trust her?* When a shadow fell across her eyes, she became aware that someone stood before her, studying her.

A man in gray, from waistcoat and cravat to shoes and stockings, bowed slightly. "Madame Duladier? Herr Oblinger."

Catherine curtsied reflexively, putting her hand to her hat as if a high wind had come up. She corresponded with Herr Oblinger, one of their key investors from Trenton and a friend of her uncle's, though she had never met the man.

His smile deepened. "I came down last night, on behalf of our investor group, to see how your presentation would be received this morning. I was particularly interested in your scientific observations about the practical uses of silk."

*Had he watched and waited until Regina went off to introduce himself?* she wondered. "How did you think I was received?" she asked.

He raised both eyebrows as if this were an indiscreet question, then bowed slightly again, drew his pocket watch out by its fob, clicked it open and snapped it shut, transient

and true as a facial tic. “It’s nearly noon. I am taking lunch with several of the city fathers, to discuss their interest in our venture. Let me say that we are very pleased with your family’s performance to date. Everything proceeding as you expect?”

She almost blurted, You know I’m pregnant? but said, “Yes. You have our reports. Any questions, Herr Oblinger?”

“None. Seeing you alone,” he smiled at the sight of Regina swooping along the walkway toward the coach, the expectation of an introduction written on her face, “I presumed to stop and introduce myself.” He tipped his hat.

“*Avec plaisir*, Herr Oblinger.” She would remind him that she was Cevenoles and not to be underestimated.

“*A bientôt*, Madame Duladier.” He picked up his French smoothly. “Mes felicitations a Monsieurs Shaffer et Sechinger.” Her husband Philip and her uncle in Trenton had introduced them to Herr Oblinger. The monthly reports to their investor groups were signed and sent by Wilhelm, her brother-in-law.

Regina looked curiously at Herr Oblinger as he gave her a passing nod. “What was that—an apparition?”

“One of our investor group up from Trenton.”

“Surely not a coincidence. I saw him in the audience this morning and wondered who he was.”

“No, not a coincidence.” Catherine replied. “He came in last night to hear me speak.”

Their stage was loading. Three businessmen travelling together stepped back and indicated with doffed hats and bows that the ladies should enter the coach first to pick their

preferred seating and settle their personal effects.

“You know Bouffier might have been a dalliance worth pursuing,” Regina suggested as the coachman took their tickets and handed them into the upholstered seats.

Catherine flushed. “Not at all,” she said. “I only wanted my fiance Kilian; shortly after I returned, we sealed our union and published the banns for our wedding.”

Regina, and indeed all of Newtown, knew how Catherine’s young husband Kilian had died of typhoid just before the Duladier party departed for Trenton, the Hessian bastion in the new world. Catherine had met her new husband Philip a year ago in the drawing rooms of her relations. The details of this were well-known as well: this past summer’s whirlwind courtship of the affluent young widow, the fraying ends of a family’s business basted shut again through a marriage with an established multigenerational Trenton-based mercantile family.

“You have had an exciting life, Catherine,” Regina said in a low murmur. There was some sort of hold-up outside the coach with the men and their luggage. “I would envy you, but I have had my own type of excitement.”

“You have an extraordinary life, Regina,” Catherine whispered. “Travelling out as you do to meet your intellectual ladyfriends. The danger with...”

Regina made a hand gesture, and indicated with her eyes the gentlemen who were peering inside the coach preparing to enter.

Catherine had been ready to mouth the word “slaves” but respected Regina’s sense of probity and didn’t want to violate it. Philip had told the family in the strictest secrecy how they had to hide their intention to construct an underground room as part of the magnanerie when they built it next year, hide it even from the Quaker workmen, their

neighbors. “Very dangerous,” he had warned. The government was considering a law implicating those who abetted runaway slaves; everyone was skittish.

Catherine was relieved that Herr Oblinger was apparently not going to catch this coach. She didn't think she could bear making small talk before such an audience with a man she had only just met, a man who figured so importantly in their venture. Speaking in code to a fellow woman is easy; speaking in code to a man with financial power over you is exhausting. Yes, and a folly: what if he were to misread the code?

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When they descended from the crowded coach in Newtown, Regina grabbed Catherine's waist, drawing her along in the opposite direction from their homes. “You have to finish the story, Catherine. And we have to talk.” She looked directly into her friend's face. “I'm not going to let you go into the magnanerie next spring alone, with Kristiana, who is just a girl after all, even with the formidable support of Elisabeth and Catya. I promise you that. Whether I pass your tests or not.” She flung her hand out sideways as if forfeiting the opportunity to train as Catherine's apprentice if she needed to.

Her nieces, Kristiana and Catya, were training as apprentices to the two sisters; Catya was shadowing her mother Elisabeth, as steward, while Kristiana, the younger, was being groomed as apprentice maitresse, in Catherine's footsteps.

“Elisabeth doesn't expect you home this early. She does expect that you will have reached some sort of agreement with me. Am I right?”

Catherine nodded.

“Then let’s go to Marguerite’s for tea and a smoke. She’ll be discreet and give us our privacy, if we ask.”

Dread was building in Catherine’s heart. She appealed to Dialog: *How will I end the story and extricate myself with dignity? Will she respect me as maitresse, later when we go en magnanerie, if I reveal too much?* And then in the privacy of her own thoughts, she asked herself, *How will our new friendship recover if we both see at the same time how severely the Madonna punishes me for my slightest transgressions?*

“Just an hour,” Regina pressed her case. “It’s still early and we’re not expected until the later coach.” Regina took her cousin’s arm. “It’s going to be all right.” She twined her arm around Catherine’s waist and squeezed. “I’m realize that I know little of your world, the world of silk you are asking me to enter,” Regina continued. “You are going to ask me, aren’t you, Catherine?”

