

Dark Corners

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The fighting had been going on for days. Outbursts of gunfire—six German soldiers dead in front of the Gare d'Orsay—a full-scale battle, complete with barricades that the French love so much, near the Eiffel Tower.

Solae had come to the surface because he heard the Resistance and the Germans had brokered a truce. The Resistance needed the time to organize, to wait for the Allies to arrive. The Germans, who were beginning to understand that they could not hold Paris, needed time to make a plan.

Solae needed food, so he had come to the only safe place he knew—a boulangerie on the Boulevard St. Germain. Most of the French were in hiding, not waiting in bread lines, and the Germans were at their posts.

He'd thought he would be able to slip in and out, unnoticed.

He had been wrong.

Solae ran across the boulevard, a loaf of bread beneath his arm, panic in his throat. He was thinner than most, so thin that if he turned sideways, the less observant could not see him. But he could not turn now.

The baker—a burly man who baked every morning for the Boche as if they were no different from the French he once served—was chasing Solae, shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Foul boy! Thief!"

Two storm troopers appeared from a kiosk, holding ripped posters telling Parisians to rise up against the Boche. The troopers looked ready for battle. They had shiny boots and shinier guns—and their eyes, that pale blue that the Boche seemed to worship—seemed even paler in the August sunlight.

Solae grabbed his bicycle, also stolen, and pedaled as fast as he could, praying that the troopers would not follow in a car. Was a bread thief worth the gas? Surely there were other battles to fight, other people to attack.

But he knew that the Germans—the filthy Boche—were like rabid dogs, unable to let go of anything once they sank their teeth into it.

He pedaled hard, weaving in and out of the bicycle traffic. Despite the fighting, Parisians were still on the streets, going about their business, ignoring the war as best they could, just like they had these last four years.

Behind him, he heard the roar of an engine. He glanced over his shoulder.

The troopers had followed him. There was the only car on the boulevard. Their helmets made their heads look round and comical, but Solae did not laugh at them.

He had not laughed at the Boche for a long time, not since they put out the lights in his fair city. Not since his father's death.

Solae pedaled faster, but he could not stay ahead of the car. It roared behind him, and it would only be a moment before it caught him.

The bread was warm beneath his arm. Sweat ran down his face, and he wished, not for the first time, that

he had the magic of his ancestors.

He would make the Boche vanish. He would explode them, destroy their vehicle, wipe their race from the earth.

But he could do none of these things. His people could do none of these things. The powers that had once belonged to faerie had faded centuries ago. When he was his most cynical, he believed that his people had had no great powers at all—that Faeryland and the magic that went with it were the myths the Real Ones believed them to be.

The Boche sitting on the right aimed his rifle at Solae, and Solae's breath caught. He imagined light streaming from his fingers, destroying the rifle, destroying the Boche.

But imagination did not make it so.

Instead, Solae veered onto a side street, then another, his bike bouncing on the cobblestones. He was near the entrance his people kept hidden with their tiny powers.

In one movement, he slipped off the bike and laid it against the closed and locked door of an empty shop. He gave the bike a longing glance—it had been by far the best bicycle he had stolen—then he slipped sideways.

The Boche squeezed their vehicle onto the tiny street, the tires on the left side of the car riding on the curb. The Boche were laughing, calling out in German and bad French, promising le jeune a present if he but stopped for them.

Solae knew what kind of present they would give him: a bullet in the heart. And no amount of magic could undo that kind of damage.

The Boche did not seem to see him, even though one looked directly at him. Solae slipped around the corner and hid against a white wall covered with dead bougainvillea, until the Boche, their merriment gone, backed out of the street and left him alone.

Solae had not always stolen bread.

Once the Real Ones of Paris thought him the favored son of a nightclub owner, a man who specialized in acts that had a touch of glamour to them—be it the way a chanteuse's songs seemed to come alive onstage or the way that a young dancer almost seemed to fly as she leapt into the arms of her partner.

There had been magic during those nights. Not the magic of Solae's ancestors, but slighter magic, a bit of beauty that seemed to brighten the darkness.

Not that there had been much darkness then.

