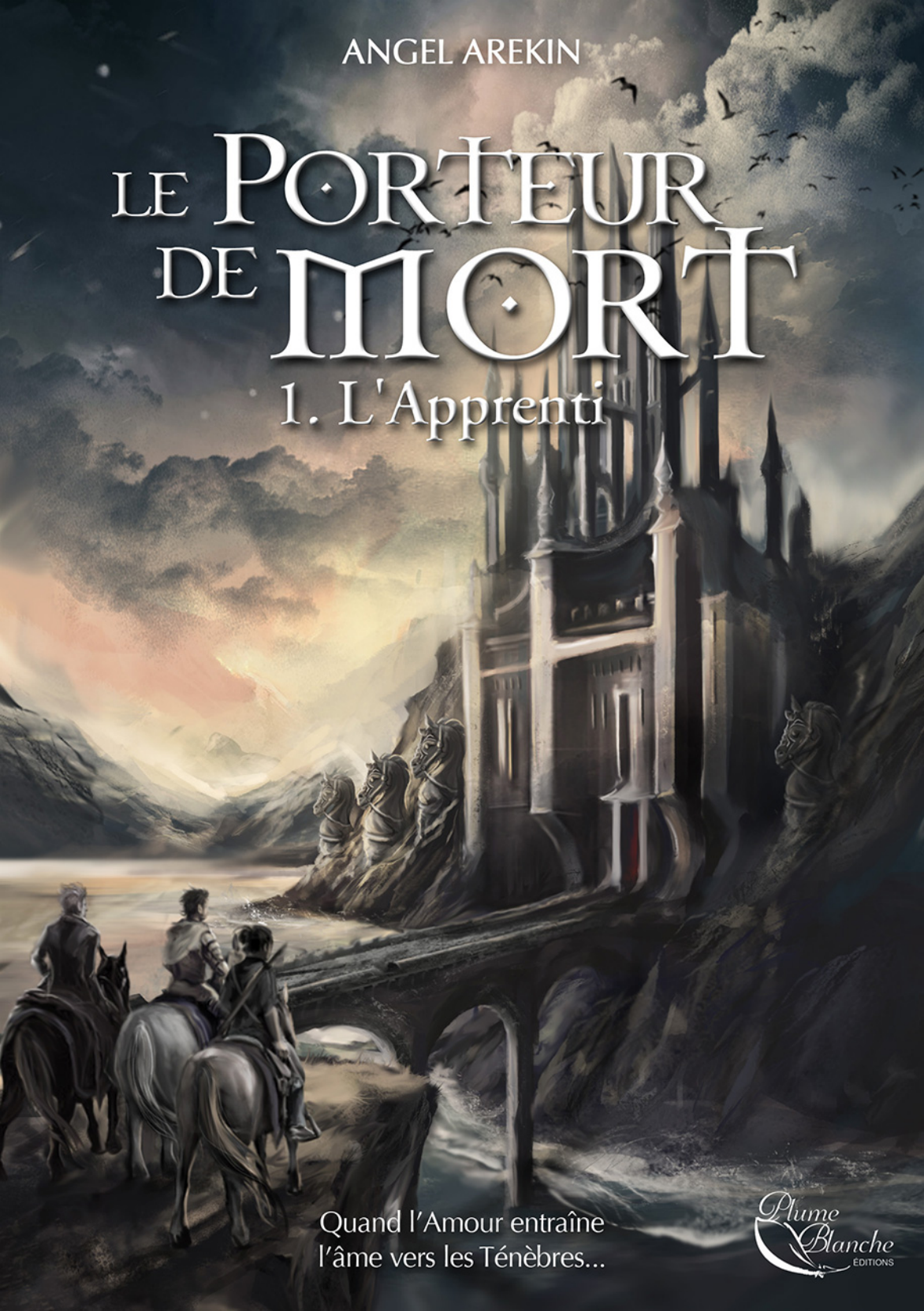


ANGEL AREKIN

LE PORTEUR DE MORT

1. L'Apprenti



Quand l'Amour entraîne
l'âme vers les Ténèbres...