Catherine bowed her head in both surrender and assent. “Yes, I am.”

“Just as you know nothing of our abolitionist movement, I know only the little you’ve told me about silk. And, what I’ve guessed,” Regina added a bit shamefacedly, letting go of her friend as they entered the forest heading to Neshaminy Creek, where the Lenape aboriginals had their settlement. Regina knew the way, so she led her friend single-file down the path.

Catherine groaned. “And you don’t know the half of it! This must be why we always keep the care and rearing of the worms within the family, generation after generation. It’s hard to explain. Because much of it...doesn’t make sense.”

Regina stopped and turned to Catherine. “I am family,” She stated the fact baldly and yet no one could have missed the reservoir of hurt behind her words.

The forest canopy threw Catherine's face into shadow. "Oh, Regina." She wanted to hug her friend close to her, heal her dismissive words. "We've never been here before. Never done this. We'll take it one step at a time. That's all we can do." Catherine scrutinized Regina's face. Alarmed by the heat that passed between them, she had to be honest: also wanted to thrust Regina from her, keep her at a distance. Then: "It's an experiment bringing you and other women from the village into the magnanerie. We have our secrets...deep secrets."

The two women glanced at each other, wondering if it might be best to say, "Let's go home. Forget the story." But then, gathering about them not only their burgeoning feelings for each other but also their courage in the face of the unknown, they reached a tacit agreement and set out again for Marguerite Montour's.

They picked their way across the brilliant forest floor, along a clear trail that led to the semi-navigable creek, whose leisurely meanders would eventually take a walker to the Delaware River within half a day.

Marguerite Montour, head of her household and proprietor of a sort of tavern, was feeding her chickens a warm mash whose fragrance reminded them that they hadn't eaten their lunch in the coach; they had felt constrained eating in front of strangers.

"Marguerite," Regina called. "I would like you to meet a new friend. Catherine Duladier, *je te presente*: Marguerite Montour."

Catherine was surprised; she hadn't expected a European lady, with a sharp visage and a rosy complexion not unlike her sister Elisabeth's. She was able to hide her confusion, and her pleasure at having Regina *tutoyer*, the familiar French form used for family and close friends. *Is Marguerite Montour a close friend of Regina's as well?*

Continuing in French, Regina established their need for a private nook, a pot of tea and some fresh tobacco.

Marguerite's face revealed nothing as she led the two women to her inglenook. "*Excusez moi.*" She laid down two teacups and saucers, silver spoons on homespun napkins by their side. Then she broke into German—"I'll go put the kettle up"—and moved off into the recesses of the kitchen.

"She speaks excellent French. And idiomatic German. She's so...civilized," Catherine stammered.

"What did you expect, Catherine? *Une sauvage nue?*" Regina grinned. She whispered, "Marguerite's grandmother was the adoptive granddaughter of the Viceroy of Quebec." Then she added: "And a Mohawk princess."

Catherine flushed, hoping Regina couldn't see her assumptions about what the Montours might be like. But more, because she didn't want to finish her story, seeing now how unflattering and revealing it was. *Where will I draw the line?* she asked herself, determined not to be seduced into revealing more than she was willing.

Marguerite brought a pot of China tea and a plate: "*mes biscuits gingembres.*"

Regina rolled her eyes; apparently Marguerite's reputation as a cook went before her.

"*Bon appetit! J'ai du travail.*" She picked a basket down from the rafter where it had been hanging next to drying herbs. "*Donc: excusez-moi. A bientôt, Madame Duladier, j'espere.*" Pleasantries dispensed with, their hostess gave a little wave toward the tray that held a pipe and a plug of tobacco and left them alone to pour their tea.

The house was empty it seemed. Sun streamed through casements set deep in stone

walls. They sat at a table in a fireside nook and were warmed by a small smokeless fire that burned on the hearth. An exotic amalgam of furniture was placed in seating arrangements around the room. Bunches of herbs hung from open rafters.

“Marguerite and her daughter Delphine have a native’s sense of medicines,” Regina observed, watching her friend closely. “You and Elisabeth would be well served getting to know them.”

“Thank you for the introduction,” Catherine said in a small tight voice, as she poured them each a cup of the extravagant tea.

Dialog blew in like a poltergeist, mincing no words: *Be grateful.*

They breathed in the sharp fragrance then set the delicate cups back on their saucers without sipping. The tea was too still hot to drink.

“Mmm,” Regina purred. “I am grateful for this cup of oolong...” She gestured around her: “...for the day. For your company.”

*Her audacity.* Catherine was grateful for her new friend’s forward nature, a sauce to her own solitary persona. She had seated herself first, tucking deep into the nook up against the stone wall. Regina sat in the chair opposite, pulled further into the room. Her head, backlit by the afternoon sun, was once again a fiery halo.

...an *archange*? Catherine marvelled. *Or perhaps I always choose enclosure, she the open light. Both of us by nature.* Looking at Regina again, she wanted to grab her friend’s hand and squeeze it to ascertain that she was real, flesh and blood. *In what realm is she Queen? Do archangels incarnate?* “Do you ever wish for a normal life, Regina?”

