

La Ligne du Marais



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COLOPHON

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A HALLOWEEN STORY

La Ligne du Marais

by Austen Tucker



Tuck spent a month in Paris trying to find the smallest casino in the world. Then, on a foggy, humid night, he found it.

The mist hung heavy, clinging to his skin and muffling the distant hum of late-night traffic. He had been walking along the Seine, the fog hiding the river's dark waters, his fingers threaded through his short, curly hair. The air was thick, each movement like wading through a dream. But then — the bells struck midnight, and the spotlight on the Eiffel Tower flickered off. That was when he saw it. A faint, glimmering white light coming from an alley. A shop opening.

The streets of Paris were quiet after midnight. Most shops were closed; some were in the process of shutting down. Scattered tables of late-night diners watched with vague curiosity as Tuck ran, full force, toward the light, as if his one chance might vanish at any moment.

He arrived at a dim, closet-sized store. Heaving for breath, he caught the smell of fresh pipe tobacco smoke mingled with decay and baby powder, a clash that prickled his throat.

The door was unlocked. He wasted no time, scrambling inside and dropping into a frail folding chair. The chair dug into his hips as he tried to settle in.

The room was bare, with dim table lamps and a single folding tray. A stanchion in the corner had been repurposed to display couture jewelry — purple velvet lining

showcased the items. In the other corner sat a low-slung trunk, on top of which rested a platter of pewter figures on horseback. Each horse was in a different pose: some reared back in glory, some trotted at ease, and some stood at attention. Their riders' faces were twisted, as if the molds hadn't set quite right.

Tuck sat. He waited. Bored, he leaned forward, picked up one of the rearing horses, and examined it with a loupe. The mold was flawed; there were dimples where the sand had shifted, ruining the figure.

Why display something like this? Maybe it was art. Maybe *everything* about this place — from the rumors to the shady contacts that led him here — was an elaborate piece of performance art, meant to mess with his mind.

How foolish he had been to chase this score. Believing in online whispers like a dreamer. He'd have a good laugh about it —

“Bonjour!”

The sound came from behind the wall. A hidden door opened in the back of the tiny shop, and from it emerged a waifish Parisian woman, wizened, wearing an elegant black dress that looked ancient, yet expensive. He stood to greet her, air-kissing each cheek in the style of her choosing.

Afterward, he extended his hand for a handshake, but she pulled hers away.

“You have come for the game, yes?”

“Yes... I mean, oui!” Tuck’s heart felt like it would burst with excitement. He reached into his pocket, pulling out the last serious weight of his bankroll and placing it on the table, expecting chips. “I’ve been waiting a month to play.”

She waved him off. “Non, non, mon ami. S’il vous plaît, put your money away. I don’t...” she paused, searching for the right words, then giggled as she tried her best American accent, “I think you Americans say, ‘too rich for the blood?’”

Tuck’s pulse quickened. “I am willing to pay. Money comes and goes. I want a real challenge.”

“Bon!” She clapped her hands together. “This makes me... how do you say it? Joyful! Then by all means, allow me to stake you.”

She produced a chip tray from under the table. It was an antique, the leather worn, the embossing floral. Engraved along the side was a phrase: “Le jeu de la vie.”

Tuck counted out five hundred thousand euros and slid the stack across. Gigi recounted it, raising it as if to show it to a camera.

“Excuse me,” she chuckled. “Old habits, yes?”

“I get it.”

“Non, mon ami. Money is only how men like you understand permission.” She tucked the cash beneath the chip tray. “Tonight, I stake you. Later, you decide what you owe.”

She set three small stacks of chips before him — red, white, and blue. Each had a sheen, their weight good in his hands. Engraved on each was a unique silhouette of a man on horseback.

She presented a small, square leather briefcase on the table, unsnapped the clasps, and opened it toward Tuck. Inside was a shoe of six decks and a small, olive-wood pallet, sized to fit the jewelry table.

His eyes flashed with recognition, though he tried to keep a neutral expression. The last thing he needed was to give away his tell.

“Baccarat? I’m a fan,” he said.

“Oh, you insult me!” she laughed. “You are in Paris, mon ami! We play Chemin de Fer. Understand?”

“Of course,” he replied, smiling. “But why the pallet? I can reach you just fine.”

“Non,” she said, pushing the small wooden spatula toward him. “I insist! What is Chemin de Fer without the pallet?”

She pressed the small wooden tool into his hand, and he gripped it. “You will deal two cards to me. Both face down, bon?”

“Do you bet first?”

“Eh... first hand is free,” she replied. “I want to know you understand before we wager. As my people say, ‘À vaincre sans péril, on triomphe sans gloire.’”

“To conquer without risk is to triumph without glory,” he translated.

“Oui! You speak the language?”

“No,” Tuck said, shrugging. “But I’m clever.”

She laughed, extending her hand. “Geneviève du Sépulcre, Mister Tuck. You may call me Gigi.” Her eyes twinkled, her smile curling as if amused by some private joke.

He reached across the table, grasping her hand in a stiff, businesslike handshake, ignoring local protocol. As soon as their skin made contact, an electric jolt went through him. He felt something leave his body, though he couldn’t name it.