Plume
Blanche
EDITIONS

DEATHBEARER



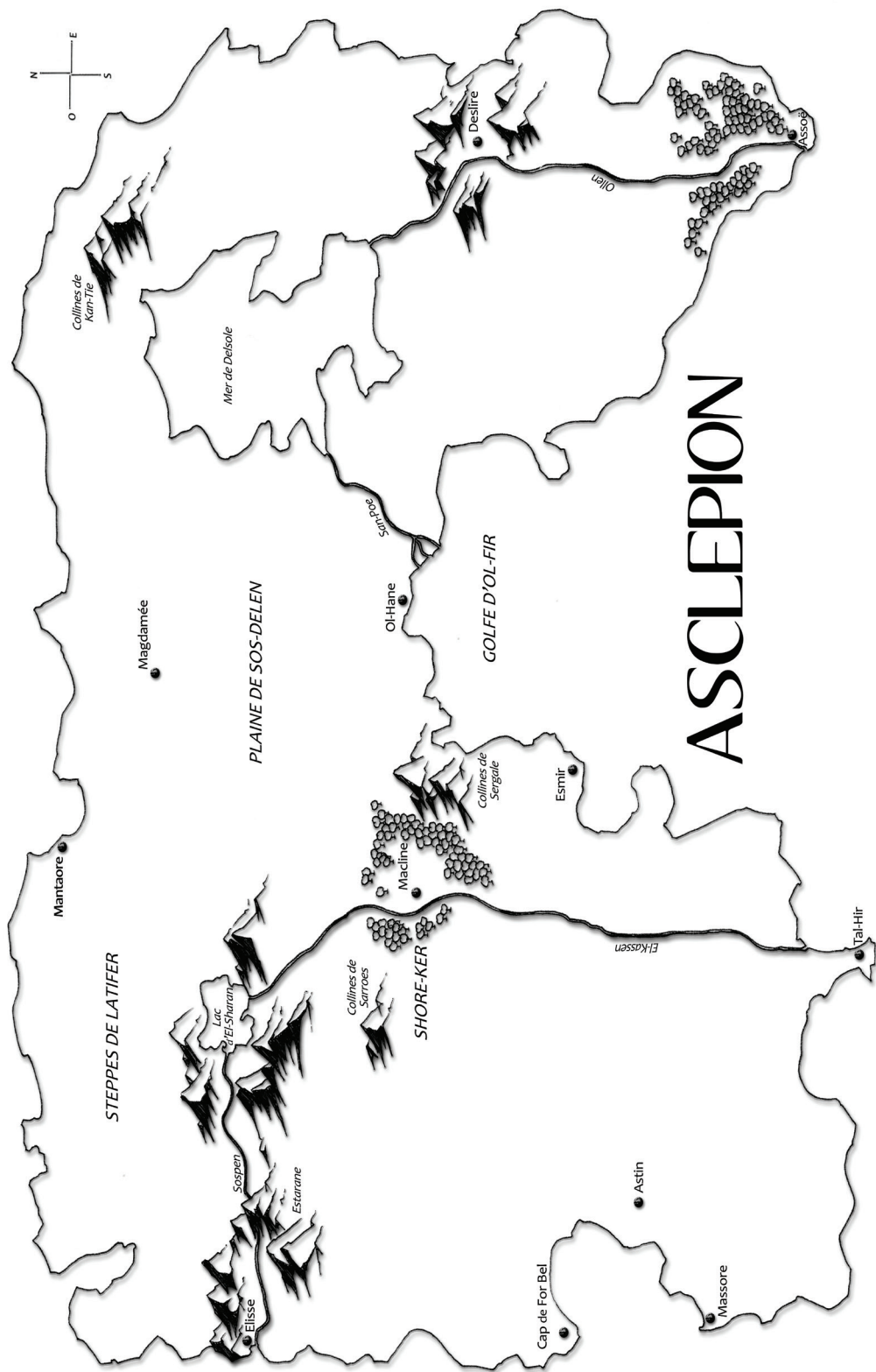
ANGEL AREKIN

DEATHBEARER

Tome 1

The apprentice

(Novel)



PROLOGUE

I was only getting what I deserved. A traitor's death. Who would have thought this was the way it would happen?

I was standing at the edge of the abyss; there was blood running down the side of my hip, dark and hot. My sword was lying at my feet, among the corpses. She was right there, in front of me, so magnificent, delightfully cruel. I barely felt the blade sinking in. Nothing but a sting, a flea-bite. I didn't feel the pain as I fell backwards, no more did I feel the rocks diving into my back when I hit the ground. She was the only thing I could see. Her long, black hair concealing her tears. And a shadow at her shoulder.

Only then did the sinkhole opened, bottomless, endless. Dark. So dark. The void was consuming me, seeping through every pore in my skin. I felt nothing but the fear itself now. The raw, boundless, naked fear. It became almost tangible, delirious, and dangerously insidious.

My memories were slipping away. They were unraveling, like someone pulling on a strand of cloth little by little. I was looking around, fumbling in the dark, but I couldn't remember a thing. There was only a silhouette left, barely imprinted in the reflections of my memory. What was her name? I couldn't hear her. She screamed and I listened with all my strength and I reached for her hand in the light, but I kept falling down the sinkhole and I couldn't hear her name. Behind her, a gigantic shadow was stretching like a spider web. "Stop it," I shouted at the top of my lungs, "Don't touch her." The man behind her didn't listen to me. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders like vines. Why wasn't she moving away? Who was this man? For God's sake!

Space crumbled down between us. The sinkhole became so deep that her silhouette slowly faded away. Soon, I would see nothing anymore. Not her gaze fixed on me, not her tears falling with me, not the outstretched arms of the man behind her. I would see nothing but death.

Darkness unfurled. Her scream was drowned out. Oh! Shaolan, tell me you didn't kill her. Who are you? Why does your name remain, while your face turned back to ashes? Who are you, for me to weep for you?

The sinkhole unfurled and I lost fragments of myself on my way down. How long had it been since I had fell? How many days, months, years? Would I ever wake

up? “No matter the years,” she had said before I fell in the abyss. “No matter the years between us.” What did she mean?