“Catherine?” Regina picked up her teacup and poised just above the bowl, let the steam warm her face as well as her fingertips. “No, I don’t, Catherine,” Regina answered

quietly. “I love my life, full of contradiction and paradox, just as it is.”

Twenty-two heartbeats passed. And one complete breath. “All right:” Catherine said. “I am grateful. Grateful for the introduction.”

“Are you going to finish the story?” Regina was smiling, as if she had caught Catherine out at something.

“I’m considering whether I should or not.” *Is it possible that Regina heard that snippet of Dialog urging me to be grateful?* She had to ask herself the question.

“Oh Catherine. It was more than ten years ago. Tell! You can’t leave me hanging.”

She sent up a trial balloon in Dialog, to see if Regina could hear. *I’m not sure that I want you to know who I am. Not sure that I won’t lose you.*

A giggle escaped Regina like a hiccup. She placed her hand over her heart on the nearly transparent tucked lawn of her blouse, as if to stop convulsions of mirth before they started.

*Her heavy ivory breasts*, Catherine reflected, then cancelled that thought. *Blue veins on the map of her skin...cancel!*

And again, a comment came in Dialog. Someone or several someones were listening in rather closely. *Lay your cards on the table.*

Catherine gave Regina a long cool look. “All right. Well, Bouffier and I kept this up. Clippings of my hair. And not just from my head.” She blushed furiously. “I took fresh samples in to the *labo* each morning. Bouffier would process whatever I brought him into a decoction he added to the formulas that Le Fournier fed him, for a series of discs whose initials and numbers were mounting on the shelf.” Catherine picked up her teacup and looked at her friend over the rim. “Where does Marguerite get this tea?” she wondered

aloud, breathing in the fragrance of the oolong, golden and complex.

“Are you stalling, Catherine?”

Catherine startled, needing to remind herself that Regina had said that out loud. “No! Aren’t you tiring of the story? I’ m tired—of talking about myself.”

“This story must be told.” Regina said. “Now. To me.” She smiled slowly and placed her hand over Catherine’s, to soften her oracular tone.

Catherine struggled to accept Regina’s touch for what it was, a gesture of comfort. She sighed, then picked up the story with the resignation of a donkey who doesn’t want to go on but does out of love for her master. “Le Fournier was growing increasingly frustrated that neither he nor Bouffier could isolate the component that occasionally appeared in the formula—unidentifiable, apparently random—mysterious components that brought him, the maestro, so close to perfecting his composition. If only he could isolate, intensify! Houbigant must have been frustrated as well; Le Fournier was certainly discarding many delicious new *parfums* in his monomaniacal search. Yet they must have trusted him, their golden goose.

“Later in the week, after we returned from St. Paul de Vence, Le Fournier announced that we were going to visit a magnanerie in Grasse. At last! I thought. The three of us left the laboratory and walked down the hill into town. I was ready for whatever transpired. Le Fournier never let on that it was his mother’s operation, but greeted her as if they were acquaintances, introducing her as Madame Magnanarelle. I understood immediately upon seeing her that she knew nothing of her son’s unholy experiments with her moths. But how could that be?

“For the first time, I realized that I had to question all of my assumptions, then and

there. Was I being willfully naïve in believing what Bouffier had told me, for how could anyone steal mating moths without the *magnanarelle* knowing? Young though I was, I sensed sliding panels, shifting settings; I no longer knew who was telling me the truth. For the first time since arriving, I trusted no one beside myself. And yet I had reached an unusual understanding for one so young: I understood that, in terms of value to myself as an ally, I was the least trustworthy!”

Regina sat back, removing her hand from where it covered Catherine’s. “And didn’t that leave you at sea?” she asked. “Without a sextant.”

Catherine sighed. “Regina.” *I have met a soulmate.* Her long isolation, a necessary component of being a maitresse, was over. “Actually I remember feeling relief. Nothing was fixed; everything in flux.” She used the occasion of taking a first sip of her tea to look at Regina. *I have had no one but Elisabeth, my sister and my steward, up until now.*

“The magnanerie was shut down. Given the date—early May—the worms must have finished their spinning. And in fact, *les cocons* were already arrayed in baskets near the backdoor, ready to go to market. All attention was now focused on the *incubateur* where the moths who had not been stifled *en cocon* were hatching and pursuing the purpose of their existence: mating, laying eggs, dying.

“Le Fournier seated me first, then took a chair beside me, indicating that his mother should sit in a chair to his other side. Bouffier crouched in front between us, leaning a bit against my knees. As if we were *copains*. Heh! Co-conspirators indeed!” Catherine laughed bitterly and dug her fingers into her plaited crown as if it were a tightening band. The high color that stained Catherine’s cheeks when she was excited or embarrassed appeared like a watercolor wash.

“Time thinned out, then thickened, punctuated by homely sounds from outside the magnanerie, village sounds, pails clattering, children running past on their way to school. And inside the *incubateur*, together with the beating of moths’ wings, my heart beat... and my maidenhead beat. As one.”

Catherine bent her head, studying the dregs of her tea. “The first cup of oolong is original in every sense,” she murmured. Anticipating this, Marguerite had left an iron teakettle on the grate, to fill the teapot for a second cup, a different experience. Catherine rose and, hefting the heavy kettle over the teapot while Regina lifted the lid, poured in boiling water.

