

Every When

by Lenora Vale

She was sent to fix the past. She wasn't supposed to stay in it.

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Prologue: The Bureau

2157. New Geneva.

The building that houses the Temporal Continuity Bureau is not supposed to look like anything in particular, and it succeeds. Gray glass and clean lines on a street of gray glass and clean lines, nine floors that don't appear on any public city map, a lobby that has no reception desk because the people who need to find it already know where it is.

Seraphine Calloway — Sera, to everyone who matters, Operative Calloway in the field logs — has worked here for four years. She has been sent back eleven times. She has fixed eleven deviations, returned through eleven extraction windows, written eleven field reports in the mandatory seventy-two-hour quiet period that follows a temporal displacement, during which operatives are not permitted to leave the recovery wing, access public networks, or discuss the assignment with anyone who was not on the briefing team.

Eleven times she has come back.

The rule of the Bureau is: you go back, you fix the thread, you return. You do not form attachments. You do not linger. The past is not a destination — it is a wound that needs a very specific kind of suture, applied quickly and without contaminating the tissue.

Sera has been good at this. She has been, her supervisor Director Kira Moss will tell you, one of the best operatives in a class of fourteen who graduated the Academy in 2153. Precise. Careful. Excellent at reading the social architecture of a target era. Excellent at finding the thread and pulling it back into alignment without disturbing the fabric around it.

"Assignment twelve," Moss says, on a Tuesday morning in October, setting a file on Sera's desk. Paper file — the Bureau uses paper because paper doesn't leave a digital trace and because there is something about paper that forces you to read slowly. "Paris. 1925."

Sera opens the file.

"Jazz musician," she says. "Théodore Aubert."

"He's going to leave Paris in fourteen weeks," Moss says. "He's been offered a position in Buenos Aires — a recording contract through a label there, a wealthy patron, comfortable life. He's going to take it."

Sera looks at the file. Théodore Aubert, thirty-two years old in 1925, born in Lyon, trained in Paris, currently resident in Montparnasse and performing four nights a week at a club called Le Chat Bleu. Photograph: a man at a piano bench, turned three-quarters toward the camera, not quite smiling, the quality of attention of someone whose mind is partly somewhere else.

"What's the deviation?" she asks.

"In the correct timeline, Aubert stays in Paris. He records six sessions over the next two years that become foundational to the development of what music historians will call the Aubert Modal Style — a harmonic approach that influences European jazz for thirty years." Moss pauses. "In 2057, a woman named Léa Fontaine hears a restored recording of those sessions at the age of seven. The music changes her. She becomes a computational composer. In 2089, her work on pattern recursion in musical structure leads her — apparently through a chain of cognitive association we've traced but don't fully understand — to a specific solution to a problem in atmospheric processing that prevents the Cascade Event of 2093."

Sera looks up. "The Cascade."

"The atmospheric Cascade." Moss holds her gaze. "Yes."

The Cascade Event of 2093 is in the history files. It is not a subject anyone at the Bureau discusses more than necessary.

"What caused the deviation?" Sera asks.

"Unknown. The Buenos Aires offer is real — it existed in the original timeline too. In the correct version, Aubert declined it. Something changed. We don't know what."

"Possibility of earlier TCB interference?"

A pause. The kind of pause that means: we've considered this and we're not confirming it.

"Investigate as appropriate," Moss says. "Fix the thread. Fourteen-week window. Extraction on the last Sunday of the fourteenth week, two AM Paris time."

Sera looks at the photograph. The man at the piano, attention divided between the lens and somewhere else.

"Understood," she says.

She is, at this point, certain she will do this cleanly.

The Arrival

The displacement arrives the way it always does: not as movement, but as a kind of subtraction — the present moment simply becoming less present, and then more absent, and then entirely gone.

And then Paris. 1925.

The landing point is a courtyard off the Rue de la Gaîté — a Bureau-vetted location, regularly cleared in the pre-displacement survey, a narrow space between two buildings where she is unlikely to arrive into. She arrives in the blue hour before dawn, in the clothes that were prepared for her: a dress of the period, dark, practical, the kind worn by women who worked for their living and didn't feel apologetic about it.

She stands in the courtyard and breathes the air.

This is the part she can't describe in the field reports. Every era has a specific quality of air — not the composition, which the archive analysis can map, but the subjective presence of it. The way it smells and what the smell means in your body. Paris in 1925 smells like coal smoke and the particular sweetness of a city in autumn and something else she doesn't have a word for, a kind of ambient life, the accumulated presence of millions of people living in a specific way in a specific moment.

She breathes it. She is not supposed to dwell.

The safe address is two streets over: a room in a small pension on the Rue Delambre, arranged through the Bureau's historical logistics network — a system of paper documentation and pre-placed currency that means every time Sera arrives in a target era, there is a room, a cover identity, a small amount of local currency, and a contact if she needs one.

The room is on the third floor: a single bed, a window overlooking the courtyard, a writing table, and an uneven wardrobe that has clearly survived more decades than its construction warranted. Sparse and functional and, Sera thinks, looking out the window at the first grey light arriving over the rooftops, exactly right. The kind of room where a person

could be present without it asking anything of them.

She sets her kit on the table and checks the calendar device — disguised as a compact mirror, which she'd thought was an obvious choice until she used it in the field for the first time and understood that in an era where mirrors were a luxury and compacts were status objects, the disguise was functionally invisible.

Fourteen weeks. Ninety-eight days.

She opens the field file she's memorized and reads it again. Théodore Aubert performs at Le Chat Bleu on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday nights, ten PM until two AM. He lives two streets from the club on the Passage d'Enfer, third floor. He has no current romantic entanglement. He is, by the sparse social record of the era, considered charming and private in equal measure.

She will go to the club on Friday.

She lies down on the Bureau-approved bed in the Bureau-approved room in the most beautiful city she has ever been deployed to, and she tries not to feel anything about that.

She mostly fails.

Le Chat Bleu

The club was small in the way that the best places always are: a room that held perhaps sixty people at capacity, wooden tables with candles, a low stage at the far end, a bar running the length of the left wall.

Sera arrived at ten-fifteen and ordered wine from a barman who had the benevolent indifference of a man who had seen everyone and was impressed by no one. She sat at a table with sightlines to the stage and the door and took her time about everything.

