

## CHAPTER TWO

*O God of Music, strengthen our souls we pray...*

The service had been long, but it was at last coming to an end.

As the final hymn swelled on the dusty air, Allegra Marques allowed her gaze to stray around the familiar contours of the cathedral. The fine vaulted ceiling, the elaborately carved wooden screens, the statues of the Saints and Masters ranged around the walls, the golden pipes of the organ, each held her attention for a moment before it wandered on. She should be focussing on her singing, giving that ultimate devotional act all the concentration it fully deserved, but it was all so familiar, so ordinary, so...

*...so dull.*

Allegra was convinced there must be more than this.

Saint Ludwig, wild-haired and beetle-browed, glared down at her from one side of the altar. Saint Peter, on the other, gazed beatifically over the heads of the congregation. Martyrs both, one to deafness, one to melancholy, they had died for their music. Allegra, at nineteen, had not as yet found anything in music worth dying for. She wondered if she ever would.

The hymn ended, and the organ broke into a voluntary. Around her, Walter, Anna, Frederica and Joachim got to their feet and Allegra hastily followed suit. The Resident Conductor and his attendants were processing down the aisle, and behind them the people in the front pews were gathering up their belongings and starting to file out of the pews. Allegra knew Sir Daniel would linger on the steps, talking, shaking hands, well-wishing. She dawdled purposefully while her fellow-students edged past her and left the cathedral, pretending that it was the ambience of the huge old building that had arrested her.

She emerged, last of all, to find the Resident Conductor already walking over to his gleaming brown and gold steam landau. His driver was sitting on the box, her breath clouding in the chilly air.

"Excuse me, Conductor," Allegra called, greatly daring.

The old man turned his grizzled head and registered her presence, and, after a moment, her name.

“Allegra!” he said, and added something under his breath that might possibly have been “again.” He took her hand and kissed it. “How nice to see you. What can I do for you, child?”

Allegra took a deep breath. This was going to take careful handling.

“Why does the hymn not have a verse for the Composers, Conductor?”

He raised his eyebrows. He had been expecting something else. “Well,” he said after a moment, “that is an...interesting question. The short and simple answer is that at the time the verses were written there were no Composers. No living ones, that is. You remember your history lessons, I am sure, Allegra.”

Allegra nodded. “Of course, Conductor. It was thought for a long time that there could be no new music, that it was sacrilege even to think about the notion. But that was years ago. The College of Composers stands equal to all the others now. Surely a verse could have been added.”

The Resident Conductor laughed, but his eyes were troubled. “My dear child, the hymn is long enough as it is, surely. Come now, this is not what you stayed behind in a draughty church to ask me, is it now?”

Allegra shook her head, and took the plunge. “Conductor, please may I test for the Principals again?”

“Again, Allegra?” Sir Daniel looked pained. “You have tried three times already. You are a very good Second Cellist. Andrei is a very good Principal. We really do not need another.”

“But Andrei,” Allegra began, hesitated and drove on regardless, “Andrei will be a Conductor some day—”

Even as she spoke she saw that it had been a mistake. Sir Daniel’s eyes narrowed and his brows darkened.

“If Andrei Ostrowski takes the baton,” he said, “he will have to pry it from my cold, dead fingers. And by that time—for I have no intention of dying just yet—you will

have graduated as the fine Second Cellist that you are and have put aside these foolish fantasies. And may I say that I think less of young Herr Ostrowski that he should stoop to using you as his catspaw.”

Allegra’s cheeks flamed. “Indeed I am nobody’s catspaw,” she cried indignantly, “and as for thinking less of people—” She stopped, aware of the abyss before her; but Sir Daniel held up one hand. He looked genuinely penitent.

