

THE GUILD OF SADOWS



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La Guilde des Ombres, Tome 1 : Le Don de mort, Partie I

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THE GUILD OF SHADOWS

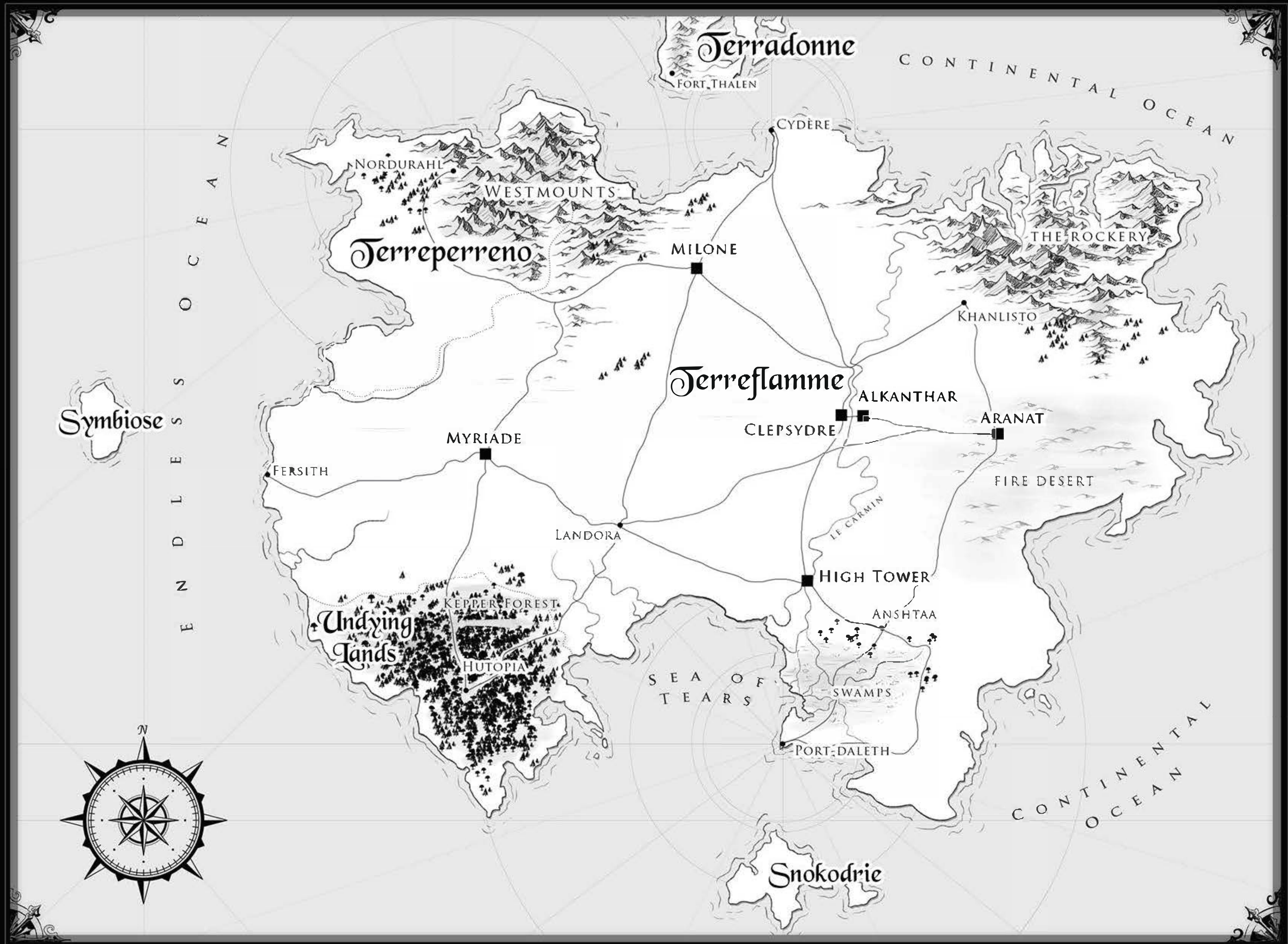
1 - Part I
The Gift of death

(Novel)

«The mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death»
OSCAR WILDE

*I dedicate this saga to my lovely boy, TÉO.
My son, never forget this words.*

**«Fall an hundred times
Get up an hundred times
Never give up»**



The Guild of Shadows



Lord

Pericious



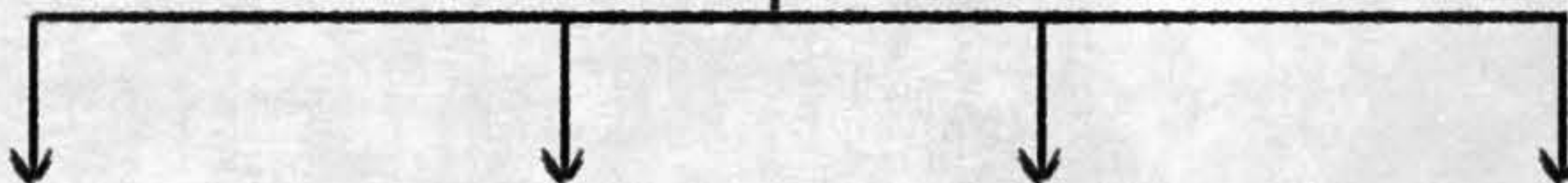
Lord

Furnace



High Master

Reaper



Master = Master = Master = Master

Belladonna

Veloce,

Sower,

Necromancer,



Shadows

Sanguine, Blackblade, Shredder, Tracker



Apprentice

THE SIX BROTHERHOOD OF TERREFLAMME AND THEIR CITIES

- The Mercantile League of Alkanthar, ruled by the three Merchants.
- The Guild of Shadows of Clepsydre, ruled by the two Lords.
- The Pantheon Brotherhood of Myriade, ruled by the Primesister
- Caste of Justice of High Tower, ruled by the Commander
- Clan of Scholars of Aranat, ruled by the Curator
- Workers' Brotherhood of Milone, ruled by the Patriarch

THE GODS OF THE CONTINENT

The two Divine Mothers, the Goddess of Life and the Goddess of Death

The God of Dreams

The goddess of Destiny

The god of War

The god of Commerce

The goddess of Lust

The goddess of Justice

The goddess of Nature

The god of Love

The god of Knowledge

The four Dryadenes, daughters of Nature: Succubus, goddess of Fire and Autumn;

Naiad, goddess of Water and Winter; Nymph, goddess of Earth and Spring; Fairy, goddess of Air and Summer

THE FOUR CLANS OF DRAGONS

The pyros

Scale color: black

Element: fire

The hydros

Scale color: blue

Element: water

The Aeolus:

Scale color: Silver

Element: wind

The tellurians

Scale color: red

Element: earth

CHARACTERS

The Guild of Shadows

PANAMA CARSWELL, a.k.a Sanguine, Shadow
KHAMAR, a.k.a Reaper, Hight Master and Yleas' son
JERY'S TARGAM, a.k.a Furnace, Lord and Beladyn's father
YLEAS, a.k.a Pericious, Lord and Khamar's father
VINS, a.k.a Blackblade, Shadow, Delton's son and Jenckins' brother
NYM, a.k.a Belladona, Master, Khamar's concubine and Lyam's sister
LYAM, a.k.a Veloce, Master and Nym's brother
DELTON, a.k.a Necromancer, Master, Vins and Jenckins's father
JOHNNAS, a.k.a Sower, Master
JENCKINS, a.k.a Shredder, Shadow, Delton's son and Vins' brother
TRACKER, Shadow Sentry
TERRYS, apprentice
MENOS SINIFUS, Guild Watchman
CLEOMENE, Guild's cook

BELADYN, a.k.a Blaze. The Damned Shadow, Jery's Targam's son

Pantheon Brotherhood

JILLIA, priestess of Life apprentice
CORA ANASTINE, Primesister, Lena's niece
LENA ANASTINE, High Priestess, Cora's aunt
MAELIA, priestess of Love

