

Liberte? Fraternite? Egalite?

The howling wind whipped through him, and his meagre clothing shivered in the silvery sheet of lashing rain. Jean Luc cast his exhausted eyes around him. Peering through the blanket of darkness, he could see that he was standing in a lonely bleak street in a small suburb somewhere. He could be anywhere. Rouen? Marseilles? Rennes? Or was he in Paris? Yes, he was near Paris, he could remember that much. Staggering forward, Jean Luc lurched into the shadow of a gargantuan beast. He stood stock still, held vice-like in its concrete gaze. He edged closer, drawn by the stony building leering drunkenly before him. He paused, a searing pain stabbing through his laboured breath. He knew that he had to carry on. The dingy expanse of road swayed before him. A sudden flash of lightning struck the most sensitive part of Jean Luc's eyes and rendered him momentarily blind. He stumbled forward like a lost orphan reaching out, terrified, for its mother. Jean Luc reached up and felt the disgusting ooze of congealing blood, the sticky crimson slime smearing through his filthy fingers. Another flash of lightning, closer this time, illuminated his dormant memory and a series of horrifying snap-shots flickered uncontrollably against his bruised eyelids: the pain and burden of his knowledge returning ten-fold. A terrific crash of thunder split the night air and the dull, pulsating pain in his forehead grew to an unbearable climax until he could no longer think, feel, breathe, and he collapsed to the ground in a crumpled heap.

Fr. Bretodeu gazed lovingly around the small homely church building; his eyes resting appreciatively on the sparking altar, illuminated by the bright stream of sunlight shining through the wide window behind it. He felt at peace here; the quiet chapel had the effect of calming his thoughts and soothing his troubles. The plump middle aged priest, his face lined with the worries of others, sighed contentedly and slowly made his way to the back of the church. As much as he would have liked it, he did not have time to stop and stare at the beautiful stained glass windows, which adorned the otherwise plain walls of the building. Or thank god for the magnificently carved Stations of the Cross, or any of the other beautiful things that the grateful people of the parish had given him throughout the many years of hard service he had spent here in this sleepy French town. Rumour were life in these most troubled times, with the word spreading like wildfire through the country that the revolutionary parties planned to overthrow the monarchy in France. But these political matters of state did not affect Fr. Bretodeu. He liked his simple life here, helping the needy and tending to the troubles of his flock. This was a world far removed from the hustle and bustle of Paris where he had been trained for the priesthood, although the actual distance between the two towns could not have been more than a few miles.

As he threw open the doors of the modest chapel on that warm spring morning and drank in the fresh cold air, Fr. Bretodeu knew that there would no doubt be some poor troubled soul seeking a patient ear waiting for him. He did not, however, expect to see a stricken form lying motionless in the street, for all the world like a forlorn pile of ragged clothing, cast aside in favour of an a la mode model. Perhaps this man was a traveller, he thought as he edged closer, caught in the terrific storms of the previous evening. One look at the woeful expression on the man's face, however, told Fr Bretodeu that this man would need more than a cup of strong coffee and a few kind words to heal his mental and physical wounds. Nevertheless, this man needed help, and he would not be left unaided. With considerable effort, Fr. Bretodeu roused the lifeless figure and helped him stumble into the little stone chapel.

'Why did that little swine have to find out that I'm a spy?'

thought Sebastian darkly as he swept imperiously through the airy night streets of Ebrennac, his swirling robes billowing in the light breeze. He despised small towns such as this. They were like empty flagons of a cheap, disgusting wine; the leftover dregs of society thrown

together in a melee of parochial slime. These simpletons could never comprehend the magnitude of his work in Paris. **Liberte! Fratemite! Egalite!** This, the puerile slogan of those revolutionary fools he had been sent to spy on. Their abominable dream of a France free of the great and powerful monarchy provoked in him feelings of intense loathing of these people- the kind of peasantry scum that inhabited **Ebrennac**. If only that bourgeois halfwit had not uncovered his true identity! Curse him! And curse those idiots he had sent to kill him. A botched job if ever he saw one. That swine had escaped, and now roamed free with the power to reveal Sebastian's true identity to his snivelling, stinking revolutionary 'superiors'. He abhorred them! All of them! But their day would come. First, he must deal with this insignificant rogue who threatened to upset his well laid plans. If anyone knew how to find someone in Paris or in its abundance of surrounding villages, **Mathieu** would, Sebastian mused, as he approached the dwelling of his old friend. Surely Mathieu would remember him and extend a familiar hand of friendship, even after all these years...