I closed my eyes, panting. I could hardly breathe. My memory was breaking apart. Down the hole, I would not remember who I was. My name was already dying out. Remember, a bit longer. Try harder. You have to remember...

Shaolan, you are the only name I have left now. I don't want to forget it. Not this one. Never. Let it follow me through the abyss or through the skies.

At the bottom, there was a light. Was it even possible? A light that pierced through the darkness, red against a steel-gray background. It was burning my eyes. I was drawn to it, my memory evaporating. The pain in my chest increased as I got closer to the brightness. I was about to die.

No matter the ages between us, I will find you again.

I crashed on the ground with so much force it felt like all my bones were breaking. Blood filled my mouth. The acid air blew on my face, and the sky, streaked with red, black, and metallic gray, materialized above me. My eyelids flickered. Keeping my eyes open was becoming too much of a struggle. Must my end lack honor to such an extent? Had I failed someone? Who had killed me?

The Other Side seemed rather colorless. Was that what we called the land of the dead?

I could not move, nor move my head to look around. I could only stare at the sky and the mountain that broke through the clouds, like an arrow. It seemed to tear the firmament in two. The blood in my mouth turned mushy and bubbles burst at the corners of my mouth. I tried to wipe it, but my hand refused to move. I didn't feel the pain anymore. The end must be close now. When you can't feel the pain anymore, it means death is already embracing you. I licked my lips and closed my eyes. I needed to rest. If I could do that, maybe I could recover some of my strength. To find her.

“There you are, finally.”

The voice stabbed me through the chest. The hair on my neck stood up. I struggled to open my eyes and trace back that voice from beyond the grave.

Just a few steps away, there was a man kneeling, on top of a mound the structure of which I couldn't comprehend. Too far back for me to make out his features, except for the two phosphorescent eyes gleaming like a cat.

“I've been waiting for you for a long time.”

“Who are you?” I managed to stammer.

I coughed out blood. Its warmth spread on my chest.

“You don't remember. One day, you will. For now, you must die.”

A cloud built on over my head, becoming dark, enormous, rolling like waves in a stormy ocean. Then, it suddenly swooped down on me, at such a high speed that I could barely let out a scream, and barely had time to remember a bit more.

CYCLE I

LES NOMINATIONS



Come on Nais, hurry up,” Seis said with a sneer, watching me struggle in the snow.

“I’m doing my best!” I grumbled. My hood had been pulled back as I fell. I put it back on and kept on walking. Seis waited for me to catch up with him before continuing up the hill, which looked every bit like a mountain in the snow.

“It’s cold,” I complained, rubbing my arms up and down.

Seis bent his head and groaned: “I know. We should hurry.” He looked up at the thickening clouds and added: “The weather is getting worse.”

The woodland trail had deep ruts carved into it and was winding its way up dry slopes before reaching Crack-of-Dawn’s house. We weren’t sure which way to go, because of the snow. Everything around us looked the same, thousands of oak trees stripped of their leaves, shrubbery covered with snow, and nothing in sight to show us the way.

Seis stopped when we reached a track heading further between the trees and pointed towards the rocky outline standing out just a few feet away.

“The Farfell Cliffs. It would save us some time to go through there instead of going all the way around the river.”

I nodded in agreement and studied the trail, my hand shielding my eyes from the snowflakes. Faint, snow-white mist was rising from the ground and sliding through the wind-battered trees. I took a deep breath, unsettled by the rising fog, and followed behind Seis. The trail went up in a soft slope for about five hundred yards and led through a plateau dotted with oak trees and maples. The Farfell Cliffs opened onto a landscape just as steep as it was mesmerizing. From where we stood, we could hear the Lady of the night river murmur in the valley down below, towering above the white expanses of the forest. A bright, almost blinding light was reflecting on the snow despite the clouds.

The cliff path may have had the advantage of being a shortcut, but it had the

equal disadvantage of being exposed to the wind. I was freezing. I had to hold my hood in place because it kept falling back on my shoulders. My hair was damp and sticky.

Seis let out little white clouds with every breath and had to keep blinking away the ice and snowflakes that caught in his eyelashes. Red patches had spread on his cheeks like a bad sunburn, and he discretely wiped his nose every two minutes with his shirt sleeve.

“Quit slacking off, Naïs,” he said as I pinched my earlobes to try to bring some life back into them. “And be careful where you walk, for pity’s sake!”

He gestured towards a pothole the size of a cauldron and curtly grabbed my hand right before I could stumble into it.

“Are we there yet?” I asked, clinging to his hand.

Seis’s eyes swept over the heights above us, and he nodded. “Behind that ridge line,” he said, pointing to the rocks rising at the end of the path.

My mouth twisted in frustration and I glanced at him reproachfully.

“What? It saved us some time,” he groaned. “We’d still be looking for the bridge to cross the river. We’ll be home in fifteen minutes. Now get moving, it’s damned freezing.”