The Mercantile League

SCERTYR, Merchant, Kemys' nephew
KEMYS, Merchant, Adrian's wife and Scertyr's aunt
ADRIAN, Merchant, Kemys' husband

Kingdom of the Undying Lands

ABINK SOLANI, a.k.a «monkey»
ALYSIA, elves' Queen, Ybranham's mother
YBRANHAM, Prince and guard captain, Alysia's son
ELYWAN, Regent of the Decennial Council
DRAZIN, High Priest et Notable of the Decennial Council

Others

THALIA CARSWELL, Panama's mother
GORGON CARSWELL, Panama's brother
KIRGHAZ CARSWELL, Panama's father
MEGAR DELATORME, Curator of the Clan of Scholars
MASTERSON, Commander of the Caste of Justice
ALBANES, Patriarch of the Workers' Brotherhood
AZUR, Archmage of Corpotium
GRISE, Archmage of Corpotium
MYRTILLE, Queen of the Collectors
CARESSE, First Celestial Relic



Prologue

*«We are all destined for the kiss of death.
Only the gods are immortal.»*

MOTTO OF THE GUILD OF SHADOWS

On this lovely evening of spring, Megar Delatorme was in a suspiciously good mood.

He had, miraculously, managed to fulfill his daily obligations on time. Locked all day in his luxurious study, the Curator of the Aranat's Great Library had been busy with administrative chores, including the tedious management of city finances and the reading of an endless list of reports sent by the Mercantile League. Running one of the five queen cities of Terreflamme had never an easy task!

Luckily, everything was ready for the Harvest, and the exorbitant amount of tax assigned to his Clan had been collected. Tomorrow, at dawn, he would leave with his retinue by carriage to the country's capital, Alkanthar, also known as the City of a Thousand Towers. If there were no mishaps during his journey, he will reach his destination on the day before the Harvest.

Megar Delatorme was as much involved in the stewardship of the Great Library as in the regency of Aranat. The front of the building was decorated with a remarkable giant fresco in trompe-l'oeil representing shelves full of books and various objects related to knowledge, such as calligraphy pens, navigational instruments, ingenious machines and scientific measuring tools. The library included a

prestigious private school and a vast museum for the high nobility of Terreflamme: like the knights of the Caste of Justice, the studious Scholars of the Clan came from a wealthy family. The library had the largest collection of books and documents from the four corners of Shynighgar. More than five hundred thousand books and fifty thousand scrolls were kept within its walls. Hundreds of scholars worked day and night to copy, translate, archive, classify and maintain these priceless objects of knowledge. Fortified with four stories high, and with dozens of hypostyle rooms decorated with thematic paintings, the library was a true institution on the Continent. Books were stored in the countless solid wood shelves and parchments were carefully arranged in the floor-to-ceiling racks. Consultation of the original works, on the spot, was reserved only for a hand-picked elite.

Indeed, the Scholars had sworn a drastic oath of confidentiality: to divulge a secret of the Great Library to the public was considered a crime against the historical heritage of Terreflamme... and therefore punishable by death. A death sentence meant an official beheading under the blades of the terrible Lacemaker, followed by a temporary head exhibition on a post in the Hinge of Alkanthar.

For his part, Megar Delatorme was an extremely professional man who devoted himself to his work with all the rigor that the Merchants demanded of their vassals. The head of the Clan of Scholars had spent twenty years winning the indispensable favor of the most powerful and influential faction in Terreflamme: the Mercantile League. The man took great pride in his record. He had begun his career as a ordinary scholar, then climbed the ladder to high society with unflagging patience. Now his distinguished position placed him far above the common mortal.

However, once his day was over, the Curator would easily let go all of the problems linked to the regency of Aranat, in order to better concentrate on the atypical pleasures of his privileged life. His nocturn activities did not concern his wife, a frigid sexagenarian of the fine aristocracy of the Alkanthian court, chosen by the Merchants for the only purpose of maintaining a healthy and respectable image among the gullible population. Megar only met her on rare occasions. He had no feelings for her, not even an ounce of respect: his aging wife was, in his eyes, a mere cover, a stooge. Ironically, she could barely read - she had poor eyesight - let alone write - as she had contracted Trembling Fingers Disease in her youth.

The sun had just set when the Curator entered a secret anteroom of the Great Library, a subterranean cell whose existence was known only to a few trusted members of his entourage. His devoted valet was waiting in the room, accompanied by an unscrupulous slave trader and his young captives. The man had taken them to Aranat in a covered wagon, then quietly ushered them into the basement of the Great Library. Curled up on the cold floor, their wrists and ankles chained, the six inmates looked at the newcomer with fear.

Dressed in a large dark coat, embroidered with golden threads that brushed his calves, Megar greeted his subordinate with a nod. The merchant bowed awkwardly and gave him a businesslike smile. Megar's appearance was more of a politician than a bureaucrat. With his upper lip crowned by a thin moustache, his eyes and black hair, the Curator exuded an undeniable charisma. However, the wild aura he gave off suggested something fundamentally disturbing.

"Let's see, what surprises did you bring me tonight?" asked Megar, inspecting the slaves. He took one by the chin, pouted disdainfully and pushed the girl's head away gruffly. "Too old."

The Curator continued to observe the other prisoners, more to his liking. They seem to have around ten to fifteen years old. They were shivering with cold: their dirty rags indicated their low extraction. They were skinny and dirty, just as he liked them. The three youngest sobbed softly, in instinctive terror. Two others were misty-eyed. But one of the six was not crying. Her head tucked between her shoulders, her gaze fixed on her bare toes, she did not even flinch.

His interest aroused by this peculiar behavior, Megar approached the girl. She was a small, thin redhead with a light skin. A barbarian from Terradonne. She raised towards him a face smeared with dirt where two emerald, green eyes sparkled. He was surprised not to detect any fear in the prisoner's expression: just a sad resignation. *She'll be docile*, mused the Clan Curator, gauging the girl's delicate features with an appreciative air. *What a pretty little exotic bird*. He had never met a Donnian girl until today. However, he still had one essential detail to settle before finalizing his choice.

"The barbarian, how old is she?" he asked the slave trader.

"Fourteen years old, my lord. An orphan, like the others. I picked her up on a street in Clepsydra where she was begging. She has no family left."

Wonderful news. No one will miss her, rejoiced the Curator, lighting up with a tiny smile.

"Good. I'll take her. My servant will give you your bounty and the commission for the transport. I am satisfied with the variety of your goods. Theophile, tell the guards to escort the girl to my chambers," he ordered his servant before turning and leaving the room.

The itinerant merchant felt an irrepressible chill and looked at the captives with a vaguely guilty eye, as he did every time he gave away young girls into the hands of his employer. This unpleasant feeling lasted only a moment, mentally replaced by the comforting tinkling of the scepters that the Curator of Aranat had promised him.



"You're not very chatty," said Megar Delatorme, sitting across from the teenager with the tangled red hair. "Are you from Terradonne, little one? What is your name?"

The young beggar did not loosen her lips. Her eyes fled, she mechanically rubbed her wrists, reddened by the cruel vice of the iron bracelets. Her rusty chains lay on the ground on an expensive carpet, a few inches from her.

While swirling his wine cup between his banded fingers, the Curator took the opportunity to detail his captive with a silent delight. Despite the smell and the dirt - which did not disgust him, though - those long, flaming curls and that fine, incredibly pure face matched perfectly Delatorme's standards of beauty. Under her large rags, he could picture a frail body with shy and innocent curves. Her submissive attitude had been decisive in his choice.

With luck, she was still a virgin.

In the past, Megar was more attracted to fierce teenage girls who resisted him for his own pleasure. Back then, he loved to have fun with such wild girls, he wanted to break their will. Once done, he forced them

to carry out all his unhealthy desires, gloating to see their rage annihilated by a huge distress. But he had grown tired of having to hide the scratches and bites of his victims and, with age, he had become more reasonable. He now chose passive and fearful slaves who were more likely ready to fall into his arms.