Less than a decade ago, when Solae was a little boy, he used to escape the smoke of his father's nightclub and climb onto the roof. There he looked at the lights of Paris—the arc lights illuminating the Eiffel Tower, the gargoyles of Notre Dame grinning in the lights on the dome, the lights of Sacré-Coeur on top of Montmartre, glowing like candles in the distance.

The Real Ones called Paris La Ville Lumière, the City of Light. Perhaps they thought of the clear, crisp sunlight which, they said, they could not find anywhere else; but Solae always thought of the nighttime when the lights of the city made Paris as bright as day.

But when the bombings started, five years before—he had still been a boy then—the lights went out. Paris had not been La Ville Lumière for one-third of his life. It had become a place where darkness grew, like a hole in his soul.

For Solae, the absence of light was like the absence of air. His magic was not like his father's. The family already knew that Solae would not run the nightclub. Solae couldn't enhance acts, nor could he make a plain woman beautiful.

For a long time, his family thought he had no gifts at all.

And then they realized that his gifts were even subtler than usual—the ability to fade away in a crowd, or to brighten a room when he entered it.

Solae was not a creature of the night as so many of his kind were. He preferred the day, and if he had to choose a type of day, he preferred the bright sunlight of a Paris afternoon, the way the light fell upon the Seine, illuminating the classic lines of the Palace du Louvre and the magnificent windows of the Gare d'Orsay.

Sometimes Solae sat on the stone edge of the Pont Saint-Michel and watched the city pass him by, enjoying the light, the warmth, the way Parisians seemed to enjoy each moment.

He had not sat on the Pont Saint-Michel in four years, not since the Boche came in tanks, hanging their filthy flag with its ancient symbol, the swastika, across the Arc de Triomphe.

Usually, his people did not become involved in the ways of the Real Ones, except as his father did, to make money to survive. So many of faerie had moved to the city decades before. No one questioned strangeness in Paris. Even though it was a Catholic city in a Catholic country, certain behaviors were ignored.

Faerie who would have been hanged or shot or burned in the countryside were tolerated here. Many, like Solae's father, were more than tolerated.

They were loved.

And now they were gone. His father to a bullet in the middle of a piano medley. Storm troopers, drunk with power, insisted on hearing "Ein Prosit" and Solae's father, who hated the Boche with a passion that made Solae's seem tepid, refused.

His father had railed against the Boche from the moment they began their campaigns in the Real Years of the 1930s. Remember, he said to his wife and sons, the Germans are the ones who exposed us, told our histories as if they were fables for children, made us less than we are.

And that night, the night the Germans wanted to hear "Ein Prosit," his father spoke of his hatred. The Boche reminded Solae's father that France was theirs now.

France belongs to no man, Solae's father said, his meaning clearer to faerie than it was to the Real Ones in the room. On some level, France had magic in her soul, magic that had been purged from so many European countries long ago.

Soon, the Boche told him, we shall remake France in our own image.

"And you shall fail," Solae's father said, "just as you failed to hear 'Ein Prosit.'"

The words grew heated, and even Solae, who had been near the door, watching the lights of the city with

a craving he still did not understand, turned toward the smoky interior of his father's club. Voices rose, shouting in German and French, about country, patriotism, and the emptiness of the German soul.

Then finally the shot, silencing everyone, including the piano player, who had been playing American boogie-woogie as if it could cover the ugliness in the room.

The smoke seemed to clear. Solae's father stood for the longest time, before collapsing in on himself. The Germans kicked him to see if he was still alive, and, when he did not move, they stood. In a loud voice, the German who shot Solae's father ordered the piano player to play "Ein Prosit," and this time, the piano player did.

Solae had hurried through the crowd to retrieve his father's body. His mother did the same, running from her position behind the wings.

But they both arrived too late. His father vanished into the floorboards, his soul stolen by the stone he landed on, his essence gone as if it had never been

Solae's mother had not been the same since. Solae had taken her and his brother away from that place, which the piano player took over and allowed to become a Vichy stronghold. Solae only hoped that the French who collaborated with the Boche were being haunted by the vengeful ghost of his father and were suffering hideous torment because of it.