The wind had gotten fiercer, stinging our cheeks, and seeping under our clothes. Seis didn’t wear any gloves. His woolen hood hung from his shoulders and he stubbornly refused to put it back on to cover his head.

“What now?” he cried out when I stopped in the middle of the path again.

“Something’s wrong. Wait... I can’t feel my fingers.”

I snatched my hand back, peeled off my glove and vigorously rubbed the left side of my hand; the wool, stiffened by the damp cold, had left it numb and chafed.

“You’re so annoying sometimes, Naïs! Come on, hurry. We’ll freeze to death if you keep acting like that.”

I glared at him and was about to put my glove back on when an unusual sound suddenly echoed in the valley, drowning out even the gusts of wind. I looked up to Seis, puzzled.

“What was that?”

He shrugged with feigned indifference, all the while glancing around with a worried look. “I have no idea. Let’s get out of here.”

He didn’t even let me put my glove back on. He grabbed my hand and dragged me along the path. He had icy fingers, chapped at the tip. He didn’t complain and didn’t even seem to care.

“Wait, my glove... my glove.”

He didn’t listen. The sharp noise cracked again. It was the same sound of the ice breaking when Seis threw stones in the riverbed.

“Naïs, keep moving.”

Any complaints I may have died on my lips when I heard the anguish in his

voice. I clung to him and tried to match his stride as well as I could. The sound was getting louder, reverberating against the cliffs. It was growling with such intensity that Seïs came to an abrupt stop next to me, his eyes wide. He slowly turned around towards the path. I did the same. There were our footprints, imprinted deep into the snow. The sound was getting louder, thundering, and charging at us at full speed like some giant beast. Seïs looked down at the path and we both saw the crack in the ground. He turned to me with feigned calm, his eyes boring into mine.

“Naïs...”

He didn’t have time to finish. The snow suddenly collapsed under our feet and swallowed us like some beast’s gaping maw. It all happened so quickly. An avalanche of snow came crashing down on us as we tumbled down the cliff. I screamed. Sharp rocks scraped my back and a shred of flesh got torn off from my forearm. A gush of blood sprayed on my face, but it wasn’t mine.

Then everything came to a stop. Time itself was standing still.

It took me a moment to come back to my senses. My entire right arm was dulled with excruciating pain. There was blood streaming down my elbow and dripping into the abyss. I stared at the Lady of the night river winding its way down below, covered in broken ice. Large boulders buried with snow protruded here and there, breaking the smooth surface like pointy teeth. The maelstroms were rumbling under the ice, deafening, and seemed to be sweeping away everything in the riverbed towards the El-Kassen river.

I looked up with difficulty and choked down a sob when I saw Seïs, lying on his back along a narrow ledge, with his face smashed against the stone. His forehead was covered all over with blood, blinding him as it caught in his eyelashes. He was blinking away the droplet. I was terrified by the lifeless expression on his face. His eyes seemed to be searching for some grappling hook of consciousness to hold on to.

And yet, there was nothing but his hand clenched around mine to keep me from the vertiginous fall waiting for me. Tears welled up in my eyes and were soon streaming down my cheeks.

“Seïs!” I called.

He didn’t answer. For a moment I thought him unconscious. I was looking up at him with frantic eyes and he was staring back at me with an equally frightened, watery look. Acting on instinct, I tried to grab his wrist with my free hand. His muscles tightened and he winced. He let out a whine. His mouth twisted. I immediately stopped moving.

His voice was nothing more than an erratic whisper: “Don’t move, Naïs... Please... Don’t move.”

My eyes filled with tears. I struggled to keep myself from screaming. Seïs’s trembling arm was holding me above the river, his nails boring into my hand, but I barely noticed because of the soreness in my arm.

“Don’t move,” he repeated under his breath.

I was as still as a dress hanging on a clothesline in the middle of a storm. The gusts of wind built up, bringing in bigger and bigger snowflakes. The wind whistling through the cliffs was like a loud, vile cry, as though it was trying to grab me by the ankles and send me tumbling down into the abyss. The clouds continued to darken above us. I was shivering with cold. The wind pulled at my fur coat, lifting it around my legs like a bell, and furiously biting my skin. It pushed me from side to side. Seis’s muffled whimpers filled me with dread.

“I’m going to fall,” I sobbed. “Seis... I’m going to fall.”

My eyes fell on the dark, empty abyss below my feet.

“No, you’re not... I’m holding you... Don’t move.”

I nodded and hung on tight, my eyes riveted to his. I lost all sense of time. I struggled to stay awake, the same way Seis was struggling not to let go of me. In a voice riddled with pain, he started humming some ribald song he had probably overheard in some tavern back in town. I tried to focus on the lyrics.

“You’re leaving your sweet mama behind... A cighthouse is where you’re going. I’m not keeping you, my dear child... If that’s really your true... calling... Follow your mother’s advice carefully... I’ve been in this business... long before that was your plan... You’ve never... known your father’s identity... The whole neighborhood could be your old man...”

He fell silent and closed his eyes, only to open them up again with a look of surprise. He was falling asleep or unconscious. Bruises, the size of my fist, were appearing on his cheek and chin. The right side of his face had disappeared into a puddle of blood, which had stopped dripping from the ledge.