The Curator of the Clan of Scholars had many childish conquests to his credit. He spent a fortune to preserve his despicable secret and had the few who accused him of such vices eliminated. Careful, Megar was also buying the silence of intermediaries and witnesses. Fortunately for the nobles, he was not interested in their children, but only in the orphans and wanderers, or even in little peasant girls whom the poor parents were ready to sell them into a pit of despair. As for the victims, no one knew what happened to them... although the disturbing rumors that circulated in the streets told of decomposing bodies of mutilated girls, found floating in the sewers of the queen city. This explained why Megar was constantly in need of new slaves to fulfill its stock.

"Are you hungry, little one?" he proposed, pointing to an elegant table filled with baskets of fruit and fine pastries. "Please help yourself. You are at home here."

The Curator had a way of doing things. He would start by making his captive feel at ease by being friendly and welcoming. Usually, offering snacks to a hungry prisoner proved fruitful, the girl quickly relaxes her vigilance. Then he would hand her a cup of wine to make her drunk. In most cases, the girl accepted his offering. Under the influence of the alcohol, the girl usually became as docile as a lamb for the rest of the festivities.

The redheaded teenager glanced at the table and shook her head. Megar frowned briefly, surprised by the girl's distrust. "You don't have to be afraid of me," he said in a soft tone that he hoped would be reassuring. "I won't do you any harm. You are no longer in the dark and hostile streets of Clepsydra, child. You are safe in my home. You are under my protection. No one will ever come after you again."

The girl gave him a strange look and – he could have sworn – the shadow of a smile passed on her pink lips for a split second. He thought he successfully made her overcome her fear.

Proud of his power of persuasion, he beckons the teenager to come forward. She obeyed without hesitating, which confirmed him in his first impression. Delicately, he took her hands and plunged his black irises in hers. Her milky skin was icy, but he would warm her up really soon. She was delicious. So delicious that he would savor every bite of his new treat.

“What gift would you like most, little one?” he breathed as he pulled her to him, forcing her to sit on his lap, caressing her fiery hair in a fatherly gesture. “A silk dress worthy of a princess? A gold necklace encrusted with emeralds to match your eyes? A pretty little dog with fluffy fur? I’m rich enough to fulfill all your wishes. You will have everything you need; I promise. You will eat and drink your fill every day. You will be free to do whatever you want. Horseback riding, lavish parties... Your life will change completely, you know. It has not done you any favors so far, has it? But the bad times are over, I’ll personally take care of you.”

The Donnian girl nodded enthusiastically. Happy by her reaction, Megar lowered his hand along her naked arm. He savored the satiny touch of her smooth skin. He felt more and more excited: his heartbeat was racing in his chest, his breathing was getting heavier, his blood was boiling in his veins and his palms were sweaty. He was in a hurry to take possession of this desirable young body. It was only a question of minutes...

“Now, give me your name,” he encouraged her in a whisper while rubbing her arm. “I am convinced that you are not dumb and that you speak my language, beautiful. Be nice to me, reveal me your name.”

Moving his fingers up to her shoulder, he saw something on the inside of her forearm. The top third of a stylized black tattoo of an animal creature appeared. The curator’s wet palm had partially erased the layer of white powder that covered the girl’s skin. It was undoubtedly a distinctive mark of her barbarian tribe.

He vaguely wondered why the slave trader had insisted on covering up her ethnic tattoo, but he couldn’t think clearly. His thoughts were slipping away under the pressure of his inflamed senses.

“Tell me, child. Tell me your name...”

Delicately, the Donnian girl puts her graceful arms around Megar’s neck and leaned to his ear to whisper a sentence in her native dialect.

“Very well, but be kind, repeat it to me in the continental language,” encouraged the Curator, delighted that she finally agreed to speak to him.

“Yes, my lord, I will translate for you,” she agreed in a small, sweet voice in human language, without the slightest accent. “It is the least I can do. My real name is not important. The only thing you need to know, right now, is that I am the Shadow before Death.”

Delatorme’s smile disappeared abruptly. He turned his head to the

teenager, exasperated by this bad joke.

But she was not joking.

The soft and vulnerable face that had charmed him so much a few minutes ago was no longer there. Megar found himself faced with an implacable mask of hardness, as icy as the eternal snows that crowned the top of the Rocky Mountains.

Yet this was not the most disturbing thing.

A radical change had occurred in the girl's eyes. A murderous flame had ignited in her green eyes, linked to the imminent danger she represented. He immediately looked down at the top of her tattoo and his face fell as he realized the extent of his misunderstanding.

It was not a Donnian mark.

It was the black dragon of the Guild of Shadows.

A Clepsydra assassin.

Quickly, Delatorme realized the meaning of the strange smile she had shown when he had assured her that she was safe under his protection.

Of course, she was safe...

On the other hand, it was not the case for him.

Sharper than a snake, the girl wrapped her arms around his neck and threw herself sharply to the side, knocking over Delatorme's chair in the process.

Gasping, the Curator tried to scream for help but only a muffled croak emerged from his constricted throat. He struggled with all his might as he caught a scrape of chains on the floor and managed to roll onto his back as the metal links took painful relief from The Shadow's arms.

In a survival reflex, he grabbed the chain with both hands, but it tightened around his windpipe. The girl changed her position and fell on top of him, one knee across his chest to prevent him from moving while she strangled him. She was crushing his sternum; he felt like she weighed twice as much as she was supposed to.

Delatorme grabbed his young attacker by the side and tried to throw her off. She anticipated his offensive and quickly brought down her elbow in the hollow of his outstretched arm. The blow proved so powerful and so precise that it dislocated instantly the joint of his bones. Megar's guttural cries were muted by the chain's vicious embrace. His right arm was out.

"You're louder than a piglet being gutted," the girl commented coldly, before grabbing him by a handful of hair and slamming the back of his head into the floor.

Half-stunned by the impact; the Curator let out a miserable hiss. His

assailant took the opportunity to pull him away and drag him toward the giant bed, pulling on the chain with both hands. Her strength was prodigious. Delatorme could barely breathe and was in agony. The barbarian hung the chain on the bedpost with the swift efficiency of a jailer. Then, she fastened her own bracelets around Megar's wrists and tightened the pressure of the metal links around his neck in order to immobilize his head as well.

"There's no need to damage your vocal cords, there's no point in screaming. Nobody can hear you, don't you remember? You dismissed all the guards so that we wouldn't be disturbed during our long rendezvous. That's what you always do when you bring a frightened little girl back to your apartments."

The Curator fluttered his eyelids with a whimper. Through his blurred vision, he saw the girl straightened up and camped in front of him, a fist on her hip. She gazed at him in silence, her face puzzled as if she were thinking about what to do of him. A hope of survival sprang up in the prisoner's heart. If this... Shadow... had wanted to kill him, she would have broken his cervical vertebrae a few seconds earlier.

"Let... let me go, assassin," Delatorme implored in a trembling voice. "Your price... will be mine. Release me and... and I'll give you more gold than you can carry!"

She turned away with a shrug and walked to the table covered with food.

"You still want to know my name, my lord?" she asked in a softened tone.

He didn't answer, his rounded eyes fixed on the hand she held out for a small knife. She swiveled toward him again, assessing the blade from every angle.

"My Shadow brothers call me Sanguine," the Donnian girl informed him, running the pad of her finger along the edge of the knife. "There are two reasons for this. The first has to do with the color of my hair. I guess you've already guessed the second reason, you're a big boy." She walked towards him, tapping her thigh with the flat of the knife at regular intervals, one every second.