As she sat back down, she said in *Dialog: Now*. “At one point, I looked at Bouffier and saw that he was clutching a small blue medal that he wore concealed inside his clothing. I was shocked to realize that Bouffier was Catholic in this Protestant south and wondered how he had kept it from me in the long hours we had spent amusing ourselves in the sterility of his laboratory. Was he praying? I wondered, as he clutched his medal. You know: ‘Lead us not into temptation...’ Catherine laughed, a vixen’s bark. *This is the threshold we’ve been approaching all day. Madonna...*

“A miasma arose, as the male moths, *les Imagos*, each pursued and then achieved their ecstasy with the several female moths, *les Phalenes* who called to their mates. None of us gathered there missed smelling it, so difficult to describe: newly mown hay overlaying aged manure, the thick slick *punque* of certain cheeses released by the evening’s breeze, freshening off the water. Almond blossoms blasted open by two fingers pressing on either side of the puckered bud.” She poured a second cup for each of them, almost defiantly. *This is what it feels like. To confide in someone who is not my sister.*

“Then, unbelievably,”—her hands traced an arabesque in the air—“everything in reverse: the low sun shining through the other side of the magnanerie. The sound of children running home from school. Pails banging together as milkmaids headed to the evening milking. Cowbells and cuckoos, May’s song.” *Beat of wings, beat of my heart, pulse of my maidenhead.* She let out her breath. “He never touched me, Regina.” She took another sip of tea while Regina watched.

She was lying, for the first time. That story had never, *would never*, she thought, *be told.*

“Who?” Regina whispered.

“Bouffier.” Again, she hid her eyes behind her teacup, transported. Was she speaking in Dialog or speaking aloud?—she didn’t know. *No, say it, to all who listen*, she thought, deliberately telling her story, the tradition of her own sexual awakening and all of the women in her line, in Dialog.

*That night I opened my shutters to the night winds. He was calling me, my Imago, calling from my blood stream, my pulses, waiting for me. Not a demon lover, my own phantom kin. I took a banana from the bowl, the bowl that Bouffier’s mother had sent, drew it in and out, to open me up, then a hard thrust, to break the hymen. Our Imago, the Moth, entered me then, pumping and pumping, drawing me inside out, while I bit my hand until it bled.*

*And so it was prescribed, a code that broke open in each of us, ripened by time. Elizabeth told me it had been the same for her; Wilhelm, being Duladier, had understood that our Imago had to be a silk maiden’s first lover.*

“I didn’t know what I was doing.” She took a breath and rattled her treasonous cup

down onto the saucer.

*And you did know, exactly.* Regina laid her palm face up on the table between them as if she held a flower there. “Your first lover was not a human man?” she whispered. “... but a moth.”

Catherine didn't even bother to nod, as one irreducible fact bore in on her: *Regina both hears and speaks in Dialog.* And then, *Could I ever tell this woman the whole truth?*

“The Nose fell into a trance, while Bouffier and I sat in his lab, drawing endless caricatures that amused us both enormously. We waited for the window to open, but it did not. Not all day. Nor did he dismiss Bouffier but kept both of us there, waiting for his inspiration. With, I suppose, a hamper of my sheets by his side. And a mashed banana.” She smiled tremulously at Regina. *You will have it all in time, won't you?*

“And this went on for the better part of twenty-four hours, during which time I did not see Le Fournier at all except at dinner, when he addressed everyone but me, as if time and space were a torn hole all around me. He had moved me to the other end of the table. I started to pack.”

*Now. You have to test her.* A clear direction came through Dialog. *Don't let it go.*

“The night of the day we'd spent in his mother's magnanerie, while Le Fournier kept us waiting on the other side of the wall from him, I asked Bouffier about his medal, hoping to lighten the atmosphere that had sprung up around us.

“Oh this,” he said and drew it out from his shirt and collar. “Do you know it?” He lifted it over his head and passed it to me.

I had never seen a Papist medal of the Virgin up close, and wondered if it was sacrilege to handle it,” she smiled, then was serious, “but I instantly saw that this was not a

Papist amulet but something else. Three women in a boat silhouetted against a background of bright blue.”

“You...,” I asked him. “—how?”

“My mother is Gypsy;” he told me. “My father Alsatian. We carry this to honor Sarah, the Mother. And for Her protection. Have you seen it before?”

“I told him I had seen it before, in Camargue, some years earlier, but I hadn’t recognized it when I glimpsed it on him earlier.” Catherine dropped abruptly out of the story. “Have you been there? It’s the grassy delta at the mouth of the Rhone River, an enchanted place.”

“No, I haven’t been in Europe at all...though I would love to go. Perhaps when the next International Quaker meeting comes around, I will be invited to attend.” Then, warily: “Where did the boat come from?”

“Africa they say. They keep an ancient carved boat with three figures in a church in Camargue.” Each May, gypsies take it into the water to refresh it.” She took down the locks, let her thoughts spill over into Dialog. *Riding on the half-wild white horses who eat from the sea. Then: They worship an statue of the Black Madonna there.*

“It sounds much like where I grew up, New Orleans.” *They teach the Old Ways there.*

“Yes!” Catherine responded, delighted. *Perhaps all deltas are holy; devoted to Her by design.*

The two women studied each other.

“You speak in Dialog,” Catherine said.

“Yes, it seems I do.” Regina was leaning forward, looking past her, at a spot on the

wall. "Can you hear everything I think?"

"Good heavens, no! Speaking in Dialog is a deliberate choice."

"Good. I thought so. And yet I've had no instruction."

"Do you know Her?-- the one on Bouffier's medal?"

Without looking across the table, Regina made a sign with her fingers.

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. "Who?"