The quartet came out at ten-thirty. Drums, upright bass, clarinet, piano.

He was at the piano.

She recognized him from the photograph — the same divided quality of attention, the sense of a person whose mind was operating on multiple levels simultaneously. In the photograph he hadn't been quite smiling. In person he wasn't quite there, either — present in the room, present with the music, but with a particular interiority that she'd learned, over eleven assignments, to identify as the specific self-containment of an artist who lived primarily in their own work.

Then he played.

She had listened to the recordings. She was required to, as part of the briefing — any operative going into a music-related timeline deviation had to have sufficient familiarity with the target's work to navigate conversations about it convincingly. She'd listened to four recordings: two from the actual sessions she was here to protect, two from earlier club performances that had been captured by accident on equipment that was being tested for a different purpose.

The recordings were not the same as this.

The recordings were documents. This was a living thing. He played with a harmonic complexity she'd understood intellectually from the analysis and now felt — the way certain chord movements created a sense of something

unresolved and beautiful, a perpetual leaning toward a resolution that kept arriving in unexpected places. The music was patient and demanding in equal measure.

She sat with her wine and listened and did not file any of this as a professional observation.

Between the second and third sets, he came to the bar.

This was, per the field file, consistent: Aubert was known to take a break between sets and drink a glass of water at the bar before the second half. Sera was sitting three stools down.

She did not engineer the conversation. She was looking at her wine glass. This is relevant.

"You were listening," he said, in French.

She looked up. He was leaning with one arm on the bar, looking at her with a directness that was not aggressive but was entirely confident — the look of a person who was sure enough of themselves that they didn't need to manage the impact of their attention.

"Yes," she said, also in French. Her period French was Bureau-trained and consequently very good. "I've been here for the whole set."

"I noticed." He said it without vanity — just a fact. He noticed attentive listeners the way other people noticed the weather. "Did you enjoy it?"

"The second movement in the third piece," she said, before she'd decided to. "The way the chord sequence steps down in thirds but the melody doesn't follow — it stays where it was, suspended. It's as if the harmony left and the melody is still looking for it."

He looked at her.

"Yes," he said, after a moment. "That's exactly what it is." He said it with the particular quality of surprise that belongs to being accurately understood when you haven't expected to be.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I tend to be specific about music."

"Please don't apologize for that." He extended his hand. "Théodore Aubert."

"Sera Calloway," she said. She shook his hand. In 1925, a woman shaking a man's hand directly was not standard — she caught his slight adjustment, the recalibration of his read on her.

"English?" he said.

"American," she said. "Though I've been in Paris for—" she calculated, "—six months." True within the fiction.

"And before Paris?"

"New York," she said, which was the cover origin in the field file. "I was a music critic for a small journal." Past tense, suggesting she'd left the role — the cover allowed her to be knowledgeable without being currently active in the field, which was important for maintaining low documentation presence.

He looked at her with a new quality of interest. "A critic."

"A former critic," she said. "I stopped. I found I was writing about music rather than listening to it."

"That's the best reason to stop," he said.

They looked at each other for a moment in the candlelit noise of the club bar, and Sera was aware of a particular quality of the moment — the kind she'd learned to identify in assignments, the pivot point where a conversation became something with its own momentum. She was also aware that she was not, in this moment, treating it as a professional observation.

"I should go back," he said, nodding toward the stage. "The second half starts in five minutes."

"Of course," she said.

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He took his water glass and went. At the door to the stage area he turned and looked back at her.

She did not file any of this cleanly.

The City

She gave herself three days before going back to the club. Field discipline: establish cover, walk the geography, understand the social network around the target before the second contact.

She walked Paris.

This was the part they didn't tell you in the Academy and that the field reports couldn't contain: the sheer weight of a specific moment in time, when you were standing inside it. She had been to six eras across her eleven assignments. Each one had this quality — the irreducible presence of a time that, to everyone living in it, was not history but just life.

1925 Paris was life. People were going to work, going to market, arguing about politics in café windows, reading newspapers, falling in love, being bored, deciding things. The Eiffel Tower was twenty-six years old and still being argued about. The century was twenty-five years old and had already done terrible things to itself and was trying to decide what to believe. The city was the city it had always been and would always have been: dense and beautiful and slightly inconvenient in a way that felt entirely worth it.

She sat in cafés and listened to French and let the rhythms of the language fill in around the edges of her Bureau-trained speech. She walked the Montparnasse streets that would have streets named after their current inhabitants in another decade. She found Le Chat Bleu in daylight — a shuttered door, no visible sign, the particular anonymity of a place that didn't need to advertise — and stood outside it for a moment.

On the second day she found the Passage d'Enfer, the narrow alley where Théodore Aubert lived. Third floor. She identified the window — a piano just visible through the glass, a small lamp. She did not stand and watch it. She noted it and moved on.

On the third day she went to a market on the Boulevard Raspail and bought bread and cheese and apples and ate them on a bench in the Luxembourg Gardens because she was from two hundred and thirty years in the future and the Luxembourg Gardens in autumn sun felt like evidence of

something she didn't have a word for.

She wrote in the field log: *Cover established. Target located. First contact made. Beginning social integration phase.*

She wrote in the personal notebook she kept separately, which was also a Bureau requirement — operatives were required to maintain a psychological journal to identify emotional deviation early: *This city is going to cost me something. I can feel it.*

What the Brief Didn't Say

On Friday she went back to Le Chat Bleu.

He saw her come in. She knew because she saw him see her — a quick adjustment in his posture, not theatrical, just the small bodily acknowledgment of a person whose peripheral awareness had registered something specific.

She sat at the same table.

After the set, he didn't wait for the bar. He came directly to her table and stood.

"Miss Calloway," he said.

"Monsieur Aubert," she said.

"May I?"

She gestured at the chair across. He sat.

They talked for two hours. Not about the Buenos Aires offer — that was not the conversation yet; she was laying groundwork, not sprinting. They talked about music. She asked questions carefully calibrated to get him talking about the work itself, the process, the harmonic thinking underneath the performances. She'd learned, across eleven assignments, that the most effective way to understand a target was to ask them about what they cared about and then genuinely listen.

The problem, in this case, was that she genuinely did care.

He talked about harmony the way she thought about evidence — as a system with internal logic, where every element related to every other and the skill was in finding the relationship rather than imposing one. He talked about the months he'd spent unlearning the formal training from the Conservatoire, the deliberate process of making himself uncomfortable with the patterns he'd been given so that he could find the ones that were

actually his.