"I must admit that I have been looking forward to our meeting. Five days of travel in the bottom of an old, covered wagon that reeked of urine, chained like a beast, so that I could infiltrate your

excessively secure home. Five days of playing the role of an anonymous victim to your fresh meat supplier to approach you in private, far from your guards. Five days of picturing how we could entertain each other.” She paused in her monologue, wrinkling her nose. “Like many men, you are so blinded by your own lust and vices that you don't trust the mask of innocence. Never trust appearances, Delatorme. Look, this kitchen knife is not blunt, on the contrary. It is as sharp as a razor blade. You have made yourself some unsavory enemies. I am the instrument of their revenge.” As she said this fatalistic sentence, her gaze fell on the crotch of her prisoner. “Which present do you think they would like the most?”

Despite their age's difference, gender, and constitution, Megar Delatorme shivered compulsively. Everything he had ever read or heard about the Guild of Shadows came flooding back to him.

"Trained in the dark arts of death by dangerous master assassins since childhood."

"Granted with supernatural powers by the Goddess of Death herself in exchange for their loyalty."

"The elite professional killers of the Continent."

"All ruthless."

“Give me your price! We can work something out between us. I'll offer you ten times what your backers paid!” he cried feverishly as she moved closer, continuing to hammer at his thigh with the flat of the knife.

“You really think you're the first target to try to save his life by bribing one of our own with money?” she said as she crouched down in front of him, her head cocked to the side. “We are not sensitive to any form of corruption. We always honor our contracts, matter of reputation.”

The man opened his mouth to protest but she beat him to it. “But I'll be frank with you, my lord...” She slowly ran her thumbnail over the blade of the knife, lowering her tone. “It won't be quick. I feel an unmitigated joy at the thought of ridding Terreflamme of your vile person and I intend to take my time in accomplishing my mission.” She waved her weapon at the door. “We have a full hour before the next round on this floor. Master of Scholars, are you eager to learn new knowledge? I plan to show you a sample of the methods taught to the apprentices of my guild so that you can broaden your knowledge one last time. For every child raped and killed by your hand, I will make you experience a treatment so unbearable that you will beg me to finish you. I will take everything from you: your dignity, your spirit, your soul, until you have nothing left. Through the bloody veil of your suffering, you will repent of all those you have caused. Each minute spent in my company will seem to last a century. During these sixty minutes, which will be the longest—and the last—of your life, we will weave a special relationship, you and I... The executioner and his victim. United in pain, blood, and tears. Yours.

A burning sensation rose in his nauseated throat. He thought he was going to vomit his last meal, duck with orange.

No, no, that's not possible. The Curator reasoned. *It can't be.* This had to be some kind of twisted game. A strong-armed maneuver designed to intimidate him, make him cough up money, or both. The girl was not an assassin from the City of Vices, just an actress — a good one. Her tattoo was fake. Gods, how could he have been fooled by such a huge sham? As far as he knew, the Shadows had only dark elves men in their ranks. Besides, their two Lords had no interest in attacking him: like his Clan and the other Flammeriades brotherhoods, the Guild of Shadows had sworn allegiance to the all-powerful Mercantile League.

Who had recruited this spectacularly strong Donnian warrior to play this role of torturer? The slave trader who had served him for years? A traitor who worked within his own clan? A nobleman from the capital jealous of his fortune and his success? In any case, the one who had orchestrated this stupid staging would regret having come into the world!

"All right, kid, cut the crap! What do you want from me?" he growled, regaining what left of his pride.

"Haven't I made myself clear, my lord?"

Delatorme froze as she tapped his belt buckle with the tip of her knife. In his pants, his balls retracted in anguish. *No way. No.*

"You want to hear me repent, is that it?" He articulated between two gasps. "I am sorry, that's it!"

"No, you are not sorry. Not yet, at least..."

She can't be a Shadow. She can't be!

"I won't do it again; I swear on the god of Knowledge and ... and all the other gods of the Pantheon! Release me. Now!"

An amused, almost childish smile played on Sanguine's lips.

"Oh, but I already know you won't do it again... The dead don't rape the living."

In his despair, Megar Delatorme let himself be overwhelmed by an unprecedented fit of rage, hatred and terror. All his muscles tightened as if he was about to break his chains. His face turned scarlet. Veins bulged in his neck and on his temples. The roar of a wounded beast thundered through the room, despite the metal shackle that compressed his throat. The tall, confident, cultured politician was gone. All that was left of him was an animal in a state of desperation, confronted with its own helplessness and its impending death, which had just realized that the girl

in front of him was exactly who she claimed to be.

“BE DAMNED, YOU BITCH!” he cursed with all his lungs.
“YOU AND ALL YOUR KIND! I AM UNTOUCHABLE! I AM A
CLOSE FRIEND OF THE MERCHANTS; MY SISTER IS
PROMISED TO THE YOUNGEST!”

“I know that, but don’t be so arrogant. No mortal is untouchable.”

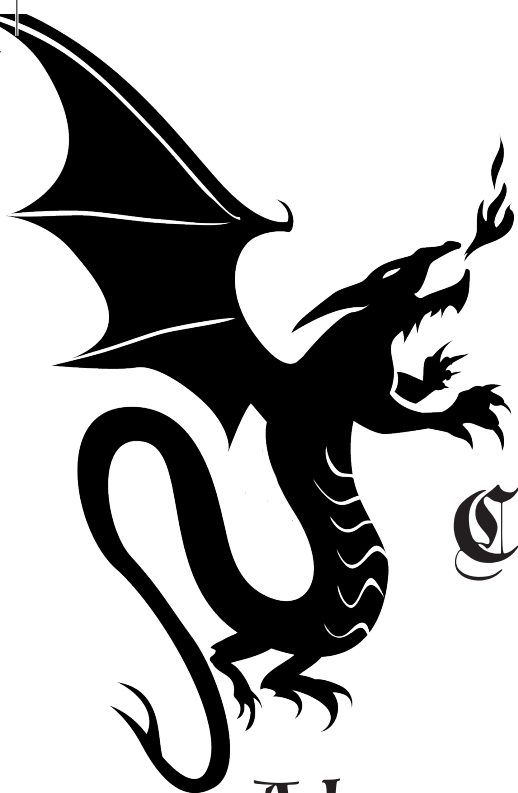
The Curator wasn’t listening. He was shouting without even catching his breath.

“DONNIAN SLUT! I’M GOING TO KILL YOU AND FUCK YOUR
CORPSE! THE MERCANTILE LEAGUE WILL EXTERMINATE ALL THE
MEMBERS OF YOUR GUILD IF YOU DARE TO TOUCH ME! THINK
ABOUT IT STUPID WHORE! YOUR LORDS WOULD NEVER BREAK
THE TRUCE FOR A SIMPLE CONTRACT ON MY HEAD!

Delatorme fell silent instantly when the Donnian girl slipped her knife under his belt and sliced it with a simple gesture. The curator’s crimson complexion turned white in less than two seconds.

“Now that you have finished pouring out your nauseating bile, let’s get down to business,” murmured the young girl, her doll-like features imbued with a heavenly calm. “But before, allow me to take again your eloquent metaphor and to put it in the right context. My lord, the times of misfortune have arrived... I will take care of you personally.”

For the next sixty minutes, the Shadow that precedes Death kept her promise.



Chapter 1

A home of darkness

*"If you have the misfortune to meet a Shadow,
make sure you write your will in the three minutes you have left to live."*

POPULAR CLEPSYDRA SAYING

Year 962, 5 years earlier

"Dead! All dead!" roared a husky voice behind the door.

Busy disinfecting her midwife's medical instruments in the blood-soaked basin, She-Wolf raised her head when she heard the door of the farmhouse open with a bang. A whistling gust of wind swept through the room and the flames in the fireplace flickered under the glimpse of the breeze. Leaving her activity, the young woman closed her eyes for a brief moment and forged an inexpressive mask on her face before turning around.

Boar staggered a few steps into the room, then fell heavily on the old bench that flanked the dining table, eliciting a crack of protest. He took his disheveled head in his hands, mumbling unintelligible words into his bushy red beard.