"My mother. Through her mother." Regina said quietly. "Does Philip know?"

"Good heavens, no! Does Moritz?" Catherine figured that Regina's husband, being also a cousin to the Duardier and therefore a family man, might know.

"Absolutely not. He wouldn't understand. It would frighten him, break our marriage. Wilhelm?"

"Yes." Catherine had told Regina how Elisabeth and Wilhelm had been an arranged marriage of first cousins, a deliberate choice elders made every few generations to bind the family men closer to the guild. *It makes him dangerous*, she revealed.

Regina spoke first, her face serious. "You mustn't ever tell. They'd pillory us."

They both laughed at the notion of Quakers pillorying anyone, nervous laughter; they would be punished by shunning. No one among any of *les cultes protestantes* would understand their hidden devotion to the Mother, bred in the silk. No matter that it wasn't Romanist corruption, it would be considered the highest heresy. And there would be no court of hearing, just rupture. In this land of religious freedom, not a man considered the possibility of a faith that predated Christ...other than the odd beliefs of the Jews, the Chinese, and the aboriginals.

"Well..." Catherine gave Regina a measuring look.

“Does this make it easier for you?” Regina asked dryly.

“Oh goodness yes,” Catherine sighed. “When we go en magnanerie...”

“I can go as your apprentice?”

“Under Kristiana. We’ve been training her all of her life. Though she is young, she is very talented.”

“*Boof!--bey oui*. I have much to learn. We have a year and a half,” she added cautiously. “Does Kristiana speak in Dialog?”

Catherine picked up a ginger cookie and, dunking it into her tea, took a small bite. “No. She can listen but not speak yet. Catya just spoke for the first time as our boat was pulling out of LeHavre, a year ago this spring.”

“How does the story end? You have to tell me.” Regina hesitated. “Now that you know you can trust me.”

Catherine thought back to Regina’s curious laughing and crying episode in Doylestown. “Why didn’t you tell me you’ve been listening in on Dialog!” she said accusingly.

“I wasn’t sure that what I was hearing wasn’t in my head alone.” Regina had the grace to blush. But then, uncompromisingly: “Have you told this story to anyone else before, Catherine? The whole story?”

“No, I haven’t. Not the whole story. Well,” she prevaricated, “my parents, when I returned. I think I’m hearing it myself for the first time. And it’s still a long haul to the end, Regina.” She made a sound as if easing a discomfort. “But all right. Now that the pudding is thickening, I will not take away the stirring spoon.”

Regina laughed a sharp bark at this double entendre for she knew that the

community referred to her in Hessian dialect as the “stirring spoon,” or boat rocker and was appreciative of the sly way Catherine had introduced it.

“Let’s see—I had just finished telling Bouffier the story of my visit to Camargue,” Catherine said, adding hotly—“yes, Regina, the partial story, the public story!--when the window flew open, startling us. Bouffier grabbed the formula and scanned it, slowly letting out air from his lungs like a hot air balloon. Then he began to move, pulling vials, flasks, tins off his shelves willy-nilly.

“‘You’ll have to leave now,’ he told me over his shoulder, then thrust the vellum with the purple ink at me. At the bottom, Le Fournier had scrawled a note: ‘Ask the Mademoiselle to return to her room.’

“I went out. The outer door was unlocked. I ate my cold supper. And wrote a long letter home...I was homesick. And frightened. *Something had reversed, and quickly. And I yearned for a real lover.* She said this in Dialog, for Regina’s practice.

Regina nodded, speaking in Dialog, *So they had gotten, somehow, what they needed.*

Catherine nodded, flushed and shy now that the door of Dialog had been thrown open between them.

“The fortnight had passed and then some. The next morning, I began to bleed with my monthly. I sent a message that I would not be coming down for meals. I rested, finished packing, and walked the fields of Grasse, free to enjoy the hectares of lavender which was just starting to bloom, white moths dancing above each row. I was relieved to be leaving. The stench of corruption was filling my nose.”

After all, she could suddenly see the way. Telling part of the truth was the easiest way to sustain the lie, to build intimacy with her new friend while hiding that which could

never be told.

“Next day, Le Fournier sent a message to my room with his thanks and a large bank cheque enclosed. I was dismissed. He did not come to thank me or say goodbye. He would not offend the delicate membranes of his nose with the ripe smells of iron and blood. I tell you, I have never felt such contempt for a person before or since. But it wasn’t him alone, you see.” She sipped the second, stronger cup of the oolong, and lingering over her the rim, drew in the tang of the tealeaf fermentation process. *Careful*, she warned herself. “Our business partners in China sent this oolong once, in a painted tin teabox,” she said offhandedly. Her voice became small, factual. “They were working together all along. From the beginning. I see that now.”

Regina gave a cry like a starling. “Bouffier was bait to gain your trust?”

Catherine nodded but didn’t look up. “The next day, while I was packing to leave, I received a small note from Bouffier asking me to tea at the local pension mid-morning before my coach left. I accepted. Over tea, I declined his delicate offer of sport, which he instantly transformed into a joke. Catherine paused, took a sip. *Now I must finish the story as fiction*, she thought, grieving. She closed the lacuna firmly.

“He stayed with me long enough to hand me into my carriage. Before I shut the window to keep the dust of the road out of the interior, he presented me with a square cutglass vial. A tag hung from the neck with the word “presqu’almond” penned on it. I removed the stopper while he watched me. It was my favorite, the scent of my long-lost blossom. I thought: *They have captured something of me after all.*” Tears began to fall from Catherine’s eyes, running down her cheeks.