That was early in the Occupation, before the Germans began to understand Paris. The so-called decadence of Paris—the homosexuals, the mixed-race couples, the transvestites who performed at the very best clubs, not to mention the Jews, who corrupted (in the opinion of the Boche) every city they touched—disgusted and fascinated the German soldiers and bureaucrats who had invaded the city.

When the Boche discovered that Paris was a haven for yet another group—a group the Germans had slaughtered centuries ago—they were merciless. Faerie were murdered on the street, and no one came to their defense. For faerie were not French; nor were they even human. They were something Other, and as food became scarce, they became little more than mongrel dogs to those who competed with them for every scrap.

Still, faerie were reluctant to leave Paris. They could not go to England, where they had been slaughtered centuries before the Germans came after them, and they could not afford the long trips to America—back in the days before the Americans became part of the war.

The countryside held the same dangers as the city, more so because there were fewer faerie and more Boche, and parts of France had become more German than others.

Faerie finally found themselves relegated to the land no one else wanted, the place no one else would think of as a refuge: the vast tombs beneath the city—the catacombs.

That was where Solae slipped now. He went onto the side street through a small, private doorway that faerie kept locked. The Boche thought the doorway led to the courtyard for the apartments above and never investigated.

Although the doorway did lead to a courtyard, beyond the courtyard was a street, a tiny street that the Boche car would never fit on. Part of the ancient city, the street meandered for less than a mile before reaching another boulevard through another doorway.

But underneath the street ran a main section of the catacombs. Solae had discovered the entrance one

afternoon when he had explored. Then he had shown it to the elders, and they had used their combined powers to mask the entrance as a whitewashed wall.

Solae touched that wall now. His fingers found the latch that released the stone door, and it swung open, echoing in the emptiness.

He hated the catacombs. They were dark and dank, and they reeked of death. The Real Ones could not smell it, although they did not care for the catacombs either. But the Real Ones had lost their sense of the Beyond, and they did not realize that when their ancestors emptied Paris's graveyards and stacked the bones in the sewers beneath the city, they had stacked the power of death there as well.

Each time Solae descended into the darkness, he felt like he lost a part of himself. He had become convinced that his thinness was not due to his lack of meals but to the pieces of himself taken by the darkness that lived below.

Still, he disappeared behind the stone door. As it closed behind him, he raised his right hand, pressed his thumb and forefinger together, and created a light.

The ability to create light was his only awe-inspiring power. A worthless power, his father used to say. But Solae did not think it worthless any longer, and he often wished that his father still lived so that Solae could prove how valuable the light had become.

Solae held his hand out before him. The light he formed was small—he didn't want to burn himself out this early in the day—and shaped like a flame. Only it did not flicker. The light burned steadily like an electric current, providing constant illumination for his journey ahead.

That was the only way he could tolerate heading into the catacombs. Flickering light would have terrified him, caused him to see ghosts in the shadows where there were none.

The Boche had come below many times, but had found no one. Only rats. For the Boche, for all of their posturing, were the most superstitious race in Europe—and the most terrified of death. They avoided the catacombs as much as possible.

The steps leading down had been carved centuries before by unknown hands, and hollowed by thousands of feet. In the time that Solae had spent below, he wondered at who had moved the bones of the ancient dead. What kind of man would carry skeletons from their natural resting places to the depths below?

The bones were not just placed in a pile. They were stacked neatly in patterns, and the patterns varied. In some places, the skulls formed a congregation of a thousand empty eyes, staring into the passageway. In others, the skulls were the center of a skull-and-crossbones motif.

Solae had found other places where the long bones of the legs and arms formed crosses or stars or other patterns that had existed since the beginning of time. In the middle of one particularly dark night, he had even found a group of bones that formed swastikas—and he had to remind himself that the symbol had been around long before the Boche took it for their own.

The catacombs were deep underground, and he always knew he drew close when water from the ceiling began to fall like rain. He worried that one day, the roof would collapse under the weight of the water above, but others, older and wiser than he, swore that would not happen.