She-Wolf wiped her soaked palms on her apron and released a weary sigh. She glanced protectively at the two children seated in the room, cross-legged, on the floor. A minute before, they were bickering about who won their last snowball fight. As soon as their drunken father had come into the house, they had stopped their quarrel and bowed their heads to look tiny.

"What are you talking about, my beloved?" asked She-Wolf, trying to keep her composure, to avoid scaring the children.

"All dead, woman!" said Boar before pounding his red forehead with his fist as if to clear his mind, which had been clouded by too many beers. "Goats, sheep, pigs, rabbits and chickens! We'll never make it through winter, never!"

She-Wolf looked up at the ceiling. She had stopped listening to her husband's drunken ramblings long ago.

"Your daughter went to feed the animals this morning and they were in great shape. Wasn't they, my Valkyrie?" The girl shook her head piteously, looking at the floor with her green eyes that were too foggy to be honest. "Go and rest for a couple of hours, my husband. When you wake up, the beasts will be alive again."

Boar's large hands slammed down fiercely on the table. This startled Marmot, the five-year-old boy. Instinctively, the little one moved closer to his older sister, who was still keeping her eyes down. In need of her reassuring physical touch, he slipped his trembling fingers into hers. She squeezed his hand tightly before whispering tender and encouraging words in his ear.

"All dead, I tell you!" the farmer shouted in a fatalistic voice, his shoulders jerking with anger. "I don't know why, but they're all stiff as a board, they look like they're scared to death! Go check the barn yourself, you incredulous whore!"

She-wolf shook her head, then pulled on her fur coat to brave the frigid Terradonne wind.

A moment later, her bowl of distress echoed in the girl's gut, and she closed her eyelids.

They would never make it through winter.

"All dead," repeated her father, his eyes lost into the room. "All dead..."



On this evening, the sky was so sumptuous that one could have thought this twilight would be the last of times. The sun was setting on the horizon, spreading bloody hues over the lands surrounding the City of a Thousand Towers and the City of Sins. From the creamy salmon clouds stood out against a purplish background, shaded with amber touches around the fading star that seemed to agonize over the triumphant shadows of the night.

Hanging on the side of its solitary spur, Alkanthar stood proudly in the middle of a once green plain that today presented the uninviting aspect of a vast desert, so arid and barren that one would have thought it had been struck by a divine curse. A jewel of blinding radiance rooted in a sickly land; the legendary capital had retained its immemorial prestige. It formed a strange contrast with its dark surroundings, but especially with its twin city, Clepsydra, located on the other bank of the ashen river.

Yet, in a time forgotten by all, Clepsydra and Alkanthar had shared the same glory.

During the Blood Age, they were only one proud metropolis, the most flourishing and gigantic in Terreflamme. It was the nerve center of the country and the capital of the empire of Callistine III, known as the Bloody One. At the end of the Continental War, the fall of the empire ushered in the Age of Peace and led to the administrative birth of Clepsydra. The new self-proclaimed government, the Mercantile League, had exemplified the dominant precept of its materialistic order: separate supply and demand. The humble citizens had been herded like cattle into the City of Sins. Wealthy merchants and noble families had been given the privilege of residing in the heart of the City of a Thousand Towers.

Soon after, the Merchants had put together the other five guilds of Terreflamme in power, by distributing the crumbs of their considerable feast to satisfy the modest hunger of their allies. Under the recognized authority of the Mercantile League, each guild had taken control of a queen city and its region. The mighty Clan of Scholars, the League's closest associate, had secured the lion's share of the spoils with the grandiose Aranath that bordered the Desert of Fire. The proletarian Brotherhood of Workers had inherited Milone, an insignificant mining town that administered the northeast of Terreflamme. The pious Brotherhood of the Pantheon had been relegated to Myriad, a monastery isolated from all civilization. The rigid Caste of Justice, a former vassal of the empire who had mutinied against the oppressor, had retained the fortress of High Tower, a huge, fortified city in a strategic position in Terreflamme, meaning at the estuary of the Carmine river. The noble knights of the Caste were omnipresent and had ensured that the governmental reform put in place by the Mercantile League was carried out correctly.

Finally, the newly founded and dangerous Guild of Shadows, which happened to be behind the coup against the empire, had pocketed Clepsydra - a poisonous offering - and a mountain of gold to finance its burgeoning expansion. Former slave-soldiers of the Blood One, the freed assassins had been content with their reward without raising the slightest protest. They had been too dazzled by their newfound freedom and their blind willingness to serve the ideals of the Goddess of Death to claim further prestige or possessions from the League.

Despite their share history, Alkanthar and Clepsydra were now difficult to compare. The City of Sins was a distorted reflection of its eminent twin. Only their almost identical river ports bore witness to their common past. The dozens of red stone towers that dotted every street in the capital were a unique architectural feature, as the towers of Clepsydra had all been destroyed during the Continental War. Those of the capital seemed to challenge the ten gods of the Celestial Pantheon with their existence. The tallest ones could be seen for miles around, topped by the standard of the Mercantile League, the fearsome golden hydra whose six heads symbolized all the brotherhoods of Terreflamme.

The City of a Thousand Towers was built on several levels in the side of the rocky spur. The City of Sins lay in the valley at the foot of the capital. The Carmine River separated them. The Archaterre, an impressive, fortified bridge with several turrets that a legion of sentries from the Mercantile Militia guarded day and night, spanned the wide waterway. The imposing stone bridge was the only way to reach the gates of Alkanthar. The Carmine provided a natural barrier against potential attackers, while the infamous wall of the human capital, the Hinge, ran along part of the bank.

As a result, the social classes did not mix, except during the annual Harvest, when the gates of the capital were opened to all foreign visitors. But, protected by a ridiculous fortified belt barely three meters high, Clepsydra had been designed by the Mercantile League to fall first in case of a siege. Thus, the bulk of the sheep herd would be sacrificed to save the lives of the shepherds, the elitist population of Alkanthar. In the face of a full-scale attack, the fragile wooden and thatched houses of the poor in the City of Sins would not stand up for long, unlike the troglodyte mansions of the wealthy in the City of a Thousand Towers.

As for the castle, it was dominating with proud on the top of the valley. Its façade, decorated with gold statues, glittered with a thousand lights, it was reputedly impregnable. The Merchants had given it the sweet sobriquet of Scepтрion, the coinage of Terreflamme put on the market at the beginning of the Age of Peace.

On principle, idle inhabitants of Clepsydra were not allowed to enter Alkanthar unless they had a proper pass. The Mercantile Militia patrolled the Hinge and were relentless in their pursuit of parasites who tried to get into the capital. In the darkness of their despair, some stowaways in search of a better life had ventured to break through the wall. Their bloody heads were displayed on metal spikes along the parapet: this was to dissuade the unruly sheep from fleeing their flock.

Built at the beginning of the Peace Age, the Hinge had only existed since the fall of the former empire. Social inequalities had always been prevalent between the dark Clepsydra and the bright Alkanthar, but the three current Merchants were the first leaders of their order to institute such a drastic split between the twin cities.

It was written in the Celestial Framework of Destiny that the venerable Age of Peace, which had lasted for more than five centuries, was coming to an end.



Every day, Panama Carswell took great care to go out after all the other children. The little girl would first check to see if her surroundings were clear before deigning to step onto the staircase and walk down the square yard of the orphanage, dodging potential stares.

Every day, she followed a strange ritual. She counted the number of steps she took to her usual place in a corner.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven...

Eight steps to the northwest.

Each day she sat on the ground, buttocks on her heels, huddled against her familiar moss-covered low wall. Carefully, she watched the orphans play in front of her. Crouching like an animal on the lookout, the girl remained perfectly still. She watched them from a distance behind the

short strands of red hair that hung in front of her white, emaciated face. They were chasing each other, running at full speed, laughing out loud. They managed to forget the precariousness of their situation thanks to their entertainment. But Panama did not envy them. At no time had she considered participating in their childish games.