“Seis!”

“Yes...” His voice sounded like a shadow of its former self.

“Keep singing... Please... don’t stop...”

He blinked. When he opened his mouth to talk again, a little blood dropped on the stone.

“I’m exhausted, Naïs,” he admitted.

It brought tears to my eyes again.

“I can’t remember... any more songs.”

I sniffed, loudly. I had a runny nose, but I didn’t dare wipe it up, afraid to cause him more pain.

“I’m scared,” I sobbed.

“I know... but... I’m holding you... I won’t let go of you... I pro-mise.”

He had a choppy voice when he spoke again, the words rattled by the wind.

“It’s funny... I had a... night-mare last n-night.”

“How is that funny?”

“Well... I dreamt that I was... falling into a black pit... I couldn’t see... the bottom... and when I was... done falling...” He broke off, coughed, and spit the

blood that had accumulated in his mouth. He tried to catch his breath. “I was standing in a va-lley, in the middle of... of... nowhere...”

He was cut off by a gust of wind that sent me flinging around like a weather-vane. A hollow cry escaped Seïs and it terrified me. And yet his hand, instead of letting go, clasped mine with renewed vigor, crushing my fingers.

“SEÏS! NAÏS!”

I was overwhelmed with relief when I heard Sirius’s cry. I looked up with frantic eyes to the snowy heights from where piles of snowflakes were falling on and off. I caught a glimpse of Teichi’s dark hair, leaning from the edge of the cliff.

“Dad, Dad! They’re here... They’re right here...”

We heard heavy footsteps above us, despite the strong gusts of wind.

“Seïs, Naïs, are you alright?” Sirius shouted, but he didn’t wait for an answer. “Fer... get to the house, quickly; bring back some ropes. Hurry.”

I couldn’t see Fer, neither could I hear his answer, but I knew he had bolted away towards Crack-of-Dawn, just beyond the ridge line we had almost reached.

“Hang in there, kids!” my uncle cried out.

I could see their shadow above us. They were talking to us, shouting to be heard above the wind. Neither Seïs nor I could answer. We were focusing all our energy on the small, fragile stone ledge that was our only anchor to life.

“Naïs...” Seïs choked out, his eyes full of blood and tears.

“What is it?”

“It hurts.”

My heart skipped a bit.

“Your father’s here,” I stammered. I didn’t know what else to say to make him feel better.

He did something like a tentative nod, but then his frown hardened.

“Hold on tight kids!” Sirius was still shouting at us.

I don’t know how much time elapsed before he finally went down the cliff, tightly secured by a hemp rope held by Hector Patis and his younger brother. All our neighbors had lent a helping hand to look for us in the storm. In a few jumps, Sirius went down the cliff until he reached Seïs and, with extreme caution, set foot on the small ledge.

“Seïs, can you hear me?” Sirius asked anxiously.

A deep wrinkle was worn between his brows. His eyes filled with worry at the sight of the puddle of blood. Seïs tried to talk, but it looked like he was choking on his own blood. He spit some of it on the stone, much to the horror of his father. A wave of panic swept over me; despite myself, my nails teared into Seïs’s skin, and he whimpered.

“Hang in there, son.”

Sirius warily slid down to my level, his feet skidding on the greasy stone.

“Naïs, are you alright?” he asked, arms wide open.

I shook my head without looking at Sirius, my eyes locked with Seis' for dear life. My uncle wrapped his arms around me, and only then did I feel the scorching on my back. I let out a sob.

"Naïs, hold on to me."

I placed my free arm around his neck, more as a reflex than a conscious choice. But when I tried to free my other hand from Seis's grip, he didn't let go. His fingers were firmly clasped around my wrist.

"Seis, you have to let her go, son... Let her go, she's safe now."

Sirius's kind voice didn't seem to get through to him. Sirius took a closer look at his fingers all cramped up around my arm and he understood. He lifted me up to the ledge with caution and made sure he was secured and stable by gripping a narrow projection in the stone. He slightly shifted me against his hip, removed his arm from my waist and made sure I was holding his nape tightly. As soon as he let go of me, all my remaining strength left me and I fell down on top of my cousin. A muffled little sound escaped him when I collapsed on his chest, knocking the wind out of him. He panted for a while, then sucked in ragged breaths.

After making sure I was in no immediate danger, Sirius struggled to remove his son's fingers, one by one. Seis let him, he wasn't even flinching. He raised his good hand stiffly and brushed it against my cheek, stained with tears and melted snow.

"I'm holding you," he whispered.

I tipped my head and buried my face in his neck, drenched in sweat. He wrapped his good arm around my shoulders and only tore free when Sirius managed to loosen his son's grip.

Hector and his brother hoisted us up with a great deal of yelling as my uncle carefully placed his feet on the cliff. Locked up in Sirius's arms, I watched Seis over his shoulder, his body curled up on the ledge. My heart started pounding at the sight of his shriveled shape. He couldn't move, sprawled up on his back, head facing the abyss, his wounded arm hanging over the edge. A cry of horror escaped me when I noticed his dislocated shoulder, stubbornly challenging the abyss. I clung closer to Sirius.