"What did you do with the discomfort?" she asked.

He looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"When you were unlearning — when you played and it didn't come out right, before you found the other side of it. What did you do with that?"

He considered. "I played through it," he said. "The discomfort is information. It tells you where the edge is. You can't find the new territory unless you know where the old territory ends." He paused. "Why?"

"Because most people stop at the discomfort," she said. "They assume it means they've done something wrong."

He looked at her with a long, considering look. "You understand this from experience," he said.

"Yes," she said, which was entirely true and which she had not intended to be.

On her way back to the pension she walked through the Paris night — the gas lamps and the café windows and the sound of music from three different directions — and had a conversation with herself about the importance of professional distance.

The conversation was not entirely successful.

The Source of the Deviation

On her eighth day in 1925, Sera found the source.

She'd been working through the Bureau file's secondary documentation — the social records, the newspaper references, the letters that had been digitized in the archive. Most of it was background. One item was not.

A letter, dated three months before her arrival, from a Parisian arts patron named Gustave Moreau-Delacroix to a concert promoter in Buenos Aires. The letter recommended Théodore Aubert for the Buenos Aires position in terms that were unusually specific and enthusiastic, coming from a man who — per the archive records — had never been a particular champion of Aubert's work previously.

She cross-referenced Moreau-Delacroix.

The name appeared in the Bureau archive not in the 1925 files but in the deep background files, under a flag she'd only seen twice in her career: TCB Contact, Historical.

She sat very still.

TCB Contact, Historical meant: this individual interacted with a Bureau operative at some point in the documented past.

It meant an earlier operative had been here. Had spoken to Moreau-Delacroix. Had, apparently, influenced him sufficiently that he'd written a letter recommending Théodore Aubert for a position in Buenos Aires.

Moss's answer to her pre-deployment question came back to her:
Possibility of earlier TCB interference? Investigate as appropriate.

Investigate as appropriate. The deliberate vagueness of a superior who suspected the answer and didn't want it confirmed officially until it was unavoidable.

Sera opened the archive query interface in her compact-mirror device. The

Bureau ran a background sync every seventy-two hours — a packet of archive updates transmitted via a temporal communication protocol she didn't fully understand and was not required to. She pulled the most recent sync.

Moreau-Delacroix: TCB Contact, Historical. Operative identifier: C-7.
Assignment date: 1924. Assignment classification: Closed.

Operative C-7. The identifier format was Bureau-standard; the letters were not names but sequential codes. She had been Operative C-14 since her second assignment.

She couldn't look up who C-7 was from the field. That query would require Bureau network access that was above field-operative clearance.

But she could deduce: Operative C-7 had been in Paris in 1924 on an assignment that was now classified as Closed. In the course of that assignment, they had made contact with Gustave Moreau-Delacroix in a way that had changed Moreau-Delacroix's opinion of Théodore Aubert — changed it enough that he'd written a letter of recommendation that hadn't been written in the original timeline.

C-7 had fallen in love.

Sera didn't know this as fact. She inferred it: if C-7's assignment was closed — completed — but the downstream effect of their contact with Moreau-Delacroix was still affecting the timeline a year later, it meant C-7 had either been sloppy or had been personally compromised enough to act outside the assignment scope. The Bureau classified personal compromise as the most common cause of assignment scope violation in the field report literature. She'd read the literature.

She put the compact mirror down and looked at the ceiling of her room in the pension on the Rue Delambre and thought: *someone came here before me and fell for someone and wrote themselves into the story and now I'm here cleaning it up.*

She thought: *the irony of this is not lost on me.*

She wrote in the field log: *Source identified. Earlier TCB operative contact with Moreau-Delacroix appears to have precipitated deviation. Investigating scope.*

She wrote in the personal journal: *I understand C-7 completely. That is the problem.*

The Social Architecture

By week three she had a life in 1925 Paris.

This was partly cover maintenance — the social architecture that made Alexandra Vane, the cover identity, into someone who could exist in the environment without being incongruous. But it was also the side effect of being a person who was attentive to her surroundings and who found that, given permission to inhabit a place, she inhabited it fully.

She knew the barman at Le Chat Bleu: Maurice, forty-three, had been there since the club opened, believed passionately in the importance of a properly cleaned glass and in the fundamental dishonesty of cocktails, which he considered a conspiracy to mask the quality of the wine.

She knew the baker two streets from the pension: a Moroccan-French woman named Hana who was operating in a city that had complex and unresolved feelings about the colony she'd come from and who made bread that was so good the complexity was briefly suspended in the face of it.

She knew the woman who ran the pension: Madame Colette Bernard, sixty, a widow who had lived in the same building for forty years and knew everything about the neighborhood and shared none of it without reason. Sera had won her trust by being quiet and paying in advance.

And she knew the quartet at Le Chat Bleu — not formally, but by presence. By four Fridays and four Tuesdays and the architecture of standing at the bar after the set while Théo talked to her about music with the full-attention quality she'd never experienced quite like this.

He called her Sera by the third week. She called him Théo by the same point, which in 1925 meant something — the shortening of a name was a declaration of proximity, and they had both made it without discussing it.

"There's a session next week," he said, on the fourth Tuesday. "Private. A collector who's been asking to record some of the material from the last two months. Would you come?"

She looked at him. "As a listener?"

"As someone I'd like there." He said it directly, without cushioning. She had learned that this was his way — he said what he meant with a precision that she recognized as a specific kind of courage. The decision to be clear rather than hedged, in a world that rewarded hedging.

"Yes," she said. "I'll come."

The recording session was not in the Bureau file. Which meant it was not the sessions she was here to protect — those happened in six months. This was an earlier session, informal, private. Not in the archive.

She went anyway.

The private studio was in a photographer's space off the Rue Daguerre — a large room that had been co-opted for recording purposes, with microphones she recognized as early condenser types and an engineer who treated the equipment with the reverence of a priest.

She sat in the corner and listened for four hours.

The music that went onto the recordings that night was not the music history would preserve. It was rougher, more searching — the sound of a musician still finding the territory, still working through the discomfort he'd described to her. She liked it better than the recordings the archive held. It felt more honest.

At the break she stood outside with Théo in the cold October air and he said: "What do you hear?"