“Forgive me,” he said. “It was an unworthy suggestion. Allegra, my dear, you are in too much of a hurry. Your father, I know, was a Principal Oboist and an ornament to our Orchestra for many years, and he achieved that rank straight from his College. Not all of us are so gifted, child. You may well, with time and experience, attain promotion to Principalship later—indeed, some day you may even become a Soloist, it has been known. But not yet, my dear. All your tutors agree. You are—at present—a good Second, and that is no bad thing. Our Orchestras would be very difficult to run with only Principal Players. Do you not see that?”

Allegra, still sickened by the horrible offence she had just barely avoided, nodded dully. “I must be patient,” she said.

“That is the way.” Sir Daniel smiled. “There is nothing wrong with healthy ambition, Allegra, but it must be tempered. And now, if you will excuse me, this wind is seeping into my bones and I must make my way home before the snow flies. Just intonation to you, child.”

“Equal temperament, Conductor,” Allegra answered formally, and watched as the old man climbed into the steam landau and pulled the collapsible cover up over himself. The driver engaged the gears, and with a puff of smoke from the rear-mounted funnel the vehicle got sedately under way. Allegra watched it turn on to the road and puff away.

As she walked back to the College, through a thin drizzle that would probably turn into snow before the night was out, her mood was sombre. It was true that Andrei had not asked her to approach Sir Daniel; indeed, he had urged her not to do so. It was also true that she *was* a good Second Cellist, and that the thought of taking on the duties of a Principal daunted her more than somewhat.

But there was her mother to consider. The small income she earned as a weaver barely covered her keep, out there in that cold and draughty cottage beyond the walls; and the Orchestra had already reduced the rent as much as it was going to. The difference between the stipend of a Second Cellist and that of a Principal would, after she graduated, mean the difference between her mother struggling to make it through another winter alone and the chance for her to live in reasonable comfort with Allegra in the town proper.

If only...

What was it that the Resident Conductor so disliked about Andrei anyway? He was a good Principal Cellist, that much was true; but he could be so much more. He had the musical knowledge, the presence and the ability to be just as good a Conductor, if not even a better. He was a little wild and prone to unseemly pranks, but surely that was no reason for such animosity.

Allegra sighed, and nodded absently to a lamplighter who was just climbing down her ladder. For all she knew, it could be something that went back generations, a never-resolved dispute between Sir Daniel's grandfather and Andrei's great-grandfather. Orchestras were hotbeds of such petty grudges. The artistic temperament, she thought, so very rarely equal, whatever people said.

Around her, steam and clockwork vehicles chugged and clattered, mingling with horse-drawn carts and carriages and the occasional rider. Most of them would be Audience, with a sprinkling of Artisans, coming home from their places of work, looking forward to the evening meal and a quiet night. The Orchestra would not be playing this evening, but Allegra knew that various quartets and chamber ensembles would be setting up in the smaller venues that encircled the Grand Hall. Attendance at these events was not mandatory, even for students like her, though Frederica and a few other zealots made a point of going whenever they could; some new works by members of the College of Composers would be receiving their première performances, and Frederica was keen to keep up with new music.

The trouble was, Allegra thought moodily, there *was* no new music.

Oh, there were new Compositions, carefully vetted by the Examining Board to make

sure they conformed to required standards. A sonata in the style of St. Wolfgang, a string quartet in the style of St. Ludwig, perhaps a suite of dances in the style of St. Antonin or (daring!) St. Sergei of Krasne. Always in the style of one of the Saints. Never in the style of oneself. She had heard of one boy who ventured to Compose a piano concerto in which he deftly blended the styles of Sts. Georg, Edvard, Felix and Sergei of Novgorod. The manuscript had been ceremoniously burned and the boy banished from the Orchestra for “dilettantism and frivolity.” He had never been seen again.

If Allegra were ever to feel the urge to write music, she would want to write it from her heart, not from style books and half-digested tricks of technique. She would want to pour out notes on to the paper as she was sure the Saints themselves had done, tapping deep wellsprings within herself.

And Andrei, she was sure, felt the same.