“They wounded you!” Regina said. “What happened?”

Catherine opened her mouth and felt the thick glove of grief slide out its length, a backhanded caress. “If I had known...” she murmured. ...*that Kilian was going to die.*

*That I would be trapped, a Moth ready to lay her eggs. Vivisection.”*

*What could you have done or undone that you hadn't already fixed in place,* came in Dialog, a rhetorical question.

“Which one betrayed you?” Regina insisted.

“Both!” And there at last was the truth. But she had closed the door; it would remain closed. She wiped her eyes and commanded her breath. “But that wasn't the perfume they took to their new venture, Guerlain. Yes, they left Houbigant, taking the fragrance they made that night, after the day in the magnanerie, after they'd dismissed me. Though it has a note of Presqu'Almond in it, *bien sur,*” she added thoughtfully. “They called it Elusif. A dozen years later, it's still the toast of Europe, wildly successful. A new generation of fragrances, the papers called it.”

“Have you smelled it?”

“Of course. They were kind enough to send the family a bottle.”

“And?”

“Yes,” Catherine said.

Regina raised an eyebrow. “They succeeded in evoking the mating call of La Phalene?”

“Famously. ‘A new frontier in the science of fragrance has been breached,’ the press trumpeted.” She paused. “Houbigant blames me for the terrible loss of revenues to Guerlain. Our Rothschild blames me.” *A king's ransom, our Rothschild told my father, furious.*

“And your family?”

Catherine would not meet Regina’s gaze. *I don’t know.*

“Are they justified in blaming you? After all, you were a girl, and sent without any instruction or guidelines.” And then, as if it had just occurred to her: “Catherine is it possible they were setting you up to...reveal your secrets?”

“The family?” Catherine looked her friend in the eye. “Possibly. Yes, why not?” she said viciously. “But had they thought through the consequences of giving me to our Rothschild to use as his tool? No!” Her cheeks burned with the remembered humiliation, with the long perspective that time gives us to see ourselves clearly. “I think back to that goodbye in the carriage. ‘M. Bouffier,’ I said, rewarding him with the long stretch of my throat...such minxes we are at eighteen and I was overripe. He watched while I placed a drop in the hollow at the base of my throat and stroked it into my skin.” Catherine was spitting out her words. ‘And the fixative?’ I asked him. Playing.”

“‘Our secret,’ he answered, making light of our little game and undercutting any sentiment that might have marred our goodbye. Of course, they had created a treasure in Elusif. And he must have known that I would be held responsible for it, in some way, for better or for worse. I thought he was my friend,” she said to herself, in the small voice of a young girl betrayed for the first time.

“The carriage lurched. I thought I was saying goodbye, returning north to my home, leaving this all behind. *Ach!* I took out my handkerchief, blotted my face with it, waved it out the window in a goodbye—or did he interpret it as a gesture of surrender?-- and then let it drop. In a self-deprecating parody of chivalry, Bouffier caught it fluttering before it dropped to the ground and pressed it to his lips, bowing with that smile that tugged at the

corners of his mouth.

“As I watched, Le Fournier strode out of a door where he had been watching and yanked my handkerchief out of Bouffier’s hand. Bouffier waved like a boy, while Le Fournier said something emphatic to Bouffier, who ignored his boss, and then—the last I ever saw of him—Le Fournier stalked off furiously toward his mother’s.” *Did any of this happen?* Catherine asked herself, uncertain now whether the coverup she had invented existed except in her mind’s eye.

“Did they have no conscience?” Regina asked no one in particular. Then, reaching for the tray, she began pressing tobacco into the pipe.

*You have no idea, Regina,* she thought, even while realizing that if she didn’t complete the story somehow, with some measure of truthfulness, some revelation, she would damage their growing intimacy. “You can see that I must bear some of the responsibility. For it didn’t end there. And if it had, would anything have been different?” Catherine rose and laid a log across the fire which had begun to smoke. With a wrought-iron poker she found beside the hearth, she changed the arrangement of the logs, added some kindling at the center. When she continued, her voice was low and uninflected.

“You see, Bouffier followed me, on the later carriage. At every inn where we stopped for the night, Bouffier made sure that I saw him, his mocking glance becoming more and more like a rictus of pain. I refused to acknowledge him, terrified that this little idyll was following me back home. He tried to speak with me. If I had listened, would he have told me that they had gotten what they wanted? Would he have apologized for using me so badly? Perhaps thanked me?” She laughed dryly.

“But I was terrified that he would profess his undying devotion, or something like

that, follow me home, ruin my life. At that age, I had no idea how a life can be ruined. I told him that our game was over, had grown tiresome. He never pleaded with me to listen, to sit down with him like a reasonable person and talk, he simply put his hand on his crotch, screwed his face into a rictus of pain, then bowed as if I had given him a royal order...but there he'd be at our next stop, my menacing shadow, showing himself to me." Catherine breathed, slowing and taming the fear that was possessing her again, simply in telling the story, in measuring its long reach over time.

"Didn't he realize that his stalking me across France put a dark taint on the outcome? Implicated me—suggested wrongdoing on my part?" Catherine stared off into the middle distance as if at the scene of a haunting. "'The appearance of misconduct,' our Rothschild wrote."

Regina watched, sickened a bit by this tale that seemed to have run out of control, no longer a  *coquine*  of a tale,  *un peu grivois* , naughty to be sure... but, yes, it had become something darker.