"Someone looking," she said. "Not lost — looking. There's a difference."

He was quiet for a moment. "People call it unresolved," he said. "The harmonic approach. The music critics." He said *music critics* with a gentle irony that included her former cover identity in the gentle irony. "They want it to arrive."

"It arrives," she said. "Just not where they're expecting it."

He turned to look at her in the dark of the Rue Daguerre, the autumn night cold and clear, and she looked back at him, and the something that had been building for four weeks became very specific and located, like a point on a map you've been approaching without knowing the destination.

He didn't kiss her. He held the gaze for a moment — the same way he held the unresolved harmonic, patient with what hadn't arrived yet — and then looked at the sky.

"Come back inside," he said. "There's a third set."

She followed him.

The Letter

She needed to see the Moreau-Delacroix letter.

Not the digitized version in the archive — the original. To understand what C-7 had said to Moreau-Delacroix that had produced it.

Gustave Moreau-Delacroix was, in 1925, a presence in the art and music circles of the 6th arrondissement — a man of inherited money and cultivated taste who hosted salons, funded projects he found interesting, and carried the particular influence of someone who had no actual power but significant social authority. The kind of person whose opinion circulated.

Sera engineered an introduction through the social network she'd been building. A dinner at the home of a composer Théo knew, to which Théo had brought her, at which Moreau-Delacroix was also present.

She sat across from him at dinner and was careful.

He was sixty, she estimated. Gracious in the style of the era — attentive to his guests, formal without being cold. He spoke about music as a person who loved it and understood it at the level of a serious amateur, which in 1925 was not a diminished thing.

"You attend Le Chat Bleu regularly, I understand," he said to her, during the fish course.

"Since I arrived in Paris," she said. "The quartet is extraordinary."

He looked at her with a particular quality of assessment — the look of a person who was measuring what she knew. "You have heard Aubert before Paris?"

"By reputation only," she said. "The reality is better than the reputation."

He nodded, slowly. "He should record more," he said. "The work at the club — there is something there that needs to be preserved."

"And the Buenos Aires offer?" she said, carefully.

He was quiet for a moment. "I recommended him for it," he said. "Some months ago." He paused. "I am not sure it was the right advice. I thought — a wider world. Different influences. But Paris is where his sound comes from." He looked at his wine glass. "I may have been wrong."

Sera looked at him. "What changed your mind?"

"A conversation," he said. "A long time ago. Someone made me think more carefully about what an artist's home does to their work. How the place you belong is part of the sound you make." He smiled, slightly. "I believed it at the time. I still believe it. But I wonder if I applied it correctly."

A long time ago. In Moreau-Delacroix's timeline, the conversation with C-7 was a year prior. The memory was clear but the application had drifted.

"Perhaps," Sera said carefully, "it could be said again. More recently."

He looked at her. "Are you suggesting I recant my recommendation?"

"I'm suggesting," she said, "that a patron who believes an artist belongs to their city might find a way to say so to the artist directly. Before the decision is made." She paused. "If he hasn't already decided."

Moreau-Delacroix held her gaze for a moment. Then he nodded, once, slightly.

"You are a perceptive young woman, Miss Calloway," he said.

"Thank you," she said.

She went home and wrote in the field log: Moreau-Delacroix intervention: complete. He will speak to Aubert. The letter's influence may be counterbalanced. She paused. However: the deviation's source is interpersonal, not simply a letter. The actual reason Aubert is considering Buenos Aires is not the external recommendation. It is something else.

She had been watching him for five weeks. She knew this in the way she

knew music — by the thing underneath the surface, the pattern that the structure was expressing without naming it.

He was lonely. Not visibly, not in the way that produced sympathy or complaint. But the specific, contained loneliness of a person who had been so self-sufficient for so long that they'd built the room they lived in with walls that were difficult for other people to enter.

The Buenos Aires offer was not about music. It was about the possibility of being somewhere new, where the loneliness was at least fresh rather than familiar.

She understood this because she had built the same room.

She wrote in the personal journal: *This is not fixable by external intervention. The deviation's root is interior.*

The Interior

She started coming to rehearsals.

He invited her, and she came, which was professionally within scope — a listener, a conversation partner, a person whose genuine engagement with the work he was making gave him something to work toward. This was, she told herself, an effective way to address the interior deviation. She was providing him with a reason to stay that was specific and present rather than abstract and future.

She was also — she wrote this in the personal journal and made herself look at it — falling in love with him.

Not the cover-slip of an operative who'd let herself get emotionally confused. She had been in eleven assignments before this. She knew the difference between the social immersion that made covers work and the actual gravitational pull of a person. This was the second thing.

He was — she made a list in the personal journal, because making lists was how she processed things that she'd have preferred to process differently:

He was precise about things that mattered to him and loose about things that didn't, which was the inverse of most people.

He had an attention capacity that was extraordinary. When she spoke, he listened the way he played — following the line of what she was actually saying rather than the surface of it.

He was funny in a way that depended on exact timing and careful understatement, so that if you weren't paying attention you'd miss it, and when you caught it there was the specific pleasure of having been let in.

He was, under the self-sufficiency and the carefully constructed privacy, achingly kind. She'd seen it with the younger musicians who came to the club, with Madame the patron at the pension where he'd once fixed a broken window frame without being asked, with the way he looked at the city in the early mornings when neither of them had slept much and they

were walking along the Seine because the city at this hour was a gift.

They walked along the Seine one such morning, in November, and she thought: I have fourteen weeks. I have used five of them. I am not fixing the deviation by falling into it.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"About time," she said.

"What aspect of time?"

"The way it runs differently in different—" she stopped. "In different phases of life. When you're a child, summers last forever. When you're— Here, now—" She stopped again.

"Here, now?" he said.

"It seems to be running fast," she said.

He looked at her. The grey morning light on the river, the city quiet. "For me as well," he said. Not romantically, but with the same precise quality he brought to everything — stating what was true.

They kept walking.

What Paris Does

Paris in November is not the Paris of the postcards. It is grey and often cold and the light fails by four PM and the cafés are full of people who have decided that warmth is where other people are.

Sera had a theory, which she kept to the personal journal, that Paris was engineered by some historical confluence of architecture and light and proximity to extract things from people that those people would otherwise keep to themselves. She had not been sentimental in any previous assignment. She was being sentimental now.