Still, in many places below, the stone floor was wet, and the ceiling even wetter. He had to go through such a place to find his family, huddled in their little sepulchre deep within the labyrinth.

At first, Solae's mother had balked at staying in such a place. Clearly the priests who had designed this place had set up many areas for worship. There were long communion tables with all of the Christian symbols carved into the sides. There were quotes carved from the Real One's Holy Book upon the ceiling. There was an altar in the center, and even a baptismal font that collected ceiling rain.

Solae had to sleep on the communion table one night alone before his mother believed that one of these abandoned churches would be safe for faerie. And even now, she still had her doubts, occasionally waking in the middle of the night screaming that the crossbones on the wall were coming for her, to put her down like the dog the Christians believed she was.

She was nothing like the woman who bore him, nothing like the glamorous creature who performed every midnight on his father's stage. Then her alto voice had mesmerized the crowd, and her dark eyes had shone with magic unused. She had become the toast of their arrondissement, the center of faerie life in Paris—and beloved among the Real Ones themselves.

Or so it had seemed.

When she had gone to the Real Ones after Solae's father's death, they had slammed their doors as if they did not know her. Solae's brother Noene suggested this was because they had not recognized her; to them she was a musical beauty in a smoke-filled room, not a woman with haunted eyes who needed refuge.

Solae brought the bread, only to find his mother sitting on the priest's chair, carved in marble and pushed against the stone wall—the only wall without bones protruding from it.

Noene was there with a sausage he had stolen, and together they made a feast. The three of them hadn't eaten that well in days.

After they finished, his mother looked at Solae. For a moment, he thought she would ask him how he had gotten the bread—how he had survived in the city above.

But she hadn't ever asked him about that. In fact, she did not speak of the city, as if it had ceased to exist. She hadn't been above ground for four years. It had affected not just her manner, but her sight. Solae had to douse his personal light and find candles for the lamps below. She preferred the gloom, claiming that anything brighter made her eyes hurt.

"They've returned," his mother said.

Solae started. The Boche had come into this sanctuary more than once. The last time, Solae had been asleep on the communion table when he heard the clatter of boots against stone. He had doused the candles and climbed into the space between the skulls and the ceiling—a space barely a foot in width.

He had lain there, his nose pressed against the damp, the bones of the dead digging into his back, as the Boche peered into the chamber.

"I cannot believe someone would hide here," one of them said in their hideous tongue. "I would die first."

And then they had moved on, boots clanking with military precision, the click-clicks marking the time it took the Boche to leave Solae behind.

"Where did you hide?" Solae asked, hoping that his frail mother did not have to lie on bones as he had.

"Not the Germans," Noene said. "The Communists."

Solae suppressed his sigh of relief. The Communists were French, and they were not as frightening as his family made them sound. The Communists were part of the Resistance, the French who opposed the collaborationists who had taken the center of French government from Paris and moved it to Vichy to hide the fact that the Germans really controlled all that they did.

Vichy had become a dirtier word than Communist, and collaborationist the dirtiest word of all.

"You heard them?" Solae asked, pretending a concern he did not feel.

"They are plotting violence," his mother said, as if the violence she spoke of was directed at her.

"They say the Americans have landed in Normandy." Noene could not hide his enthusiasm. "They worry that De Gaulle will come here and destroy them."

That was not the real worry of the Communists. Solae knew more about them than he told his family. He had found the Communist enclave long ago, and during the dark nights, had snuck through the bones to find the enclave, listening to the speeches and the pep talks and the news.

It was from them that Solae had picked up the word Boche, which suited the Germans much more than any other word had. He did not want to speak of them with respect. He needed a word that was profane for what they had done to his city, his family, his home.

The Communists had taken to hiding in the sewers more than the catacombs, and planning small attacks against Germans. They disarmed the Vichy police, they occasionally killed a storm trooper who found himself alone, and they sabotaged shipments of French goods back to Germany.

The Communists were only a small part of the Resistance, but they were hated by their own people, and feared, for when the Germans were defeated and Vichy gone, the Free French believed the Communists would rise up and take over the government—obligating the French to Stalin and the Soviet Union the way Vichy obligated France to Hitler.