Catherine had fixed the fire; it was snapping brightly on the bricks again. She stood, the tip of the poker dropped to the floor, like a fencer, foil at rest, face blank.

Regina got out of her chair, then stooped to light a taper from the flames. Holding it to the bowl, she drew deeply on it, repeatedly, until a great cloud of smoke enveloped her and the coal in the bowl glowed brightly. She passed it to Catherine whose eyes, unseeing, accepted the pipe and drew on it delicately, blowing the smoke out her mouth and again, up into her nose. She coughed, then sat, and took a sip of tea before continuing.

"Finally, I had to tell the driver. He told the magistrate in Lyons, when we stopped. They detained Bouffier." A fleeting expression of pain passed over Catherine's face. "And

I'm afraid that from both Grasse and Lyons, word got back to the Rothschild. Our Rothschild." She took a deep breath and blew it out. "Years later, last fall—when we were about to leave Hesse for Bucks County, our Rothschild sent his condolences about—Kilian. And he said...our Rothschild said," Catherine's voice sounded as if it were being strained through a high wind. "...that he had every hope for our new venture but that he would not communicate directly with me. For reasons he preferred not to go into." Catherine was seized by a paroxysm of coughing, her shoulders collapsing around the teacup she held in both hands.

"A horehound lozenge," Regina offered. "My own." She drew one out of a tin and passed it to Catherine who obligingly sucked. Regina banged the tin down on the table, the margins of her lips going white from compression.

"Mother and Father both tried to change his mind. I had been a girl, they reminded him. They had apologized, even while emphasizing that I had done nothing wrong. It was long ago. I was their chosen and trained magnanarelle. My word would be law in the venture.

"Our Rothschild would not hear of it, would not discuss why. "Where there's smoke, there's fire," was all he would say. He flatly stated that he and his venture partners would only communicate with the men in the family, specifically my father August and Elisabeth's husband Wilhelm." Catherine was finally out of breath, gasping out the words, wringing the napkin Marguerite had provided. She tried to quell another coughing fit with a sip of tea, trying in vain to regain a measure of control.

"You shouldn't smoke tobacco. At all!" Regina said, but Catherine kept on forcing out the words as if she hadn't heard Regina, words pressed as if the young magnanarelle

were ironing them with a steaming flatiron before presenting them. She had control of her breathing now. “Mother and Father were outraged. They sent a letter saying his terms were unacceptable. The family would finance the venture ourselves.” Catherine looked up at Regina, her face naked. “Didn’t he understand the dynamics of our guild? How could he be involved with our family so long without understanding who runs the magnanerie?” Catherine looked at her hands. It was hard to tell this story without letting it leak over into Dialog; it took all her skill. “And I am destined to begin this venture with my authority so undercut by our investor.”

After her parents had received the letter from their banker, they had sent for her, asking for the entire story, finally. *Did I tell them the whole story? No. How could I have admitted my complicity in the affair? I professed complete innocence.*

“We hold ourselves responsible for this, Catherine,” August had said.

Her mother had held herself stiffly, saying only, “If I hadn’t been so distracted...I should have seen this coming.”

“We did, Hannah!” her father had shouted at his wife. “We were both too busy to think through the implications of sending Catherine into that viper’s nest.” All his anger had left him in a gust. “We have been hoisted on our own petard, Hannah.”

Catherine hadn’t the slightest idea what her father was talking about except that he blamed himself. This had been her last audience with her father before leaving Hesse. Had he changed toward her? She didn’t think so.

Catherine covered her face with her hands. “I’m so humiliated to tell you this.” She looked up at Regina. “I can’t stand the fact that I was such a goose, that I may have spoiled our chances.” *Where is my discipline when I need it, Mother!* she cried out in

Dialog.

When the response came, it was so unlike her mother that she began to weep a little: *Fall apart now. Be gentle with yourself. You're carrying our seed. Later, you will practice your disciplines. You will be ready.*

“You see, Catherine,” Regina said soothingly, agreeing with a woman she had yet to meet, speaking from across the ocean. She handed her friend a linen handkerchief. “One doesn’t think consequences through as a young person. If you had been a man, the little caper would have been forgotten by all. Look at Bouffier and Le Fournier. They made a success of the whole tawdry affair. Oh, Catherine, I’m sorry...a poor choice of words.” Catherine was trembling now, almost cowering, trapped in a nightmare only she could see behind her eyes.

“Catherine!” Regina grabbed her wrist, yanking Catherine’s hand away from her mouth. “We’re a family. Your important investors are here. We can handle this Rothschild. He’s not the only merchant banker in the world. If you’re worried about Wilhelm, that’s a different matter.”

Catherine nodded, sniffing.

“Well. If you can’t trust the men in your family...”

“And in our guild,” Catherine added pointedly.

The scene which had seemed so golden and soothing earlier lay wrapped around them like a blackened apron saturated from the forge.

“Mind you, Catherine—the Jews are different from us.” Regina was casting about now for a way to go forward, without blame. “And the Papists! think of their views on women. Interesting women are either unimpeachable matriarchs or loose Magdalenes.”

Regina's rage was surfacing now, the volcano that fueled her good works burst from carefully sealed seams. "The witch trials here were happening at the same time as our families were fleeing France."

*A force of nature*, Catherine thought, not for the first time. *I need her with me*. And this was a terrifying thought, to let someone in, someone besides Elisabeth. Someone she felt this way about. *Verboten*.