Could that be it? Could he have made some injudicious remark on the subject, that, in the manner of all such ill-omened utterances, had winged its way to the august ear of Sir Daniel? Was Andrei suspected of “dilettantism and frivolity”?

She stopped suddenly, looked about her and almost swore. Oblivious to her surroundings, she had walked right past the College gates and now found herself in a part of town she had never visited before. She peered up at a street sign through the thickening drizzle, and just made it out in the wavering gas light: Bjoerlingsstrasse. The Singers’ Quarter.

Well, presumably she had walked in a straight line, or thereabouts, and retracing her steps would bring her back to familiar territory. She turned and set off again, this time taking care to note her surroundings, the names of shops whose leaded, bottle-glazed windows were darkening one by one as they closed for the evening, the occasional church or other public building. From upstairs windows at odd intervals came the sound of vocal exercises.

Allegra suddenly found herself confronted by a high wall, topped with spikes, and with a very locked-looking double gate in it.

*That couldn't have been there before.*

A moment's casting about revealed a narrow alley that ran between whatever was enclosed by the high wall and the adjacent building. She must have unconsciously veered off her straight line when she emerged from it. The alley was in almost total darkness now, and Allegra hesitated. A growl from her stomach decided her; if she was too late back for dinner in Hall, she would go hungry all night.

She plunged into the alley, and almost immediately tripped over something which groaned.

Allegra, completely off balance, floundered two more paces, barked the knuckles of one hand on one wall of the alley, bruised the base of her other thumb on the other, and narrowly avoided measuring her length on the slimy, waste-strewn cobbles. She leaned against the damp wall, breathing hard, waiting for things to stop spinning.

Whatever she had tripped over groaned again.

She was tempted just to forget it and go on. The man was probably drunk, and might only be pretending pain to lure her close before attacking her. Such things happened. Something got in her way, though, and it took her a moment to recognise it as her conscience, usually so unobtrusive and self-effacing a part of her mental make-up as hardly to seem to be there at all. Now it asserted itself, and unwillingly she edged closer to the huddled shape now dimly visible to her dark-adapted eyes.

"Are you all right?" she said tentatively. "Should I go and get some help?"

The shape flung out a tentacle, which resolved itself into a hand, and uttered another inarticulate groan. Allegra halted in the act of turning away, and went down on her haunches so as to be level with its head. She saw, etched on the shadows of the alley in tones scarcely less dark, the face of a man. Young, she thought; not unhandsome, she imagined; contorted in pain, she knew beyond question. The man drew a harsh breath, then another, and spoke in a rasping, fraught whisper.

"Tell Friedrich..." He tried to move himself, and coughed. "Saint Richard's day...cancel performance. Hundreds...hundreds will die. Must...stop..." He coughed again, drew another breath that ended in a sob. "Music must be free," he croaked, and then a torrent of black liquid gushed from his mouth, his eyes widened and froze, and the breathing stopped altogether.

Allegra pressed both hands against her mouth, trying to hold back the unforgivable thing that was pushing up from her stomach. She rose to her feet, her eyes still fixed helplessly on the frozen eyes of the dead man. She backed away, coming up hard against the opposite wall, and almost lost it then; turning at last away from that blank, accusing stare, she stumbled to the mouth of the alley, thought about it for a moment, gave up the unequal struggle, and screamed.

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The gendarmes were very nice to her. They wrapped her in a blanket, sat her on the running-board of their steam car, and even gave her a cup of very hot and rather too sweet tea. Allegra tried not to look over at the alley, where a doctor was examining the dead man. Iconostat lights flashed, and a uniformed man with a sketchbook stood by and dutifully captured the scene, just in case this new-fangled technology should fail to work.

“Yes,” she said for the seventh or eighth time. “I lost my way, and I was trying to retrace my steps when I—I fell over him.”

“But he wasn’t there when you came through the first time, Fräulein?”