But Solae did not share that fear. The Communists called themselves freedom fighters, and they were fierce advocates for France.

He admired all they did. Sometimes he sat in the shadows and listened as they made their plans. He wished he could help them, but he could not. If someone died—even accidentally—because of his involvement, he would lose what little magic he had.

For that was why faerie were so easily defeated throughout Europe. Their powers were the powers of life, lost when touched with death. Faerie resisted coming into the catacombs for that very reason—even ancient death disturbed them.

It took a courageous few to live below, test their powers, and report to the others before the entire community found the shelter and safety they needed.

Solae wished he could help the Communists. He did what he could. He was what some called a passive member of the Resistance—he taunted the Boche, stole from them or their Vichy compatriots, and destroyed their writings wherever he found them. Sometimes he siphoned precious gas from their cars, but carefully, never allowing his powers of light to touch the liquid for fear of a fire.

He did what he could, but it was very little.

"Aren't you worried by this?" Noene asked. "They will start a war above us."

"There is a war above us," Solae said.

"But not like the countryside," Noene said. "Paris still stands."

For the moment. But Solae did not say that. Instead, he said, "They say De Gaulle will be here by the first of September, and I believe it. Many of the Germans who are not soldiers have stolen what they can from the city and fled."

"What will happen to us?" his mother asked. "If Communists find us, they are even more ruthless than the Germans."

She was thinking of the Russian communists. She had lost family in St. Petersburg, which the communists had then renamed. Sometimes, she said lately, her entire life had been about loss.

"We'll be fine," Solae said. But he did not believe that, for the Germans were ruthless. He had seen too much to believe they would let Paris go so easily.

His thoughts made him restless. He stood, unable to stay in the darkness much longer.

"It's still daylight above," he said. "I'll see if I can find us anything else before night falls."

He did not wait for his mother's answer. Instead, he fled through the tunnels and went up to the light.

He heard the sound before he even left the stairway—gunfire. The heat had grown worse, a physical presence that made the gunfire seem even more ominous. As he stepped through the doorway, this one leading to a different part of the city, he saw German tanks in the street.

Four of them, large as houses. The tanks made Solae shudder. He pressed himself against the wall, uncertain what to do. He did not know if he had been seen, if his presence would lead others to the catacombs.

The gunfire came from the Hôtel de Ville, the city hall. Men—boys, really—leaned out of windows and shot at the tanks with revolvers.

The tanks swiveled, aiming their guns at the Hôtel de Ville. The building itself seemed to shudder from their might. Solae winced, feeling helpless.

He had heard that the Germans would destroy the city before they allowed the French to retake it, but he had not believed it. Paris was, according the BBC, the only intact city left in Europe. It had artifacts and treasures that everyone—not just the French—could enjoy.

It was his home.

A young woman, standing near his hiding place, screamed at the Boche. Solae couldn't make out the words—something about leaving her city in peace—then she grabbed a bottle from the ground beside her and ran for the street.

His heart pounded. He stepped forward to stop her—there was nothing she could do against tanks—but she kept screaming, "Filthy Boche! You do not belong here! Filthy Boche!"

Solae could not reach her.

She got to the side of the tank, smashed her bottle against its open turret, and somehow flames exploded

along the metal. Solae had heard about such weapons—simple combinations of chemicals that he did not understand.

He heard a scream from inside, saw a German soldier rise, slapping himself, trying to put out the fire his clothing had become.

The girl grinned and ran back toward Solae, her steps almost a dance. For a moment, he remembered the beauty his father conferred upon the nonbeautiful—a touch of glamour, given by a little bit of magic.

The girl had that magic, without Solae's father's help. She was not faerie, and yet she glowed with her victory.

Her gaze met Solae's, and he thought he had never seen anything so lovely in his entire life.

And then a shot rang out.

A single shot, even though he knew it could not have been the only one, even though he knew others were firing.

But it was as if he were with the girl, as if he were linked to her by her moment of victory. He saw the surprise fill her eyes, the blood spatter out of her mouth, her look of triumph turn to horror—

And then to nothing.

She stumbled, collapsed, and fell forward, like his father had done. Like so many others had done.