"And those same people—the Puritans—hold the reins of commerce in this country. The Old Money." Regina was seething, steam pouring from every pore. "They don't trust women. Look at how they keep the vote from us!" she stamped her foot on the flagstone floor. "At least in our guilds we enjoy respect for the work we do. For centuries now. More than just the loom and cradle. More than just the hearth."

The room wouldn't hold her anymore. Catherine could see why Regina was such an influence in the Quaker community. She was passionate about her principles and could speak from the center of that passion, enlist others. "Have we gained nothing?" she asked the heavens. And then leveling her gaze on Catherine, her face twisted. "We can't even own land in this country. Land of the free—pah!" She mock-spat in disgust, slumped into her chair.

"Montour women own this land," Catherine said. "I thought so..."

"By treaty," Regina told her. "The aboriginals are outside the law. And when we gave the Lenape money for the land we bought from them?—our officials insisted that the names on the new deeds that were being prepared had to bear the patronymic: Lazar, McCourt, Miller..."

"Because they had no deeds, and after the war, only treaties?"

Regina nodded. "You're learning, Cat."

Catherine looked around. "So that's why the villagers call this place 'Lazars.' That's the name of the men the Montour women have married?"

"Yes, it's the clan thing...like us, they marry their own cousins. But not from the same clan. Listen:" Regina continued, "when our government wants to negotiate with Iroquois or Lenape, they ask to speak to their chiefs, not realizing that the women elect their chiefs. These natives are matrilineal. Land, clan, heirlooms, wealth are all passed down through the mother."

"The Old Way," Catherine said.

"Yes, from a time out of memory."

"When did we lose it?" Catherine asked. "Do you know?"

"We lose it every day," Regina said, deflated. "Repeated and repeated, played out on the stage of our homes, in our villages. With our husbands and fathers."

The cooling hearth ticked as the bricks contracted. The slant of the sun through the window told them they had overstayed. They got up, needing to move, needing to return to their homes where husbands and grown daughters and children waited, needing to leave this table where so much emotion had been freighted.

"Don't trouble yourself with vague imaginings, Catherine. You're going to have a baby next midsummer, and, if you are to understand this climate before we go *en magnanerie*, you had better get to know the Montours." Regina was sketching out the tasks that needed to be accomplished. "In just over a year and a half, as I understand it, we will be hatching the first *volte* of seed. And yes, I am with you. Completely with you. I will be your most devoted apprentice...besides Kristiana of course. I will pick it up because it flows

in my blood.”

*Her blood...completely with me.* To cool her heated awareness of Regina standing so near, and to ease her discomfort with her friend’s passionate stance toward everything she embraced, Catherine fell back on ritual, summarized their meeting in Dialog for those who listened there. *Regina has no idea how complex Elisabeth’s secret breeding plan is, yet she understands how important her contact with the Montour women is.*

*Her instincts are good. She can be trusted,* came a confirmation in Dialog.

She turned toward Regina again, “In the interest of speeding our project along toward a successful outcome, Elisabeth is determined to develop a moth, part wild native silkmoth and part our domesticated *imago*. You must keep this a secret!”

“Whatever you ask me to keep secret,” Regina responded, “I will.”

Catherine flushed, thinking, *It’s as if we’re speaking in code. We will need help from the Montours calling in the wild silkmoth,* Catherine said in Dialog.

*In time. In time,* came sage advice, in Dialog.

*We have such little time,* she responded, watching Regina’s face change as she listened in to the channel, began to appreciate that for Regina, her new-found gift represented a new if odd community. *We have to prove we can raise a fine thread here within—two seasons. At most!*

“We are intending to absorb a very high level of risk to get the thread that we want, Regina.” Catherine’s body swarmed with emotions, rife with the start-up chemistry of nurturing a fetus. “What if we need the backing of our Rothschild and his investors...” *If only to secure our local investors’ confidence in us.*

“One step at a time, Catherine,” Regina said firmly, echoing the message in Dialog.

“No one understands as well as I do your sense of urgency. Time is our friend because we know its shape.” She made a rolling sign between them.

Catherine wanted to kiss that hand, travel up it to the elbow, then... The image of a white shoulder was suddenly interrupted by a vision of her husband. *Philip!* she thought in alarm, lurching back as if from a fall.

“*Soit tranquille*, Catherine. Your anxiety serves nothing. We are perfectly aligned.” Regina flexed her fingers. “Look.” She crossed the index fingers of each hand, one up, the other down: “*One*. First we free the slaves. Then we get the vote *two* and end war *three*... so we can relax in the silks and laudanum profits the family will surely be enjoying.

The women’s ungoverned laughter was heard. “*A bientôt, j’espere, Cat’rine*,” Marguerite Montour said to herself, where she stood just inside the verge of the woods where shade and sunlight met. She didn’t need to call on her fabled prescience to see the shadow that fell from the silvery head of the Duladier woman. She understood that all the Duladier’s plans fell on the narrow shoulders of this one, plans that intersected with her family’s trajectory. She couldn’t see where the connection led; she could only see its gravity. More was at stake than the Duladier’s fortunes’ she determined to support these women with everything she had at her command, for she had the keen appetite of a gambler for this game, sharpened over generations of her own family in the *rondelay* of time.

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At the turn of the year, a letter arrived from Hannah. August had died suddenly of a stroke. They should look to their opium profits to support their venture. Hannah would be

selling the Duladier operations in Bavaria and Hesse. Grace a Dieu, they could expect her to arrive in a year to eighteen months, perhaps in time to help open the first season of the new magnanerie.