He had never mentioned his name.

His mind narrowed. The streets of Le Marais — the month of searching, the bells, the fog — slid to the edge of his vision and stayed there. The hand she had touched still buzzed.

He felt heavy in the chair, as if anchored to the table.

“The game is Chemin de Fer. Five hundred thousand euros, monsieur, in denominations of 100, 1,000, and 10,000. The minimum bet for each hand will be 100. As I’m sure you know, Chemin de Fer is played for high stakes. *Consentez-vous?*”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he said. This was the kind of thrill he craved — the reason he lived for gambling.

“Excellente! The contract, it is signed. Now, we play cards, yes?”

Tuck picked up the pallet and placed two cards on it, face down, before sliding them across the table.

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said. “I hold the bank first, correct?”

“But of course!” Gigi smiled. “Bonne chance!”

Tuck knew the game, but Gigi didn’t need to know that.

He set his stack at the edge of the pallet — five blue, ten red, the rest white. Five hundred thousand. He pushed five forward.

“Faites vos jeux.”

She slid two cards across on the pallet. He turned them with the flat of his thumb. King, Jack. Zero. He tapped the table.

“Carte.”

Nine came back. Natural.

“Bon!” Gigi clapped, slid him chips. “It seems Chemin de Fer suits you, yes?”

“Picked it up online. Blackjack with better window dressing.”

“Tradition scares away the — how do you say — tourists.”

“Like honeymooners in Vegas. I almost feel bad for them.”

She laughed. The laugh rattled in her chest. He waited for it to come back off the wall behind her and it didn't. The room ate the sound.

He clocked it. Filed it. Pushed twenty forward.

. . .

Five and a four. Nine again. He kept his face flat as he raked the chips in. Five-eighty.

"You play like a man who's been counted out of better casinos," Gigi said.

"I play to win."

"Mm. They walked you off how many floors? Three? Four?"

Tuck's hand stopped on the chip stack.

He had not told her. He had not told anyone in this country.

"Lucky guess," he said.

"Mm." She pulled a bottle of wine from her bag, poured herself a glass. "Vin?"

"I don't drink when I gamble."

"Shame. I shall do my duty to France."

He filed it next to the echo. The count was still in his favor. He pushed the shoe across.

. . .

She held the bank now. He bet thirty. Her fingers moved on the cards — long, white, the knuckles too

prominent, as if the bones were already most of what was there.

She dealt him an eight and a four. Two.

“Carte?”

Twos and tens were heavy in the deck — he’d been counting since hand one — which meant he should stand. Take his chances on her drawing to a small card. Standard play.

“Stay.”

Gigi flipped her hand. Six and three. Nine.

“Pas de bol,” she said. Pulled a hundred off his side of the table. Smiled.

Stack: four-eighty. The first time it had dipped under the buy-in.

“Ça ne vaut pas la peine, Monsieur Tuck. Counting — it isn’t worth the trouble.”

He didn’t move. The ash on her cigarette was the wrong color. He couldn’t say what color it *should* have been, only that this one was wrong. The air stank of stale tobacco, melting lead, and something he couldn’t recognize.

“Perhaps we can chat instead?”

“I came to gamble, not to make friends.”

“But mon ami, isn’t that the whole point?” She tapped one of the pewter horses and continued regardless.

“There’s a legend about French statues. A man’s horse tells the story of his death.”

“Fascinating.”

“Two legs up — death in battle. One leg — death from wounds. None — natural causes. Boring.”

“You’ve told me three of four.”

“Cheval du déshonneur.” She smiled. “Broken under its own weight.”

She slid two cards across.

• • •

The room was lighter. He hadn’t noticed the room getting lighter. Outside the door — a door he was no longer sure he could find — Paris was waking, indifferent.

Stack: two-twenty. He had played eleven more hands and won three. He couldn’t remember any of them clearly.

He shuffled what was left of his chips, his eyes tracing the horse engravings. Why were they all different? What were they made from?

“I engrave them myself.”

“Excuse me?”

“The chips.” She pointed at them. “Beautiful, aren’t they?”

“They’re gorgeous.” His voice came out dry. “I wish I had more of them.”

“The gambler’s *raison d’être*.” She tapped the table. “Faites vos jeux?”

His fingers were under the bottom card, palming the King out of the deck and into his cuff in one motion he had practiced for fifteen years.

“Banco.” He shoved the rest of the chips forward.

She applauded. “All-in. Now we are truly gambling. And you haven’t kept count for hours, have you, mon ami?”

The King, in his cuff, was warm.

“Bonne chance, right?”

She dealt two cards. Ace and nine — zero. If he could bury the Ace and show the King, he’d have a natural nine.

“What a predicament,” he mused, forcing himself to relax. “May I smoke?”

“Of course. Il faut tourner sept fois sa langue dans sa bouche avant de parler.”

He started to stand, reaching for his hidden King, but Gigi’s cold hand gripped his wrist.

“Attends un moment.” She flipped open a cigarette case. “Parisian. Le meilleur tabac. I insist.”

He took the cigarette, and she leaned in to light it for him. He took a long drag, savoring it.