“No.” Allegra was definite. “I would have noticed. I would have fallen over him then too, and that would without doubt have recalled me to myself.”

“And you don’t know him, you said?”

“He is a complete stranger to me.” Allegra bit her lip. “I should say that he was.”

The sergeant of gendarmes nodded. “Now...was he dead when you, er, encountered him?”

*Tell Friedrich...Saint Richard’s day...hundreds...hundreds will die...*

“Yes,” Allegra said. “He was quite dead when I fell over him.”

“I see.” The sergeant sounded disappointed. “Well, Fräulein, I’ll see if I can get someone to run you back to your Hall. You’ll have missed dinner with all this, so we’ll see if we can’t do something about that as well.” He straightened up. “Oh, and I wouldn’t waste any tears on our friend over there. He was a member of a known gang of blasphemers and malcontents. It would have been useful if he had said anything to

you, anything that might enable us to identify..." His voice tailed off as he met Allegra's steady grey gaze. "Oh well. Can't be helped. Thank you for your assistance, Fräulein. One of my lads will be along shortly to take you home."

Allegra summoned up a sort of smile and thanked the sergeant in turn. Cradling the still-warm mug between her hands, she sipped the tea and thought.

The man had been killed, she knew; stabbed, or shot, exactly where he had lain, in the time between her, Allegra's, first engrossed transit of the alley and her over-hasty return. He had presumably been killed to prevent him from delivering the message he had entrusted to her. Therefore, if those who had killed him were to learn that she now knew it...

A snowflake landed in her tea and melted. She looked up. More were descending from the dense cloud above. She shivered.

"Fräulein Marques?" A young constable was standing before her. "I'm to drive you back to your Hall. If you'd like to get in?"

Allegra looked around for somewhere to put her mug. The constable took it, tipped the dregs out on the ground and stood back. She got to her feet, he opened the door and she climbed inside the car. The interior was warm and dry, with a not unpleasant masculine smell. The constable got in on the other side and set the empty mug on the dashboard.

"Will the sergeant not be requiring..." she began.

"Bless you, Fräulein, he'll be here all night. Supervising the search, questioning the people who live round about. I'll be back here in plenty of time."

The sergeant set the car in motion, and Allegra leaned back against the upholstery. It was not her first time in a car, but certainly it had been quite a while. Neither the life of a student, nor that of a poor weaver's daughter, ran to such luxury.

She could not tell anyone what the dying man had told her. Except Friedrich, if she could find out who Friedrich was. He must be someone with authority over performances somewhere in this town, possibly even at the Grand Hall. Hundreds, the man had said. Hundreds would die.

St. Richard's day was about six months away—assuming he'd meant St. Richard of Bayreuth, which was most likely. She had six months.

The car stopped at a street corner where a man was selling hot currywurst in long bread rolls. The constable bought two and handed Allegra one, and she ate gratefully as he drove on.

Six months. It seemed like a great deal of time, but Allegra, after three years of examinations, knew that for the illusion it was. Unless she began now, before she knew it St. Richard's day would be upon her, and it would be too late.

But where to begin? And how, when she had so much to do? It would be Christmas soon, the festival of the old religion that was still sacred to the God of Music because so many great Compositions had been created to honour it, and there would be the big service in the cathedral, and then she would have to go and visit her mother, and then...

"Here you are, Fräulein," the constable said, and hopped out to open the door for her. Allegra alighted, and saw through thickening snow the familiar gates of Paganini Hall. She thanked the constable politely.

"No trouble, Fräulein," the constable said, proffering a card. "Sergeant told me give you this, Fräulein. If you think of anything—anything at all—that might help with the enquiry, call on him. If he's not there, the duty sergeant will take a message."

*And then stab me in a dark alley,* Allegra thought. *No thank you.* It could be anyone. The killer could have been working for the gendarmes himself. She could trust nobody.

"Thank you, constable," she said again, taking the card. "Good night."