As soon as we reached the edge of the cliff, strong arms got a hold of me and I was carried away. Sirius didn't waste time and hurried back down. I didn't see him hoist Seis up. Fer wrapped me in a thick wool coat, took me in his arms and carried me to the house. I have no memory of our journey back home.

When I woke up in my bed, it was still dark outside and the wind was pounding on the shutters. My mouth was dry and I was really thirsty. I perked up on my elbows. A sharp pain instantly spread in my entire arm, forearm to shoulder. I froze and let out a choked cry. I blinked a moment, trying to adjust to the darkness and the pain. I considered my bandaged hand. With my fingertips, I felt the roughness of bandages on the small of my back.

Pushing away my exhaustion, I sat up on the bed and looked around at the

closed shutters of my bedroom. Wrapped in several layers of blankets, I stared at the logs cracking in the fireplace. I was trying to remember what had startled me awake. In my nightmare, Seis was screaming.

A cry of rage and pain suddenly burst out in the house. It was like an electric choc in my entire body. I jumped, startled. It wasn't a dream. Without thinking, I grabbed the ladder stile and stumbled over it. I almost fell when my numb hand met the wood. I could hear Seis's cries through the door. It was all that mattered, not my wound making me suffer, not my exhaustion, not me.

It felt harder to get across the six feet that separated me from the door than making my way through a swamp. I leaned against the handle for a moment, to catch my breath. Then, I pushed the leaf open and headed into the darkness of the corridor.

When I reached the kitchen, I froze on the threshold. My eyes widened with horror. My mouth opened without a single sound. My entire body started shaking, tears running down my cheeks.

Seis was lying on the kitchen table. Teichi and Fer were huddled against a wall in a corner and watched in shock as their younger brother kicked and screamed. Sirius, Athora and Parton, the Oakenwood healer, were all surrounding him. Sirius was pressing down on his chest with a firm hand to keep him still, but his attempts to restrain Seis only seemed to make him struggle with redoubled strength. Despite the blood covering the right side of his face, he was watching with wild eyes the healer's yellowish fingers around his shoulder. He was screaming. His legs were kicking around in his attempts to get back up. Blood was dripping from his lips. His shirt collar, just like his throat, was stained with brown patches.

"No!" he screamed with a vehemence that baffled me. "Get off me... Get off me..."

His voice faltered and he coughed.

"Seis, stay still. We have to do this," urged Athora, visibly upset. She placed a gentle hand on his forehead, but he shot her such a volcanic glare that she recoiled a few paces in surprise.

"Seis, listen to your mother..." said Sirius. "Don't fight us. You're going to lose your arm if you keep this up."

Seis stubbornly shook his head. He tried to tear his shoulder free from the healer's grip. But much to his dismay, his arm only fell back weakly on the table.

"It will be quick," said Parton in an attempt to reassure him. The healer, in his sixties, was an honest, decent man from Macline, who had fought against the Renegade's armies in his prime. One had to admit, though, that the man may not lack courage, but was a terrible liar, because he didn't fool Seis nor I for an instant.

"Fuck off!" my cousin yelled, stirring up even more.

Sirius watched him in disbelief. He frowned and, in a careless manner, heavily pressed down on Seis's chest to keep him in place.

"If you want to lose your arm, good for you, but I won't let you throw your life away..." He turned to Parton. "Get on with it", he added with a categorical voice.

Seis, taken aback, stared at his father with wide eyes, then at the healer, who was positioning his fingers on his arm with great care. He mumbled under his breath, stammering some ancestral words in the ancient language.

"No," Seis whined, "No no no... No..."

His voice went up in pitch before breaking wretchedly. He tried to stir up, but his father's hand kept him in place.

"Take a deep breath, Seis," Parton advised.

Seis didn't seem to hear him. He was staring at his feeble limb lying on the table. His face was soaked with tears and fear had whitened his cheeks.

"Ready?"

Parton wasn't asking a real question. Seis didn't answer. His eyes went wide to the point that his face twisted in a mask of terror.

No sound escaped him when the healer yanked with a quick, firm movement to set the bone right, and it went back in its joint with a snap. His mouth opened wide, gaping, and the cry choked in his throat. His entire body tensed up, then fell back weakly on the table. His eyes stared into the ceiling, so contorted that he looked dead. A cold wave of panic swept through my body, chilling me to the bone. I barged into the kitchen, bumping into a surprised Athora, and climbed on the bench. I put a hand on his burning cheek. Sirus tried to hold me back, but his wife signaled him to step away.

"Seis? Seis? Answer me..."

At my side, the healer was palpating his shoulder, taking no notice of me.

"Seis?"

I sobbed, frighten by my cousin's pale face.

"I'm fine, Naïs," he said with a slurred voice after a while, without moving his head, as if his entire body was frozen in pain. I flinched when he added: "Go back to sleep."

I stared at him, appalled.

"But..."