These were only small humans. The elves, less commonly known as the “dark elves”, who also lived in the Forgotten Quarter of the City of Sins, took in the children of their race who had lost their parents and raised them in the community. Known for their individualism, the humans did not bother to do the same, since they already had a hard time feeding their own offspring. The few children who managed to leave the orphanage of Clepsydra, the youngest and most docile, were usually adopted by foreigners or wealthy couples from the capital. This was a priceless chance for them to change their lives radically, a godsend that was almost a miracle in this context. The other orphans were growing up in the heart of this squalid place, and on their fourteenth birthday, according to the law of Terreflamme, they were either sold as servants in the Queen Cities or unceremoniously thrown out onto the streets to a hazardous fate.

When Panama Carswell first arrived, she was greeted by the collective curiosity of her new dark-skinned peers. At first, they thought she was a boy because of her short hair and thinness. She didn’t speak their mainland language, but she assumed they were meeting a fair-skinned, fiery-haired northern islander for the first time in their lives.

The leader of the orphans, a tall, gaunt teenager who looked like a weasel, had seen her as an ideal victim. Unaware that the Donnians taught their children how to fight at an early age, the reckless kid had made the mistake of pushing her back to provoke the giggles of his friends. The redheaded girl had defended herself by throwing herself against her attacker, throwing him to the ground and pounding her little fists against his face with a primal rage.

The result of the fight: a broken tooth, a deviated septum, and a nice purple-black eye for the weasel. The owners of the orphanage, two cunning old shrews—hyenas—had castigated the little northern barbarian with a volley of blows from their cane.

Since this incident, the children avoided the redheaded girl like a plague and nicknamed her “wild girl” in their language. She systematically stood back without saying a word and in return they ignored her presence. Their indifference suited Panama, who did not share their mentality or their carefree attitude. She seemed to make them extremely uncomfortable, in fact: they felt that she was different from them.

They did not know how right they were.

Every day, the redheaded wildling studied the behavior of her orphaned classmates in the yard like a laboratory technician would study the behavior of small rodents in captivity.

She may not have understood the meaning of their words, but she had other ways to find out. She watched for subtleties in their expressions, eyes, and body language. When one child lied to another, he would frequently put his hand to his face, mouth or nose, or waddle from one foot to the other. A child standing cross-legged and looking away suggested a shy and reserved nature. A child wringing his hands betrayed a certain anxiety bordering on fear when his pupils dilated. A sincere smile lingered on the lips for a few more seconds, while a forced smile tightened the jaw.

Panama spied the weasel who had just snatched the wooden toy from a five, or six-year-old kid. The scraggly, light-haired boy sobbed and hopped around as his tormentor waved the toy high above him, out of his reach. The wild girl's emerald eyes clouded over. The blond boy's heartbreaking cries reminded her of Marmot's, the day when everything had changed.



“Mother! Mother, wake up!” moaned Marmot, blinded by his tears.

But She-Wolf would not wake up. She would never wake up again.

A few steps away from the inert body of She-Wolf and Marmot, who was frantically shaking his mother's limp hand, Boar was also lying on his back, his arms spread out in the snow. His fat, gaunt fingers with dirt-blackened fingernails were twitching slightly as his wide, terror-stricken eyes grew more and more glassy.

Fascinated by this morbid vision, the redheaded girl leaned over him. In agony, Boar had painfully turned his head in her direction and now seemed to stare at her with all the darkness of his frightened soul. A small amount of steam still emerged from his lips, reddened with sticky liquid. Drops of blood formed glistening beads in the middle of his orange beard and fell one by one on the immaculate mounds of snow.

A shower of rubies sprinkled a cloud of cotton.

The girl slowly stood on her feet, unable to take her eyes off his.

He was no longer a danger. He was only the shadow of the man he was.

In the eyes of the dying man, fear was slowly fading, replaced by an abyss of calm that touched the redheaded girl deeply, giving her an incomparable feeling of peace and well-being. Even her dull pain at having lost She-Wolf and her hatred for Boar evaporated like a sheet of fog dissipated by the wind.

Guided by a dark premonition and a heightened sense of cold, the girl raised her head. Through the snowflakes that swirled around her family's farmhouse, she discerned an evanescent figure lurking in the shadow of a wall. The black, inhuman shape seemed to be waiting for something.

Marmot did not see it.

She-wolf could not see it anymore.

Boar could see it, but not for long.

The girl was convinced that the inhuman figure was not a threat. It was simply waiting in the shadows. Boar exhaled his last breath.

By mimetic reflex, her daughter held hers.

At that precise moment, she felt, deep in her gut, that nothing would ever be the same again.



The last of the sensory haze faded from the wild girl's memory, and an unusual pair of visitors entered the orphanage courtyard. In a climate of tangible distrust, the orphans stopped playing and stared at the two tall men draped in dark capes who moved with remarkable agility. Even the weasel, usually so blustery in the presence of potential adopters, kept a low profile. The self-preservation instincts of street children were more exasperated than others.

Panama leaned further back against her low stone wall as she realized that the four adults were focusing their attention on her—not a good sign. One of the old hyenas simpered and shook her stunted shoulders like a maiden before a knight. The older of the two men retorted a short sentence that triggered a reaction of surprise in the old woman. She looked hesitantly at her sister. The second hyena nodded vigorously and gave the male visitors a smile full of yellowish teeth.

The redheaded girl could only see the back of the second man, but he looked younger than his companion. The hyenas kept leering at him, shaking their stringy hair in a mixture of nervousness and coquetry. By adult standards, he must have been attractive. He was at least six feet tall. His long black and glossy hair cascaded freely between his shoulder blades, glazed with midnight blue reflections, shaved on the sides of his head. *Strange cut, strange color of hair*, thought the kid. He shifted in profile with a feline elegance. His dark skin was a different shade from the Continentals': it tended more towards gray than brown. Panama began to associate him with an animal, as she did with all those who crossed her path. A panther, perhaps?

She could see distinctly the other man. He was undoubtedly a hawk to her. He was half a head shorter than his sidekick, but his upright, proud posture minimized their size difference. His features were angular, as if a facetious god had carved them at birth. His fine silver hair was tied in a ponytail that looks like a crescent moon. His azure eyes were so translucent and shimmering in his tanned face that Panama could see them with impeccable clarity despite the distance. His wise and penetrating gaze betrayed a depth as dizzying as it was complex, as if he had already lived a thousand previous lives.

He took out of his inner pocket a sheepskin purse to offer it to the old hyenas. The two sisters looked at each other approvingly and weighed the money between their dry fingers, twisted over the years by the nasty blows of the cane they had banged against the orphans' sickly legs.

A piercing chirp drew the attention of the wild girl, pulling her out of her reflections. A sparrow with reddish-brown plumage was wriggling on the ground of the yard close to her.

It had just hit the wall of the old, dilapidated building and had broken a wing under the violence of the impact. Curious, Panama surreptitiously moved closer to the broken bird, tilting her head to one side.

The sparrow wished it could fly again. It seemed to be begging for her help with its plaintive cries. The redheaded girl took it gently between her palms. Almost immediately, the bird died in her hands, shaken by a last convulsion. She analyzed for a long time the little feathered corpse in the hollow of her hands. A small smile on her pale lips. *The blessed one. It does not suffer anymore. It is free.*

The wild child suddenly raised her head, shuddered with astonishment and backed up hastily against the wall. He was crouching in front of her, an elbow leaning on her thigh. His cloak was dragging on the floor around him, like a demon's wings. Panama hadn't even heard the sound of his leather boots on the cobblestones, as if his soles were padded! Instantly, she was captivated by his thin, pointed ears and the deep charcoal hue of his skin - so he was a dark elf! - and, most of all, she was sucked in by his incredible minnow eyes.