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The dining hall was dark and silent, and Allegra was grateful for the currywurst. She hoped the constable's wasn't going to be too cold when he finally got to eat it. She tiptoed up the stairs to the third landing, found the door of the room she shared, and eased it open.

"And what time of night," said a cold voice, "do you call this?"

Even as Allegra realised that she didn't actually know what time it was, Frederica abandoned the pose and leaped from the bed to embrace her. The two girls were good friends, both Second Cellists. If Allegra had one doubt about trying for a Principal's chair, it was that she would lose Frederica as a friend. That, and a nagging feeling that Frederica was actually the better player of the two.

She told the story, again leaving out the dying man's last words, and Frederica stared and gasped and moaned at all the right places. The room was warm, a banked fire glowing in the grate, and gradually, as Allegra told it, the horror that had inhabited the experience ebbed away. She was safe, she was home, she was warm, her belly was full, and moment by moment it was growing harder to recall the cold terror that had gripped her when the unknown man had died, if not actually in her arms, at least under her eyes. She resisted the temptation to embroider or extenuate, though, and her account was quite honest, though, as has been said, only up to a point.

"I would have been terrified," Frederica said. "Thank God you're safe."

"I *was* terrified," Allegra retorted. "I'm no kind of hero, Flicka. I wanted to run. I wanted to run as far and as fast as I could. Only I didn't know where I was." That was only half true.

"You were brave," Frederica insisted. "He might have been anyone...a drunk, a rapist, a presser...or even one of those awful people who want to make Godless music."

*Music must be free.*

And there it was, the real reason why Allegra had told nobody that the man had spoken to her. There were people in the world who believed that the church's hold on music was a stranglehold, that there were other ways of making music besides emulating the Saints and Masters. They wanted to experiment, to find new styles, new harmonies, new rhythms...to carry on the work of the Apostates like Alban the Terrible and Karlheinz the Mad, whose works were anathematised and kept under lock and key in the libraries...even to probe the deadly secrets of what was only ever referred to in hushed tones as the Devil's Music.

And Allegra rather thought she might be one of them.

But she could never tell even Frederica that, certainly never tell her mother or any of

her teachers. That would be the end of everything, her career, her friendships, her family. She would be banished from every Orchestra in the world, like the boy who had Composed in his own style, forced to wander the roads and make her own way with hard labour, forbidden to sing or play any Instrument on pain of death.

So she said, trying to sound casual, "Well, he wasn't. He was just a dead man. And it was very horrible, but it's over now, and I'm very tired."

"Of course you are," Frederica hastened to agree. "We should both be in bed. Busy day tomorrow."

All the days were busy, Allegra thought gloomily as she undressed behind her screen. Lessons, practices, prayers, revising for the ever-impending examinations, there was no end to it. Christmas always meant more to do too. And in among it all she had to find a man she'd never heard of and pass on a message she didn't understand from a stranger who had almost certainly been killed to prevent it being passed on. Otherwise hundreds would die.

Going over to the Devil's Music was starting to seem like the easier option.

Allegra Marques drifted into uneasy sleep wishing heartily that she'd never bothered developing a conscience.

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Sir Daniel Richter, the Resident Conductor of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, was praying by candlelight, kneeling in his nightshirt on the bare boards of his spartan bedchamber.

"O God of Music," he prayed silently, "grant to all whom I serve just intonation and equal temperament. May their souls dwell in harmony on this earth, that they may be taken up at the last into that greater Harmony that only You can Compose. Open their hearts, that they may hear your Melody and know it for Truth. Govern, O Lord, the rhythms of their lives, that they may keep Your time, and let the cadences of this world not lead them into Discord. This I ask in Your Holy Name. Amen."