“You’re right,” he said. “Parisians do have the best craftsmanship.”

“We put love into it, you see.”

He reached back into his coat, this time palming the King in one motion. “I’d like some air.”

“Faites comme chez vous.”

He opened the door, expecting Paris's bustling streets — found instead himself, in infinite reflection. His image stretched into the horizon, mirror after mirror, a perfect loop of him staring at Gigi staring back.

He stepped through. The hallway extended.

He stepped back. Closed the door. Opened it. The same hallway. The same stretch of Tucks, none of them moving when he expected them to.

He turned to the shop. The walls were closer than they had been. The window above the trunk — there had been a window, he was sure, a small grimy thing — was gone. He ran his hand along the plaster where it should have been. Plaster, wood, plaster. The hidden door Gigi had come through at the start: gone too. The room had finished closing while he was looking the wrong way.

The world had collapsed into a single, unending room.

"It is like the railroad car," Gigi laughed. "Like Chemin de Fer." She chugged her hands and her infinite reflections seemed to dance a long, perpetual train-wave.

She picked up a silver ashtray and placed it before him. "Come, sit. Join me for a cigarette."

He stood for a second, frozen. Then the heavy weight of the chair called for him.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Non," she said with a shrug. "We all have our roles, Monsieur. But we needn't be cruel. You Americans are al-

ways so... bitter. So mean! No respect for those of us with... dirty jobs.”

He sat down.

“Is yours a dirty job, Geneviève?”

“I am a humble croupier,” she said, taking a drag.

“Bullshit.”

“Such language,” Gigi said, shaking her head. “At least you’re not butchering my French. Now, have you thought about your horse?”

She tapped her cigarette in the ashtray, waiting.

“I want my horse’s hooves on the ground. Glory is for suckers. Real action is in the money.”

“Hedonism,” Gigi mused. “Bon, bah. There is something to dying fat and old, no?”

He took a drag and looked at his cards as if to remind himself of the score. “Merde,” he muttered, tossing the nine and the palmed King onto the table. “At this rate, I won’t even have the fare home.”

She laughed, loud and unrestrained. “That, Monsieur, is how you become Parisian!”

He joined her laughter, trying to mask his dread. It had been one cheat — nobody needed to know. He just had to win his money back.

He looked again at the gleaming chips on the table. He hadn’t noticed before, but they had inlays of silver, copper, and gold, marking their value. Even if the horse motifs were unsettling, they were beautiful.

“It’s a lifelong passion,” she said.

“What is?”

“The chips.” She pointed to his wager. “Gorgeous, aren’t they?”

“They are.”

She reached for the trunk beneath the platter of pewter horses, unclasping the latch and throwing it open.

Inside was an ossuary bag — canvas, browned at the seams, bleached bones to the top. The smell came up. Old building, old dust, the faintly sweet rot of marrow that has been dry for a long time. Tuck’s stomach lurched.

Above the bag, a simple workspace: a small lamp, a jeweler’s loupe, a set of files. Her latest project sat in a clamp under the loupe. A chip, half-finished. Made of teeth. Old fillings glinting silver and gold in the lamplight — the same silver and gold as the inlays on the chips on the table.

The chips on the table. The chips in his hands. He looked down at his stack — what was left of it — and felt the weight of them again. The weight that had been *good* in his hands. The weight that wasn’t pewter or resin or clay.

His thumb had been pressed against someone’s femur for hours.

“Knuckles, toes, femurs, hip bones. The house’s commission, Monsieur Tuck. Each one tells a story. Each one

more precious than gold. The gamble isn't about money; it's about offering. Sacrifice — it's why we exist.

"The most precious things must be offered freely, yes?"

Tuck took one last drag of his cigarette before stubbing it out. He played at trying to read her. Sat back in the chair. Made some noises. The game was over anyway. If the King was where he'd left it, he had a natural — and then he could cash out and go anywhere *but* here.

"Reste," he whispered, then flipped his cards.

Ace and nine. Zero.

"Pas de bol. Tough luck, Monsieur Tuck!"

He grabbed for his pocket. The King was gone.

"Did you think the house doesn't see all? Charming," Gigi said, her smile unbroken.

Tuck froze.

"No sad faces, please! We had such fun, didn't we? Besides that little... inconvenience. We're gamblers, are we not? What joy is there if we win every time?"

He couldn't meet her eyes, but she didn't seem to care. She pulled him to his feet with one hand.

"I'm sorry, mon cher. We did have fun."

She cupped his face and planted la bise on each cheek.

Tuck's world erupted in agony. The warmth became searing heat that scorched his flesh. His skin blistered and cracked, giving way to the inferno beneath. He writhed in pain, his muscles dissolving, his eyes melting

into empty pits. He collapsed inward until nothing remained but a skeleton, gleaming in the dim light.

Clucking her tongue, Gigi reached for the ossuary bag and began sifting through Tuck's remains. She hummed as she worked, ultimately pulling out his skull.

Laughing to herself, she resumed cleaning the tiny Parisian shop, considering which horse she would engrave for Tuck. The cheval du déshonneur, broken under its own arrogance, would suit him best.

She poured herself more wine and began to engrave.



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