The right one was black spangled with silver. *Night sky studded with stars.*

The left one was ice blue. *A frozen lake at the height of winter.*

The tall, dark elf studied the girl as he had studied the other children, with a kind of scientific detachment. He finally took off his leather gloves and slipped them on the front of his belt. Then he held out his open, cupped palms toward her.

"A magic trick?" he whispered in the native island dialect with the slightest accent.

Panama gauged for a long moment the hard and perfect shape of his features. This man wasn't just attractive: he was breathtakingly handsome. Because of his proximity, she had the impression there were only the two of them. She couldn't notice anyone around them anymore, no orphans, no hyenas, no hawk. *No, he's not a panther*, she thought as she saw its tawny face vibrating with controlled power. *He's a tiger, a snow tiger.*

The Donnian handed him the sparrow's remains. He closed his long grey hands on her dead little offering, giving her the warmth of his skin.

"Look," he invited her softly.

The child complied and blinked, thinking she was hallucinating.

The sparrow's feathers had just trembled between the elf's intertwined fingers.

He suddenly spread his hands to free the red-feathered bird, which spread its wings and flew away at full speed, full of life. It shot through the air like an arrow toward the roof of the orphanage. In shock, Panama looked back at the stranger, who did not flinch. *He's just like me!* a voice screamed hysterically in her brain, her heart pounding.

This was the first time she had met someone who held such power.

The snow tiger lowered his left hand, his other hand still outstretched toward the girl to invite her to follow him.

"Panama Carswell, you have an exceptional talent to cultivate."

An exceptional talent. No one had ever paid her such a compliment.

Despite her extraordinary appearance, which would have worried many ordinary children...

Despite her late mother's warnings not to trust strangers...

Despite the intensely calculating gaze and inexpressive face of the tiger...

This dark elf spontaneously inspired in the wild woman an abysmal confidence that defied all logic, all reason. An obscure and unspeakable bond united them, beyond space and time.

He knew her name. He had come for her.

Without hesitation, Panama Carswell slipped her small, cold white hand into Reaper's, the High Master of the Guild of Shadows.



The hawk also mastered the Donian language with the ease of diligent travelers who study and practice the dialects of every land they visit. As they walked through the muddy streets of Clepsydra, the two men were walking on either side of the redheaded girl like bodyguards, he introduced himself to Panama in person.

His name was Jerys Targam, but his fellow students called him by his title of Lord or by his pseudonym, Furnace. The girl kept silent. She

had a lot of difficulty understanding him: it seemed as if a fog of mystery surrounded the old human, a sensation reinforced by the weight of his crystalline eyes.

First rule. Don't trust appearances, especially with the Shadows.

On the way, Panama saw the tall, dark elf unhook his precious fibula, a silver rose with petals encrusted with tiny onyxes, to remove his cloak from his shoulders. Marking a halt in the middle of the street, he put a knee on the ground in front of the girl, folded his cloak in two and wrapped it around her famished back to cover her shabby rags. He followed the intrigued glance of the orphan. It was a winged creature which adorned its dark red breastplate in flexible leather.

"The dragon is the emblem of the Guild of Shadows. The black rose is the symbol of the Goddess of Death" he said, pinning the cloak with the fibula, before rising.

As the three companions continue their walk, the little barbarian pursed her lips as she noticed the carved handle of the scimitar sticking out of the snow tiger's harness. Only the crests of the tribes of her archipelago were familiar to her: the axe severing a pine branch of the Caurak, the fierce and foaming bear of the Bersekell, the proud warship of the Maraudants.

On their sea voyage, his uncle Damian had taught her that the Continent was divided into three main regions: the Undying Lands, the realm of the elves; Terreperreno, the homeland of the dwarves; and Terreflamme, the territory of the humans, which took up almost half the Continent.

According to his uncle, Terreflamme was governed by a system of sedentary tribes, much more elaborate and hierarchical than in Terradonne, called brotherhoods or guilds. The ruling faction, the Mercantile League, had replaced an "imperial monarchy" that had been dismantled centuries earlier after an apocalyptic war.

What a load of gibberish, she had thought on the deck of the ship. That was all she knew about their foreign politics. As for the deities worshipped by the Continentals, she knew none. Her naturalistic people glorified the sea, the sun, the wind, and the earth as the four key elements of their world, the Great Telluric. She-Wolf had explained to her that life had arisen from tiny, primitive organisms, invisible to the naked eye, that once wriggled in the oceans. These organisms had evolved over thousands of years, transforming into fish, amphibians, monkeys...

to mutate into humans, elves, and dwarves. She-Wolf once told her that all the races of Shynighgar had one common ancestor: a stupid microscopic water bug. Panama liked the playfulness of this idea of the natural evolution of species, which her mother had likened to a great family tree with countless branches studded with leaves. Ever since, the little girl had learned about this exciting theory of the origin of living things, she had been trying to identify the animal ancestors that best matched the people around her.

Jerys Targam laughed for no apparent reason as he inspected the little barbarian with his clear eyes. He addressed a possibly humorous remark to Reaper in a light and melodious dialect punctuated by intonations a hundred times softer than those of the continental jargon or his mother tongue. *Elvish?* Panama presumed, listening to the lilting syllables with all her ears. The snow tiger gave a half-smile, destined to the little girl, not the old man. Spontaneously, she smiled back at him.

“The beliefs of your island people are different from those of the mainlanders, child,” the raptor said playfully. “You’ll make up your own mind about that in no time. A single, universal thought would be awfully boring.”

Why is he telling me this? Disturbed, as much by his incomprehensible words as by the sharp gaze of the Lord of the Shadows Guild, Panama pulled the cloak tighter around her arms, creating a small protective cocoon. The silky, flowing textile was permeated with Reaper’s particular scent: a refined amalgam of leather, metal, and mint.

With her dirty fingernail, the girl scratched the chisels of her fibula, looking absentmindedly at the humans and elves who resided in the Quarter of the Forgotten. Perhaps it was better to die than to live in such misery.

People on the stinking streets were often barefoot and dressed in faded rags. Their emaciated bodies were bruised by hunger, weariness, and distress. An old leprous dog lay whimpering in an alley. In a cesspool, children sobbed their hearts out while their mother beat and insulted them, unloading their misery on them. Further on, two drunken vagabonds were fighting for the favors of a sick prostitute with a vacant look. Then, a skeletal orphan covered with pimples was crouched against a wall. He was sorting through garbage with a rusty knife to retrieve what would be useful to him as he watched a group of burly thieves arguing over the terms of their next heist. The thieves lowered their heads as one at the sight of the hawk and the tiger, before dispersing into the adjacent alleys.

Panama witnessed a similar reaction from a large peddler who was strolling leisurely in the opposite direction, two heavy saddlebags on his sides. As the onlooker's eyes lingered on the black dragon of the elf's armor, his features showed an irrepressible tension. Indecisive, he slowed his progress, his fists clenched on his saddlebags ... before accelerating and turning at an intersection to abruptly change his course. This reluctance to cross paths with two Shadows on the street might have troubled Panama under different circumstances, but the mere presence of Reaper helped to alleviate any reservations she might have had about her dreaded bodyguards. Still, she was no fool: she had already guessed that the Shadow Guild was nothing less than a brotherhood of assassins in the pay of a goddess of Death glorified by the Flammeriades. They were interested in her cursed power.

"Damn, Reaper! The mute of Terradonne is smarter than she lets on," Jerys Targam commented, genuinely impressed.

"You shouldn't read her mind, Furnace. We just found her. You're going to make her run before we get to the *Bookmark*."

Stunned, Panama forgot to check where she was walking and stumbled against a rock. With a reflex worthy of a juggler, Reaper caught her by the arm and pulled her back.

"You read my mind?"

"Well, well, your protégée has suddenly found her voice," laughed the old falcon, to the great dismay of the Donnian girl. "You lost your bet, kid! I was sure she would react quickly before crossing the threshold of the bookshop. Give me my money!" Stoically, Reaper tossed him a purse of sceptrions, which Jerys picked up with a dexterous gesture before tucking it into his pants pocket.