Solae did not stop to think. He ran into the street, to the girl, as people around him shouted, demanding that he take cover. The tanks kept shelling the Hôtel de Ville and, in one heart-stopping moment, he feared the building would tumble around him.

He reached her and crouched, knowing from her open and glazed eyes that she was gone. But he could not leave her there. Even if the stone would not absorb her soul the way it had absorbed his father's, Solae could not abandon her on the street, to be run over by the Boche, to be treated as one more rag in a city littered with them.

He slipped his hands under her arms and lifted her. Bullets pinged off the cobblestones as someone shot at him—maybe even the freedom fighters above, missing their German targets.

His heart was pounding, the girl's blood warm on his skin. She had had her moment against the Boche, her victory, and the Boche had stolen it from her, as they had stolen everything else—her home, her life, her world.

Solae's world.

He carried her to the sidewalk, where one of the old women wailed in grief. Then he set the girl's body, and knew what he had to do.

The Boche were the most superstitious creatures in Europe.

Solae turned to face them.

The boys still fired from the windows above. Three of the tanks still fired at the Hôtel de Ville. The fourth, its crew disabled or dead thanks to the girl, huddled like a wounded animal in the middle of the street.

Solae formed a fist and held it high, in mockery of the German salute.

" Achtung !" he shouted, his German flawless from years of listening to the vile tongue.

No one looked at him. No one seemed to see him.

He used his own glamour, his ability to brighten a room.

" Achtung !" he shouted again, and this time, every German within hearing range looked.

Solae squinted slightly, concentrating. He imagined his entire fist engulfed in flame—and suddenly it was. Cool flame which did not consume, but which burned beautifully in the bright August sunlight.

The shooting from the windows stopped.

He let the fire slide down his arm and engulf his entire body. The street looked wavy through the flame, as if he were viewing everything from a heat mirage.

" Vive la France !" he shouted.

Then he made the fire wink out.

The Germans stared at him for the longest time. The moment seemed to stretch forever.

Solae smiled at them.

" Vive la France !" he repeated, and put his hands on his hips, obviously unharmed by the fire that had surrounded him a moment before.

He took a step forward, and the German closest to him screamed. So did another, and another. They scrambled into their tanks, down the turrets, closing the hatches.

Solae remained on the street, watching them. The Germans drove their tanks away from him, their terror palpable in the thick August heat.

Dust rose around him. He did not feel the girl's sense of victory. All he had done was a trick, nothing monumental, nothing worth a life.

But the boys in the windows above started to cheer. And so did the people on the street. They were looking at him, and cheering, and he could not take it.

He had done nothing. He was nothing. Just a small man with a small talent, and a little bit of luck.

He could not save the girl from death. He could not prevent death. And he had used his one talent the only way he knew how.

The cheering continued, and he looked away. The girl's corpse remained on the sidewalk, the old woman bent over her, rocking, as if the movement would make the girl return.

Nothing would make her return. Nor would Solae's father return, or their life, or his mother's sanity. Nothing would be the same again, no matter when the Allies came.

All these years, he had deluded himself, hiding among the dead, believing that all he had to do was wait, and life would return to normal. The humans would stop their craziness, the war would fade, and everything would return.

But it was not just a human craziness. His father had been right: there were humans to ally with, and humans to fight. His father would have fought—he had fought, in his own turf, over his own command: music.

But Solae had not. He had not used his powers at all.

Until now.

All these years, he could have fought in a slightly larger way, and he had not.

He had not.

While others died.

He had chosen to fade away instead of bringing light. He had chosen to live among the dead instead of fight beside the living.

But he would not make that choice again.

He could bring light to darkness, and vanish seemingly without a trace.

The Resistance was chasing the Boche from Paris, and Solae would help as best he could. And when he was done here, he would help liberate all of France, which was the world he cared about.

He finally knew how to do it, without losing his powers, without betraying his people.

He would haunt the Boche. He would bring light to the darkest corners of their souls, exposing them to all they had done.

He would destroy the Boche, taking all they feared and turning it against them, one by one.

One superstitious mind at a time.