He turned his head towards me, a fragile smile dancing on his lips: "Go back to sleep... Please."

I retreated. I nodded and got off the bench, wincing when my wounded knees met with the wood. Athora picked me up in her arms right away and carried me back to my bedroom.

"Don't worry, Naïs," my aunt said as she put me back to sleep. "He will be with you very soon. But for now, you need sleep to regain some strength, that way you will be able to watch over him once you're feeling better."

I nodded in disbelief, thinking about the way he had chased me away from the kitchen.

“Seïs is almost a man now,” Athora explained while she covered me with the blankets, “and men don’t like to be seen as weak or vulnerable. They like to pretend to be tough, always ready to face dragons or move mountains.” She paused to kiss me on the cheek. “Seïs is proud,” she added with a smile, “He doesn’t want his little cousin to see him in a state like this. How could he protect her otherwise?”

Her smile widened at the thought. She jumped from the last step of the bunk bed ladder and walked away after a little wave in my direction.

“Sleep well, Naïs. Get some rest.”

She shut the door behind her, effectively muffling the noises that were coming from the kitchen, and against my better judgement, I drifted off to sleep.

Seïs was carried into his bed at dawn. When I opened my eyes, I noticed the first beams of light filtering through the cracks in the shutters. I pretended to be asleep and held still when sets of eyes studied my bed. As soon as I heard the door closing, I perked up and went down the ladder.

Seïs was sleeping soundly, crushed under the weight of a mountain of blankets. His forehead was scarred, his right cheek and his lower lip chapped. The bloody scab on his forehead split his brow in two. It was strange looking, in the shape of a sword with a long, curved blade coming down to his temple.

I didn’t dare come closer, afraid that I would wake him. I was about climb back to my bed when he abruptly opened his eyes and stared at me.

“Where are you going?”

Like a fool, I looked up to the ladder and my mattress. A fragile smile danced on his lips. He lifted his blankets with an unsteady hand and made some room for me next to him.

“Mountain climbing isn’t going to help with your hand.”

I nodded in agreement, smiled back at him, and crawled under the sheets. He covered us both with the quilt and sank his head right back into his pillow. He let out a loud yawn and tried to get comfortable.

“You’re not cold?” he asked me.

“No... Not anymore... Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore.”

He curled up and reached out to hold my hand in his. I had shivers down my back at his touch. Seïs was watching me, his eyes half-shut. And even though I was still young, I knew I was right where I had always wanted to be.



6 years later

It was the summer of my fourteenth birthday. The town was getting ready for the annual Fortifications celebration. From the battlements to the cob houses' balconies, Macline was covered with candles and lanterns. Flower garlands were hanging above the stalls and all the shops were open. The streets were packed with people.

I elbowed my way through carts filled to the brim and merchants' stalls. Market Town, the oldest neighborhood in Macline, was at the heart of town, and its narrow alleyways stretched all the way to the main straight-lined streets in the city. The houses, all jumbled together, prevented the sunlight from reaching the pavement. Only a few blue squares sometimes emerged from between the slate roofs.

I stopped by an apothecary stall and bargained for an ointment my aunt had asked me to get her. I spent a good fifteen minutes negotiating the price. In Macline, bargaining was a way of life. Some merchants and customers would bargain for hours over a matchstick, only to see which one of them would emerge victorious.

I had to buy some linen fabrics to make a new shirt for Antoni. He had gotten so big lately that his shirts barely reached his stomach. His brothers were always complaining because he kept borrowing their clothes without giving them back. I also had to find a brand-new cast-iron pot since the last one, made from terracotta, had blown up in the kitchen. Athora needed it to cook the dinner.

I went up Healers Street, then turned the corner of Daywell and Heartwood Pine in order to reach Town Square.

The enclosure wall surrounding Macline was octagonal-shaped. The city inside was divided into five symmetrical neighborhoods: old Market Town at the center, the Hive in the northeastern corner, which was the bad part of town, Oakenwood at the opposite end, Golden Coin southeast of the city, and finally, the Merchants neighborhood to the southwest.

On my way up Heartwood Pine Street, I got caught in the influx of caravanners

crossing Market Town. A procession of carts and plows, loaded with supplies from nearby cities, was going down the street, making its way to the Merchants neighborhood.

It took me a while to reach the Town Square of the Seven Kings because of the dense crowd. The seven statues of our previous monarchs proudly towered above the masses, perched on their chryselephantine quadriga, both the horses and the kings' armors plated with gold and ivory.

I was fending off a kid a bit too eager to shine my shoes when the town governor's trumpet resounded in the square. I turned towards Notable Avenue where Aymeri of Chasse and his counselors were making their way through the crowd in a long procession.

The governor headed for the podium set up for tonight's festivities. I assumed that Aymeri was planning to show off his orator skills ahead of time. I had no intention of listening to him. Aymeri couldn't keep his mouth shut, that was a nasty habit of his. I threaded my way through caravanners fighting like cats and dogs, unperturbed, and decided to leave for the Merchants neighborhood. Brawls between merchants were commonplace in the city, and the city guard didn't bother to intervene anymore.