He believed utterly in what he was doing. The God of Music did not, of course, answer; it was not His Way. Sir Daniel would have been first shocked, and then

suspicious, if he had perceived anything in the nature of a response. It was clear to the meanest intellect, he thought, as he laboriously got up off his knees and checked them for splinters, that the God of Music was not some immense, ethereal humanoid being living somewhere in the sky. This did not make Him any less real. There was music; therefore there was a God. How else could beings as naturally discordant and chaotic as those he saw around him have ever arrived at any such sublime expression of Divine beauty?

His talk with young Fräulein Marques had troubled him. Many things troubled him, of course, but Allegra had been the most recent. He detected in her signs of discontent, quite distinct from her doomed aspiration to Principalship, which he could well understand even as he knew it futile. She had a questioning mind, which was of course a great gift, but could so easily run wild and lead her into Discord, or even Atonality.

He wondered, not for the first time, if she might be better off training for the Conductorhood. She would learn more then, and her mind might find adequate sustenance in studying the banned works of the Apostates, to which only Conductors were allowed access. Or St. Olivier, now...

St. Olivier was a personal hobby-horse of Sir Daniel's. Declared Apostate no less than five times, reinstated as many, he was under examination yet again this year to determine whether he should or should not be cast into the outer darkness once more. Sir Daniel liked his works, though the Board's constant vacillation meant that few Conductors had the nerve to put them on even when it was possible, and was his most vocal advocate on the Examining Board, frequently comparing him to St. Igor, whose status had never been in doubt.

It was a delicate matter, to be sure, determining which of the later Saints had strayed too close to Apostasy, which of their works might be inclined to seduce the unwary into Discordant thinking. Even the later Compositions of St. Ludwig himself...

Sir Daniel halted that train of thought quickly. If he were to start on that he'd never sleep.

The trouble was, he reflected as he sat on his bed, that the young took things far too

seriously, when they weren't taking them not seriously enough. Allegra, now...he meant Fräulein Marques...she was the too-serious type. She would worry and question and doubt and probably drive herself to nervous exhaustion. Whereas young Ostrowski...quite the reverse problem. He saw music as some sort of game. He was for ever challenging, confronting, trying (Sir Daniel presumed) to gain points. Only last week he had been caught improvising, in no recognisable style and without sanction, an entirely new cello line in St. Edward's Enigma Variations, and when called on it he had declared, utterly unrepentantly, that he was trying to discover the unknown underlying theme. If he were not such a very good Player...

Sir Daniel sighed, and lay down, pulling the sparse covers over him. It was hardly a question of whether Andrei Ostrowski would get into serious trouble, merely of when; but to invoke extreme penalties for what were, after all, still no more than minor misdemeanours would call his own judgment into question. He could hardly afford that, at his age, and with his own little store of secrets just waiting to be unearthed and pawed over by younger, keener minds.

Sleep was a long time coming to Sir Daniel Richter that night.

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Sitting up in his own bed in the men's wing of Paganini Hall, Andrei Ostrowski peered at the sheet of paper on his knees and nibbled the tip of his pen.

Across the room, his roommate Sviatoslav snored rhythmically. It was not the ideal accompaniment to creative thought, but there was no other time Andrei could do this. During the day he was under the constant surveillance of censorious eyes, and could only turn ideas over in his head. To write them down, to see how they worked and how they could be improved, he needed this time, this special, sacred hour of the night.

Had Andrei been more the questioning type, he might have asked himself what the point was of writing a cello concerto, in a style that owed nothing to the Saints or Masters, when nobody could ever see it, much less play it; but this thought never occurred to him. He had to write, so he wrote. Under the loose floorboard beneath his bed lay the manuscripts of a dozen string quartets, three overtures and half a

symphony. When it was finished, the concerto would join them. Sometimes Andrei pictured the cache being discovered, long after his death, and brought to the authorities. “Why,” the aged professors would cry in bewildered dismay, “surely we have sheltered some unnamed Saint under our roof and never known it. How could we have been so blind?”