"I confirm kiddo, I am a telepath. All the members of our guild have a gift, a 'cursed power' as you wisely point out. As for me, I collect several psychic faculties: telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation, and other gifts that can be useful. This dark elf that you compared to a snow tiger has the Gift of Life, you witnessed it earlier in the yard of the orphanage. Indeed, my dear, that means he raises the dead! We'll discuss your people's theory of species evolution again sometime, Panama. I flipped through a thrilling book on it a couple of hundred years ago, but I tend to get confused with all the books I've read over the centuries, and I can't remember the title or the author's name. Derwyn, Darwyn, something like that..."

Telepathy, Gift? the girl mused, stunned by this surreal speech and swimming in total confusion.

“My speech was not surrealistic,” the Lord denied her. “It just doesn’t fit in with your narrow conception of the truth at the moment, that’s all. I don’t hold it against you. For now, you’re an ignorant, inexperienced little thing, fresh off her snowy island and shipped off to an orphanage in the City of Sins by a cowardly, unscrupulous uncle. Let us say that you have mitigating factor.

Oh boy, two hundred years... How old can he be? wondered Panama, stunned.

“*How old do you think I am, kid?*” he replied in the second, his menial voice expressly echoing inside her skull.

“*You ... you can also ... speak in my mind?*” she thought before realizing that her remark was of an absolute idiocy.

“*You are not stupid, far from it. How old do you think I am?*”

“*Uh... Seventy?*”

“*Ah, a septuagenarian! Seven decades! You’re making me look outrageously young. I would be at the very end of my life if I were human. My seventy years go back to...*” He thinks while rubbing his chin. “*...More than forty-two centuries. Time flies by at such a speed! I still have so many books to read. But I digress, Panama Carswell, and your skepticism is blatant. You already have a million questions on your mind, conscious and unconscious, present, forgotten and future. It’s a cacophony in your immature brain. You’re going to have to sort through your questions and prioritize them quickly, or I’m going to get a headache. It’s a real cerebral mess under your red hair.*”

Panama’s green eyes flitted from Hawk to Tiger, then from Tiger to Hawk.

Only one question really mattered to her.

“Who the hell are you?”

An honest smile stretched the old man’s lips.

“*I am Furnace, Lord of the Guild of Shadows and this is Reaper, one of the High Master, my right-hand man. We belong to an ancient and theological order that has sworn allegiance to the Goddess of Death, to preserve the natural balance of Creation. Our brotherhood was founded during the Continental War, at the end of the Blood Age. It has ruled over the urban slum that is Clepsydra ever since. That’s all you need to know for now. Ah, one more thing, kid! We’re not just ‘interested’ in your ‘damn’ gift. We want to help you channel it and train you as a professional assassin with the Guild.*”

“Oh” the girl thinks for three seconds, at most. “Does an assassin make good money?”

A bewildered expression came over Hawk’s face. He arched a silver eyebrow and exchanged a look with Tiger.

“Well... Not too bad, yes.”

“Then it’s agreed,” she said enthusiastically. “When do I start?”



Between her two companions, Panama observed the shelves full of books that ran along the walls. She had never seen so many books in one place.

Rubbing her palms on his apron, the bookseller emerged from the back room of the *Bookmark*, the cover building of the assassins’ headquarters that stretched beneath the streets of the City of Sins. The top of his shaven, scarred head barely towered above the eleven-year-old girl, but the old dwarf was three times as wide and had a few centuries on his shoulders. He sported a pair of eyepieces perched on his busted nose and restoration tools were tucked into the many belly pockets of his leather apron. He had a long, braided greyish beard. His wily, hazel-colored eyes reminded Panama of a sly old fox. His wrinkled, weathered face was a fascinating map of the ages, with mountains of anger, plains of serenity, and rivers of sorrow, visible to the naked eye by a minority of beings with a little more insight than the average.

Menos Sinifus, the Watcher of the Shadow Guild, inspired in the wild woman an immediate sense of sympathy and complicity before he even opened his mouth.

Sometimes, encounters mark you with a red iron and change you forever. This was the case with Khamar and Jerys Targam. Others illuminate you briefly before disappearing, crossing the course of your life like a shooting star. Most of them remain in a few quantities and count for too little to be kept them in memory. Finally, more rarely, some strangers touch you so naturally and so deeply that you have the curious impression to have known them forever. To have already lived a thousand

adventures with them. To have laughed out loud with them and shed tears of despair on their shoulder. The first time they stand in front of you, you feel the quiet certainty that they will occupy a huge place in your life and your heart. It is as if an invisible web is woven around you, creating a close connection. In Panama's childlike eyes, although she could not explain it to herself, Menos Sinifus belonged to this rare category.

She gripped the large hand he held out to her tightly. Apparently, this was how the citizens of Clepsydra greeted each other. Menos made an exaggerated face, then blew noisily on his pudgy little fingers, shaking them in front of him, pretending that the girl had crushed his grip. She laughed with amusement.

“*“Youe unia Dionna deia forci, ma ceterine?”* he asked in his gruff voice, articulating excessively each syllable of his sentence .

Panama shrugged her shoulders in disbelief. The bookseller had tried to express himself in her native language, the donnian. The old dwarf gave an embarrassed snarl and turned to Hawk to whisper something she couldn't yet understand.

“I'll translate, kid,” offered Jerys Targam. “Menos is aware that his donnian is rusty. He just asked you if you had a Gift of Strength.”

The girl shook her head at the old dwarf, who feigned surprise. He pointed to Panama's diaphanous hand and made a comment in human language. Jerys acted as interpreter:

“Menos says you have quite a grip for a baby bird that has just fallen out of its nest...”

“I am not a baby bird! Tell him I know how to fight!” The Lord reported these fierce words to the Guild Watchmen, who burst out laughing. He went back behind his freshly waxed counter to take out of his bag the training manuals ordered by the old hawk, grumbling in his beard.

“Menos says that you are not a bird after all, but a donkey,” smiles the old man with eyes as blue as a summer sky. “He adds that bird or donkey will always be welcome at the *Bookmark* and that he has many adventure novels suitable for children of your age, stories where donkey fight giant oliphants.”

“Tell him I don't know how to read,” said the Donnian with a sad voice.

“Not yet, child... But if you want, we'll teach you. We'll teach you how to read, write and learn the common languages of Terreflamme.”

“And many other skills,” said the tall, dark elf in a low voice whose icy sweetness seeped into the girl’s spinal cord.



“Medical tests?” Panama repeated in the back room of the Bookmark.

“An admission formality that all new recruits must do,” said Reaper, pulling back the curtain that separated the two rooms on the first floor. “It won’t take long. Before we go to the laboratory, we’ll go through the main rooms of the Guild.”

Jerys Targam stood in front of a bronze candlestick nailed to the back wall and snuck his hand behind the object to activate the well design mechanism: three short jerks on the top hook followed by two long jerks on the bottom hook. A secret door in the wall of the bookstore opened without a sound. The old man pulled on the heavy door, shifting his weight on one bent leg. A stone staircase descended into the flickering darkness.

Panama was both stunned and hypnotized by this unknown darkness. A dark hand was placed on her shoulder with a delicacy. She turned her head toward her snow tiger, who was calm.

“Kid, we never force recruits with Gifts to stay against their will,” the old hawk assured her. “The free will of the apprentice is a fundamental principle of our brotherhood. During your training period, you may decide to leave at any time after having duly informed me. We give the apprentices time to judge whether this unique profession is right for them. However, once you are a baptized Shadow, you cannot turn back and break your blood oath to the Goddess of Death. Now, if you don’t want to go down that staircase, you have only one word to say... We will let you go and never see each other again.”

To go away? She thought at once. *Where would I go? I don’t have anything anymore. I am nobody here. I might as well do what I do best.*

With a reckless glint in her eye, the girl walked ahead of the subterranean darkness and gradually let herself be swallowed up by its embrace.