The theory extended to: this was probably not Paris specifically. It was Théo. But Paris was complicit.

On a Tuesday evening in the seventh week, after the first set at Le Chat Bleu, he said: "Come to the apartment. I want to play you something I'm working on. I can't hear it properly in the club."

She followed him through the cold Montparnasse streets to the Passage d'Enfer, up the three flights, into the apartment she'd identified from the street and had not been inside.

It was one room and a small kitchen, which in 1925 was not unusual for a musician who spent more on sheet music than furniture. A bookshelf. A writing table with scores on it. And the piano, which filled a quarter of the available space in a way that suggested it had been there first and the apartment had been arranged around it.

He played her what he was working on.

She sat in the one chair that wasn't covered in something and listened, and what she heard was the material from the rehearsals transformed — he'd been working through the discomfort, and what was coming out the other side was the first thing she'd heard from him that sounded fully arrived. The harmonic language that history would preserve as the Aubert Modal Style, present in its early form, specific and beautiful and completely unlike anything else she'd encountered in eleven assignments worth of historical

music.

When he finished, the silence in the small apartment had weight.

"That's it," she said.

He looked at her.

"That's the thing you've been building toward," she said. "Since the first set I heard. It's all there."

He looked at the piano. "You think so."

"I know so," she said. "It's—" She stopped. She was about to use the word *foundational*, which was the word in the Bureau archive's music history files, and she filed this as a near-miss and chose a different word. "It's the sound that was underneath all the other sets. You were uncovering it."

He turned on the piano bench and looked at her with the full-attention quality, the complete present-ness that she had been cataloguing for seven weeks and was now, sitting five feet away in his apartment, feeling at close range.

"Sera," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"I need you to know—" He stopped. He looked at his hands, briefly. The gesture of a person choosing words with care. "In seven weeks, you are the most — I have not—" He stopped again. Started over. "I am not good at being understood," he said. "People have tried. I don't think I've made it easy. You arrived and you didn't try. You just—listened. And I found that I—" He stopped. "I don't know what word to use."

"You don't need a word," she said.

He got up from the piano bench. He crossed the small room, which took two steps, and sat on the arm of the chair she was in — the way a person does when there isn't another chair and they don't want to be across the

room anymore.

She looked up at him.

"Sera," he said again. Just her name. The way he said it — she had heard him say it before, but here in the small apartment with the piano at their backs and the November cold on the window, it had a different weight.

She reached up and touched his face.

He covered her hand with his.

They stayed like that for a moment — her hand on his face, his over hers, both of them holding what was happening and neither of them looking away from it. Then he leaned down and kissed her with the same quality as his music: patient, precise, the full thing rather than the surface of it.

She kissed him back.

The Morning

She stayed.

This is the sentence that does not appear in the field report, which covers the same night in the following language: *Social integration with target continues. Emotional connection development proceeding. Subject demonstrates decreased interest in the Buenos Aires departure based on direct conversation monitoring.*

The personal journal says: *I stayed.*

What staying meant: the cold Paris November outside and the small warm room and the piano casting its shadow across the floor and the specific quality of being with a person who was entirely present. He was present the way he played — not performing intimacy but simply being inside it, attending to it, finding the thing underneath the surface.

She woke at some point in the very early hours in the light of a Paris night — never entirely dark, always that orange ambient glow of a city that doesn't sleep — and lay looking at the ceiling of his apartment and had a conversation with herself about what she was doing.

The conversation went: *you are an operative of the Temporal Continuity Bureau on a fourteen-week assignment to prevent a deviation in the musical timeline. You have eight weeks remaining. You have become emotionally involved with the target. This is the textbook scenario that the Academy warned you about. This is C-7.*

The conversation also went: *this is the first time in four years and eleven assignments that you have felt like a person rather than a function.*

She looked at the ceiling and thought about Rule Seven. *A Meridian operative is not a tourist. She is not a participant. She is a correction.*

She thought: *and if the correction requires participation?*

This was not a question that appeared in the field charter.

He woke and found her awake.

"The ceiling," he said. "Something wrong with it?"

"I'm a habitual analyst," she said.

"Of ceilings."

"Of everything," she said.

He propped himself up on one arm and looked at her in the dark. "What are you analyzing?"

"Whether I'm making a mistake," she said. It was honest. She had learned, with him, that honesty was the only register that worked, because he heard the space around what was said as clearly as the thing itself.

"In being here?" he asked.

"In being—" she stopped. "In wanting to stay."

He was quiet for a moment. "Do you want to go?"

"No," she said. "That's the problem."

He reached over and took her hand in the dark. Just held it. The gesture that was his, she'd learned — not pulling, not claiming. Just contact.

"Sera," he said. "You don't have to analyze everything."

She looked at the ceiling.

"Yes I do," she said. "But thank you for suggesting it."

He laughed, softly, and she felt it against her shoulder and thought: *I am going to make a terrible field operative and I don't currently care.*

What She Carried

She was carrying two things she hadn't told him.

The first: she was going to leave. Not by choice — by the fixed physics of temporal displacement, which were not arguable. In six weeks, on the last Sunday of the fourteenth week, at two AM, she would be extracted from this point in the timeline and returned to 2157. She had no mechanism for staying. The extraction was not voluntary; it was the closing of the displacement window, which was a function of the Bureau's temporal technology and not her decision.

The second: the reason she was here. He didn't know he was a target. He didn't know that his decision about Buenos Aires was a thread in a fabric that, if pulled, would unravel into a catastrophe two hundred and thirty years from now. He thought she was a former music critic from New York who had come to Paris and happened to sit at a table in his club.

She thought about telling him. She thought about it every morning in the apartment on the Passage d'Enfer when he made coffee in the small kitchen and brought it to her and sat on the edge of the bed and they talked for an hour before he went to rehearsal and she went back to the pension to write her reports.

She thought: if I tell him what I am, I either destroy whatever this is, or I lose control of the timeline interaction in a way that could make things worse.

She thought: if I don't tell him, I am lying to him. And he hears the space around what's said.

The second thought won, eventually. Not because it was professionally required — it wasn't — but because she had concluded, after eleven assignments, that the things that cost you in the long run were not the things you did but the things you didn't say when you knew they needed to be said.

She waited for the right time.

The right time arrived, as right times do, unexpectedly.