If he was inclined to be honest with himself, Andrei tended to doubt the validity of this beatific vision. More likely the aged professors would shake their heads and tut over fudged harmonic transitions, spineless melodies, incoherent orchestration and several passages which did in fact owe more to various Saints than to Andrei’s own invention. Still, one has to start somewhere, and even the sketchbooks of St. Ludwig were full of false starts and discarded ideas.

Andrei Ostrowski was going to be a Composer. And not just any Composer, slavishly confining himself to the styles of those who had gone before, but an original Composer, setting a new style for others to emulate. He could—almost—hear it in his head; stark and uncompromising like St. Jean, yet warm and lush as St. Claude; quirky and surprising as St. Sergei of Krasne, yet firm and reassuring as St. Ralph. All this, and yet still, somehow, all his own.

Sviatoslav grunted, grumbled, and turned over, and Andrei quickly shoved the sheets under his pillow, dropped his pen into the inkwell on his nightstand, and feigned deep slumber till the regular snoring began again.

Should he tell Allegra?

The grey-eyed girl with the obstinately frizzy hair was as much of a friend as he had ever had. She already knew that he rebelled against the teachings of the church, that he longed for music to be free; he was almost sure she felt the same. She knew that he was given to pranks in rehearsal; sitting next to him, she could hardly avoid it. But what if she knew that he was already writing his own music, however dismal it looked when finally down on paper? What would she do then?

Andrei thought he knew. But he couldn’t be sure. He just...couldn’t be sure.

He yawned. He was getting sleepy. Best to leave it for tonight. He would put the papers under the loose floorboard in the morning. His last thought, before sleep

claimed him, was a vague curiosity as to why Allegra had not been at dinner that night. He would ask her in the morning.

Well satisfied with his night's work, Andrei dropped blissfully off to sleep.

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And in another quarter of the town called Vienna, a woman in a dark hooded cloak knocked a rapid tattoo, *da-da-da-dum dum da-da-dum*, on an unobtrusive door in a high stone wall topped with spikes. It opened, and, looking over her shoulder, she passed rapidly into the darkness within.

The unlit hall gave on a seedy, dimly-lit room in which a lean, hard-bitten man perched on the corner of a desk reading a newspaper. He looked up as the woman entered.

"All done?" he said shortly.

The woman nodded wearily. "How did it go with the gendarmes?"

"I was appropriately shocked and bewildered." The man grinned without humour.

"My compliments, by the way. I would not have expected you to do it right on my doorstep, as it were."

"That was why. It will divert suspicion." The woman pulled off her cloak, shook it to dislodge a few lingering snowflakes and threw it at an armchair. "And I can prove, should it be needful, that I was on the other side of town all evening, drinking with my good friends in the Artisans' Quarter."

"Well, then." The man seemed satisfied.

"There is one..." The woman searched for the appropriate word. "Complication," she said. "Potentially. A witness."

"To the killing?" Sharply.

"Not to the killing...but to the death." The woman was defensive. "Remember that I am not one of your professionals. My blow did not kill him straight away. A girl stumbled over the body...literally, in fact." She allowed herself a tight smile. "He may have spoken to her."

The man frowned. "She did not see you?"

"No. Nor did he. You and I are both safe. But we have to consider the possibility that the message...still exists."

"Who is she?"

"You are in a better position to find that out than I, surely." The woman sat down on top of her discarded cloak. "She was the one who summoned the gendarmes...well, screamed till they came. They will have a record of her name and address. From her age and clothing, though, I would guess a student."

"A student." The man frowned and rubbed his chin. "That will be difficult."

"Not unreasonably so." The woman's smile was as cold as his. "Students often go home to visit their families at this time of year. When she does not come back..." She shrugged. "Students sometimes change their minds about their calling in life."

"I hope it will be that simple," the man said. "We are committed now." He got off the desk, went to a sideboard and filled two glasses with dark wine from a dusty bottle. The woman took one and raised it.

"Music must be free," she said.

"Music must be free," the man echoed.

They laughed, and drained their glasses.