If Mathieu was surprised to see the long, drawn face of his old friend on his doorstep, he did not show it. Genuine warmth shone from his eyes as he flung wide the door and exclaimed, 'Sebastian **Seignard!** Come in, dear friend, come in!' Pleasantries exchanged, Mathieu waited patiently for Sebastian to reveal the purpose of his visit. It was certainly a shock to see him, Mathieu mused as Sebastian launched into a stream of mindless small talk and pointless details of his career and home and acquaintances, as if this useless information would somehow make up for his abrupt twenty-year disappearance from Mathieu's life. As Sebastian explained that he had come to see Mathieu for 'old times' sake' and because he needed to find a 'dear cousin' he had lost track of in the city, Mathieu surreptitiously inspected his face. After all this time, Mathieu could still tell when Sebastian was lying. The lingering ghost of **deja vu** enveloped the two figures, and Mathieu could remember with disturbing clarity the last time Sebastian had lied to him. Whoever the man Sebastian was looking for was, he was certainly not a 'dear cousin': the poorly hidden steely glaze in his eyes told Mathieu this much. His instinctive senses screamed at him to be careful. Sebastian had changed a great deal. He sported a malevolent gleam in his eye that Mathieu could not remember from their time training together in Paris. Sebastian now had a disdainful air, like some unpleasant odour was polluting the air he was breathing. This man, whoever he was, had better watch out for himself; this disturbing change in Sebastian had not been for the better. Mathieu breathed a quick prayer for this poor soul before returning to the demanding eyes of his guest.

Jean **Luc** was wakened by the murmur of low voices emanating from the darkness around him. He was in the upstairs room of a house somewhere, he didn't know where. The last thing he could remember was standing in a rain-drenched street outside a stone church near Paris. He had been running, but to where and from whom? As he attempted to rise from the warm bed he was lying in, a terrific pain shot across his forehead, and he flopped back down among the soft pillows. And then he remembered. He remembered seeing Sebastian **Seignard**, his father's most trusted confidante, passing information to *them*. He remembered that he had been going to tell his father when Sebastian's men had attacked him. He had to leave. Whoever he was staying with, they were in grave danger; Sebastian had many powerful friends, he could track down Jean **Luc** wherever he was. Wincing with pain, Jean **Luc** gingerly made his way to the door of his room and peered out. He found himself in a corridor with a staircase at one end. He crept silently to the end of the corridor and glanced furtively down the stairway. Bathed in the moon's unearthly glow, the staircase swam before his eyes. He stumbled on the first step, and his heart leapt into his mouth. He came crashing down the stairs, terror making his eyes see the cold stone slabs come racing up to meet him in slow motion. With a repulsive crack, his head smashed against the stone, and his eyes glazed over in pain as his world turned blood red.

The two figures at the foot of the stairs stood motionless in shock: one tall and emaciated with a cold profile that the dead man would have found disturbingly familiar; the other small and plump, a bemused expression taking the place of his normally serene features. Sebastian's face turned from shock to cold fury as he turned slowly and menacingly to face his companion.

'Do you know what this piece of filth is?,' he asked slowly, deliberately stressing each syllable through uncontrollably clenched teeth.

'You are one of them, **Bretodeu**,' he said, chuckling inanely, 'you always did pick the losing side. You! You helped this abominable swine! YOU DARED TO HELP THIS, THIS PIECE OF... OF...' His voice grew to a crescendo of hate and fury as he struggled to find words to vent his anger, and his face turned a sickly, swollen purple. **Mathieu** backed slowly away from Sebastian, attempting to fight the onslaught of accusations with his outstretched hands.

'Sebastian, what are you talking about?,' he said slowly and calmly, 'I found him battered and bruised on the street. Of course I helped him. That is my job. Or had you forgotten that we priests are meant to help people, not hurt them?'

'YOU!' yelled Sebastian in a strangled half-scream. He lunged at Mathieu and closed his spindly fingers around the struggling man's throat. His face was a distorted portrait of uncontrollable fury as he slowly squeezed life from Mathieu's flailing body. Sebastian finally released the dead man's corpse from his poisoned grip, and let it fall to the cold, stone floor with a sickening thud.