They were at a café on the Rue de la Grande Chaumière, in the tenth week, the Thursday afternoon when the November rain had settled in for what felt like a permanent arrangement, and he said: "Tell me why you're actually in Paris."

She looked at him across the table.

"I told you," she said. "Six months ago, before I met you. I needed—"

"No," he said. "The real reason." He held her gaze with the directness that was entirely him, that she'd documented and filed and fallen for. "Not the cover story."

She was still.

"What do you mean?" she said. The operative's response — buying time, assessing.

"You know things you shouldn't," he said. "Small things. You knew the name of a bassist who played here once, years ago, who no one else has mentioned. You knew the approximate dates of the Moreau-Delacroix dinner before I told you there would be one." He paused. "You look at Paris like someone who knows what it will become."

She looked at her coffee.

"That's what someone from New York would do," she said. "You imagine the future of the city."

"No," he said. "You look at the buildings the way you'd look at photographs of someone who had died. Affectionately. From a distance." He paused. "Sera. Who are you?"

The Truth

She told him.

She told him over two hours, in a café during a November rain, in 1925 Paris, using language she'd adapted to the era — not the technical vocabulary of the Bureau but the simple version of it, the story of a future that had learned to reach back into the past with careful hands and fix the places where the fabric was tearing.

She told him about the Cascade. About what happened if the music was lost. About the chain of causality that ran from his six recording sessions in 1926 to a woman named Léa Fontaine who was seven years old in 2057 and didn't exist yet.

She told him about C-7, and Moreau-Delacroix, and the letter that had pushed him toward Buenos Aires. About the deviation she'd been sent to correct.

She told him she had four weeks left.

He listened without interrupting. His face was — she was watching it, watching the man who heard the space around what was said process a thing that was almost entirely space.

When she finished, the café was quieter. The rain continued.

"You came here to stop me from leaving," he said.

"Yes."

"And to do that, you—" He stopped. "What we have. Was that the method?"

"No," she said, and made herself say the next part clearly, because he deserved clarity. "I came to stop you from leaving. That was the assignment. What I feel about you is—" She paused. "It is not the assignment. It is a consequence of knowing you. And I would rather have it than not, even though it makes everything more complicated."

He looked at her.

"The extraction," he said. "In four weeks."

"Yes."

"You can't stay."

"The displacement window closes. It's not a choice. I don't have a mechanism for staying even if I—" She stopped.

"Even if you wanted to," he said.

"Yes."

He sat with this for a long time. She let him. She looked at the rain on the window and waited.

"The music," he said, finally. "The reason I stay. The sessions. I was going to make them regardless of your assignment."

"I know," she said. "The deviation had another source — not you. The Buenos Aires offer was partially engineered by someone who interfered in the timeline before I arrived. Left to yourself, without that interference, you would have stayed."

"So you came to—undo an earlier mistake."

"Yes."

He was quiet again. "And in the process made—" He looked at her. "This."

"Yes," she said. "I didn't plan it. If that matters."

"It matters enormously," he said.

Another long quiet.

"Théo," she said. "Tell me what you're thinking."

He looked at the table. The precise, careful look of a person choosing the most accurate version of the truth. "I am thinking," he said slowly, "that the most honest thing about you — the thing that made me trust you before I understood you — is that you are exactly what you are. No more, no less." He paused. "I knew something was— not false, but not complete. I didn't push because I was afraid that if I pushed you would leave." He looked up. "And now I know you're leaving anyway."

"Yes," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Are you."

"Profoundly," she said. "For everything except meeting you."

He held her gaze for a moment.

"Then we have four weeks," he said. "What do you want to do with them?"

She looked at him across the table in the rainy Paris November.

"Everything," she said.

Four Weeks

They used them.

This is the thing Sera would struggle to account for in any formal document and would find, in the years after, that she could account for precisely in the personal journal: the specific texture of four weeks held inside the knowledge of their end.

She had not expected that knowledge to make the time smaller. It made it larger. The way a frame defines a painting — the boundary doesn't diminish the thing inside it, it makes the thing inside more fully itself.

They went everywhere in Paris. Not because she was a tourist — she'd been in the city for ten weeks and had the bones of it by now — but because the city looked different with him next to her. He had walked every street in Montparnasse with the specific knowledge of a person who had been looking at them for six years, and the city under his attention was available to her in a different way.

He showed her things that were not in any archive. A wall on the Rue Campagne-Première where the light at four PM in November did something she couldn't describe. A café that stayed open until six AM because the owner believed in the moral importance of being available. A stretch of the Seine just south of the Île de la Cité where the light on the water at dusk was the color of something she didn't have a word for — not gold, not silver, the color that happened when both were present.

She showed him things too. Not from the future — she was careful, now that the truth was between them, not to disturb the timeline further. But the things she had noticed with the attention of someone trained to pay attention: the way the city was changing in ways its inhabitants were too close to see. The patterns in the music she'd been tracking.

"You've been watching us," he said one evening, walking back from the river. Not accusatory.

"Yes," she said.

"Like a scientist."

"Like someone who cares about what happens to the things she's watching," she said. "The science is just how I care."

He took her hand. She let him. The taking and letting of it — the hand-holding that had been, for four weeks since the night in the apartment, their ordinary — was a thing she was trying not to become used to in the way that would make its absence painful.

She was failing at this. She was very aware that she was failing at this.

The Recording Sessions

The sessions were scheduled for the first week of December — still three weeks before her extraction window, which was correct. The sessions needed to happen; their happening was the confirmation of the fixed thread.

Moreau-Delacroix had spoken to Théo privately the week before Sera told him the truth. He'd said — and Théo told her this afterward — that he'd reconsidered his recommendation of the Buenos Aires position. That Paris was where the work was coming from, and that leaving Paris would not be leaving in the direction of the work.

Théo had said he'd already reached the same conclusion.

Sera noted this in the field log without allowing herself to examine the full implications.

The recording sessions were three evenings at the private studio on the Rue Daguerre. Four musicians, two microphones, an engineer who wept during the third take of the second session and then denied it when asked. Sera sat in the corner in the same place she'd sat for the informal sessions in October, and she listened to what the archive would hold for a hundred and thirty-two years until Léa Fontaine was seven years old and heard it.

She listened with every part of herself.

The music that was being made was beyond what she'd heard at the club — not because the execution was more precise but because something had happened in Théo's playing in the three months she'd been here, some final turning toward the sound that had been underneath everything, and what came out of the piano in that studio was fully arrived. The harmonic language complete. The Aubert Modal Style, present.

She wrote in the field log: *Sessions complete. Six recordings in total. Deviation corrected. Thread secured.*

She wrote in the personal journal: *I will hear this for the rest of my life.*

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What They Didn't Say

They had an unspoken agreement not to talk directly about the extraction window until they had to. Not denial — they both knew it was coming, and the knowledge was present in everything, the specific way that knowledge lodges in the background of ordinary moments and gives them their particular weight.

What they did instead was talk about everything else.

About the music he planned to make after December. About the city in spring, which she would not be there for. About the other cities he'd played in and the specific qualities of each. About her work — not the details that would compromise the timeline, but the nature of it, the experience of moving through eras with the particular attention of someone whose job was to find the thread and hold it.

"You must have seen extraordinary things," he said.

"Yes," she said. "Eleven assignments."

"And before this one — were there others. Like this."

She looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Did you fall in love," he said. Directly.

"No," she said. "I was always—" She paused. "I was always the operative. I was very good at staying in that register." She held his gaze. "You were different."

"Why?"

She considered. "Because you don't let anyone stay in a register," she said. "You listen too carefully. You hear what's actually being said." A pause. "I had the experience of being understood before I wanted to be. Before I'd decided it was safe." She looked at him. "It was already done by the time I noticed."

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He looked at her for a long time.

"Good," he said. And meant it.

The Last Week

The last week had the quality of the last week of anything important — hyperreal in its detail, the texture of each day finer-grained than usual, every ordinary moment already slightly nostalgic.

She stayed at the apartment on the Passage d'Enfer. This had not been the plan; the plan had been the pension until extraction. But the plan had been made before the truth was between them and everything after the truth had a different shape.

She wrote and filed all her reports. The field log was complete: deviation corrected, method documented, extraction scheduled. She wrote the report in the careful professional language of the Bureau, which required her to omit certain things — not lie, exactly, but to exercise the specific editorial discipline of a report that was accurate in its facts and silent on certain others.

She wrote in the personal journal everything the field log didn't say.

On the second-to-last day she went to the gallery where the Petrova-equivalent of 1925 Paris lived — not the photographer she would know in another assignment but a painter, a young woman named Simone Archard who was not yet well-known and who was making paintings of city surfaces. Sera bought one. A small canvas, the wall of a building in the 14th arrondissement, painted in the greys and blues of winter Paris.

She could not take it with her. Extraction protocol: you arrive with what you're given, you leave with what you arrived with. No artifacts from the target era. The Bureau was extremely clear on this.

She left it with Théo.

"To remember what the walls of the city looked like when you were young," she said, which was the only version of the real reason she could say.

He took it. He held it for a moment in the way he held things — with attention, not possession.

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"I'll think of you every time I look at it," he said.

"Good," she said.

The Night Before

They didn't talk about the extraction directly until the night before.

They were in the apartment — she had cooked, which she had discovered she was moderately competent at and which had made him laugh with genuine delight the first time she'd produced a meal in his kitchen. The remains of dinner on the table, wine, the late evening. The piano.

"Play something," she said.

He went to the piano and played.

He played for an hour. Not the formal sessions — the private music, the searching music, the music that was still finding its way. She sat and listened and memorized it in the way she was memorizing everything about this week: the quality of the light from the lamp on the writing table, the smell of Paris in December through the slightly ill-fitting window, the sound of his playing when he wasn't playing for history.

When he stopped, the silence was the kind that happened between two people who had said what needed to be said.

He turned on the bench.

"In your time," he said. "Is there a record of me?"

She looked at him. "Yes," she said.

"A good record?"

"The best kind," she said. "The kind that changes how people hear music."

He nodded slowly. "David Park will hear me," he said — he had remembered the name, from when she told him the chain of causality. "In 2057."

"Léa Fontaine," she said. "Yes."

"Good," he said. He said it the same way she'd said it to him — the word that meant: *this is enough. this is what it was for.*

"Théo," she said.

"I know," he said.

She crossed the room and he stood up from the piano bench and they held each other in the small apartment in the December cold and she put her face against his neck and felt his arms around her and let herself feel all of it — the full weight of what she was going to carry out of this room and into the extraction point at two AM.

"I want you to know," she said, against his shoulder, "that this was—" She stopped. The word *real* was too small. The word *everything* was too large. She settled for: "This was the truest thing that has happened to me."

He held her more tightly. "Yes," he said. "For me also."

"I can't tell you it will get easier quickly," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for that either," he said. "I'll spend it on the music." A pause. "That's not a small consolation."

"No," she said. "It's the largest one there is."

Two AM

She left at one-fifteen.

The extraction point was the same courtyard off the Rue de la Gaîté where she'd arrived. She had the kit. She had the compact-mirror device set to the extraction protocol. She had the field log and the personal journal, both of which would be required reading during the seventy-two-hour quiet period.

She did not have the painting. The painting was on the wall of the apartment on the Passage d'Enfer where it would remain, in Théo's keeping, for however long Théo kept things.

She stood at the door of the apartment for a moment before she left.

"I would—" she started.

"I know," he said. "If you could."

She looked at him in the doorway light.

"The next one," she said. "The woman after me. Don't make her wait seven weeks."

He smiled, and the smile had the particular quality of a person who was managing grief with precision. "There is no next one," he said. "That's not how this works."

"It is," she said. "Eventually. That's the right answer."

He held her gaze. "You are very direct."

"I learned it from you," she said.

She kissed him once, final and complete, and turned and went down the three flights of stairs into the cold December Paris street.

She walked to the Rue de la Gaîté without looking back. She stood in the

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courtyard. She set the device.

At two AM, Paris 1925 became less present.

And then less absent.

And then gone.

Return

The return is not the same as the displacement.

The displacement is like leaving a conversation in the middle. The return is like arriving at a conversation that has moved on while you were away and is now about something else entirely.

New Geneva, 2157. The recovery wing of the Bureau. White walls and the particular quality of institutional light that exists, apparently, in every era — the light that means: *you are in a facility and people have decided what is best for you.*

Sera lay on the recovery bed and looked at the ceiling, which she was in the habit of analyzing.

She was back.

She had the field log with her. She had the personal journal. She had the complete memory of fourteen weeks in 1925 Paris and the specific, located knowledge of what she was going to do with it.

Moss came in on the second day.

"Field log is strong," Moss said, sitting. "Deviation corrected. The recording sessions are confirmed in the archive — they happened, the thread is secure." She paused. "The earlier TCB interference by C-7. You found it."

"Yes," Sera said.

"I'll note it in the review file," Moss said. "C-7 is—a more complicated matter." She paused, and Sera heard the pause. "Not your concern for now."

"Who was C-7?" Sera asked.

Moss looked at her for a moment. "Someone who did what you did," she said. "More or less." She paused. "She's retired now."

Sera looked at the ceiling.

"The personal journal," Moss said. "I've read the required sections."

"And?"

"You were compromised," Moss said. Not harshly — the word was clinical. "Emotional involvement with the target. The personal journal is clear."

"Yes," Sera said.

"And the mission succeeded."

"Yes."

Moss was quiet for a moment. "I'm going to ask you a question that's not in the formal review," she said. "And you can answer it off the record."

"Alright."

"Do you regret it?"

Sera looked at the ceiling. At the white walls. At the Bureau's careful, clean-lined, gray-glass present.

"No," she said.

Moss nodded, once. "Then put it in the journal," she said. "The real journal. Not the field log. Write it clearly, so you can read it." She paused. "And then come back to work. There are twelve more assignments."

Sera turned her head and looked at her supervisor.

"I know," she said.

What the Archive Holds

Three weeks after the return, when the quiet period was over and she was back at her actual desk in the Bureau building, Sera pulled the archive file on Théodore Aubert, 1925.

She didn't open it immediately. She sat with it — the paper file, the Bureau paper — and held it the way he had held things, with attention rather than possession.

Then she opened it.

The six recording sessions from December 1925: all present. The recordings preserved, digitized in the twenty-first century, remastered in the twenty-second, currently held in three separate archives as among the most significant documents of early European jazz. The Aubert Modal Style: documented, analyzed, influential. The chain of causality: traced to Léa Fontaine, computational composer, who in her 2098 memoir had written about the recording she heard as a child in terms that the Bureau historians considered one of the most precise accounts ever given of a cultural influence.

Théodore Aubert, 1925–1968. The biographical notes: six years of extraordinary productivity in Paris after the sessions. A period abroad in the early thirties that was less musically significant but personally rich — he traveled, he taught, he married a pianist named Marguerite Blot in 1934 and had two children. He continued performing until the late sixties. He died at sixty-five of a heart condition that the archive noted was consistent with the era's medical limitations.

He had lived a full life.

She closed the file.

She sat at her desk in 2157 and thought about the wall painting on the Passage d'Enfer. The Simone Archard canvas she'd left with him. She thought about whether it had survived — whether it was in a museum, archived, or lost. She didn't look it up. Some things were better held without

the documentary record.

She thought about what he'd said: *There is no next one. That's not how this works.*

And what she'd said back: *It is. Eventually. That's the right answer.*

She picked up the next assignment file that Moss had left on her desk.

Manila folder. Paper. The weight of it familiar.

She opened it.

1881. Vienna. A composer named Elise Hartmann who was about to burn a symphony that needed to survive.

Sera read the file. She noted the target's name, the deviation, the thread she was going to need to find and hold. She looked at the photograph: a woman at a writing desk, mid-twenties, the particular absorbed expression of someone whose mind was primarily occupied with something invisible.

She closed the file.

She picked up the personal journal — she was always starting a new one on a new assignment; this one was clean, empty — and wrote on the first page:

Vienna, 1881. The rule is: I am a correction, not a participant.

She paused. She looked at the blank page.

She wrote: *Rule Seven is the one we all break.*

Epilogue: The Letters

Archived in the Bureau's historical contact file, under a classification that required senior security clearance, is a set of letters.

The letters are handwritten. French. The paper is period — identified by the Bureau's materials analysis team as consistent with 1926–1930 manufacture, Parisian origin.

They are addressed to no one.

The first is dated January 1926. It reads, in part:

Paris is cold this year, colder than last December, and I find I notice the cold more than I used to. The apartment is the same. The piano is the same. I have begun the next set of compositions and they are going well — perhaps better than well. The sound is there, fully, and I think I knew it would be from the December sessions. I think I knew it because she told me it was there before I could hear it myself.

I cannot write to you. I know this. The rules of what you do, the careful way the past and the future hold each other — I understand why there is no address for this letter. I am writing it anyway, because she taught me that the things that cost you are not the things you do but the things you don't say when they need saying.

So: I loved you. Present tense but past context — I understand the grammar of time differently now. I loved you and I will continue to love you in the register that is available to me, which is the music. That is not a small thing. You said so yourself.

Come back, if the timeline ever asks it of you. I'll know who you are.

— T.A.

There are twelve letters in total. The last is dated 1934, the year before his marriage.

The Bureau file note reads: *Letters received through temporal recovery protocol, 2089. Origin: physical mail submitted by the estate of Marguerite Aubert (née Blot) following the death of Théodore Aubert, 1968, with a note from the estate reading: "He asked that these be forwarded to the appropriate recipient. We did not understand who that was. We hoped someone would."*

Letters held in the archive. Recipient: Operative Calloway, Sera (retired). Status of delivery: pending operative return from current assignment.

Note: Operative C-14 is currently on assignment twelve of an active field career. Archive holding maintained.

Book One: 1925 Paris. Théodore Aubert. A jazz musician and the music that needs to survive. **Book Two:** 1881 Vienna. A composer and a symphony at risk. **Book Three:** [Undisclosed era.] The assignment that brings Sera home — in every sense of the word.

The rule every Meridian operative breaks is Rule Seven. The letters all get delivered eventually.

Word count: ~20,000 words **Series:** The Meridian Series, Book One **Heat rating:** Spice Level 3/4 — romantic and sensory, intimate scenes present and emotionally earned, tone prioritizes emotional depth and world-building **Tropes:** Time Travel Romance, Forbidden Love, Slow Burn, Found Family (the Bureau), Bittersweet HFN **Author:** Lenora Vale **Themes:** The cost of correct action, whether following the rules is the same as doing the right thing, what survives when the person doesn't stay, the ethics of caring about the past