I was about to leave the square when the trumpet resounded again. Startled, I turned back towards the podium. It had to be important for the herald to announce it twice.

Aymeri stood above the mass of people that had quickly gathered around him. He cleared his throat before addressing the crowd, as he always did, and took the time to brush a loose strand of graying hair behind his pointy ear. He started to speak, but his voice was drowned out by the racket around him. Irritated, he gestured to the herald and the trumpet clanged again. Order was restored with great difficulty and the governor was almost vibrating with impatience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he proclaimed, "I have just received word from Elisse. Extraordinary news has reached us..."

His eyes went wide, as if he couldn't fathom the scope of his announcement. He carried on with his speech: "The... The great masters of Asclepion, The Tenshins, have just decided, in this year 2074 of our calendar system, to welcome new apprentices in their order..."

The whole square went silent with shock. Eyes met, quizzical and bewildered, then quickly turned back to Aymeri who kept going with enthusiasm.

"Every young man from the age of seventeen to thirty may enter their name in the register books at Mal-Han palace within the next few days..."

Whispers, then shouts started to break out, inflaming the square.

"What's all the fuss about?"

Startled, I turned toward Seis. He was leaning against the wheel of Queen Lyn-Ane's quadriga and was casually smoking a cigarette, eyes fixed on the governor. I

shrugged, reluctant to answer, as I stared at the cigarette smoldering between his lips. His eyes caught mine and he held it out to me.

“Go on... Have a taste if you feel like it.”

I shot him a sharp look.

“These are Thaumaturgus Herbs,” he said, “It’s perfectly safe, I swear.”

“Thanks, but no, I don’t feel like it at all.”

“Alright, suit yourself, it’s your loss... So, what’s going on?”

He pointed the smoldering end of his cigarette towards Aymeri.

“The Tenshins have announced they are holding new elections.”

“Is that so? Curious.”

I looked up at him in surprise. “Why do you think it’s curious?”

He stood up and threw his arm around my shoulders. He angled his face towards mine and the Herbs smell reached my nose, much to my displeasure.

“Well, because it’s been... wait a minute, I need to think... at least six hundred years since they’ve held any elections. Taranis of the Ladders is the last apprentice to have become a master. And if I remember Professor Glorna’s classes correctly, it happened in the years 1400, give or take a few springs. I think it’s curious for them to suddenly decide to welcome new apprentices in the Brotherhood again. Use your head for a change, Naïs!”

He used his forefinger to pat my temple with a snarky smile, which got on my nerves. I elbowed him in the ribs to shove him away. He deigned to give me some space and shifted his attention back to the governor.

“Are you going to enroll?” I asked, curious.

He shrugged flippantly, all the while eyeing with interest a street hawker selling bottles of cheap Massore wine. He only turned back to me when the seller had vanished in the crowd.

“To do what now?”

He licked his lips, acting nonchalantly, and for a moment, he pretended to marvel at the two opal stones embedded in the statue’s eyeballs.

“What do you mean, to do what? For the elections, of course.”

He tossed his cigarette stub on the pavement and put it out with his boot. “I have other business to attend to, that require all my attention.”

“Oh, right!” I hissed. “I’d rather not know.”

He burst out laughing, arms crossed on his chest. “Ah! Naïs... sweetheart... It’s best you don’t.”

Having said that, he smiled slyly and walked away. I watched him effortlessly thread his way through the townspeople, as if there was no one standing in his way.

“Seïs, we head home in an hour... Do you hear me?” I called. “In an hour... I won’t wait for you. I’m warning you. The South Gate, in an hour... Seïs?”

He waved a hand at me, not sparing me a glance, and disappeared into the crowd. I sighed with faint irritation and got back to my business. Aymeri had no-

thing of interest left to say. He was now fawning over the Tenshins to try to gain the favor of the few notables currently in Macline.

Asclepion was a kingdom built on a convoluted hierarchy. It was all about orders, from the lower classes to the highest spheres. The goldsmith belonged to the Golden Chalice guild, the stonemason to the Brass Stone order, the apothecary to the Sickie corporation... Everything was about corporations. Only the farmers were excluded from the orders, crushed under the feuds piling up above their heads, all of it under the auspices of the Trade Institute, always happy to extend its influence.

When it came to military and political bodies, on the other hand, only the Brotherhood of Mantaore prevailed, powerful and immutable. In the common language of our gods, Mantaore stood for Knowledge. Members of this group, called Masters or Tenshins, were few, but their power was unparalleled. Kings had been cooperating with them since the monarchy was established two thousand years ago, resetting our calendar system at the same time. They claimed to be the wardens allowing our dynasty and monarchy to endure, and everyone agreed to say they were the immovable sentinels standing watch over Asclepion. To be appointed apprentice of Mantaore was an honor many dreamt of: with it came privilege, respect and notoriety. The Tenshins were both warlords and great politicians. The king didn't make any decisions without them... the king couldn't make any decisions without them.

I ran my errands quickly, then made my way back to the south gate with a huge cast-iron pot under my arm.

Much to my surprise, Seïs was already there, standing under the arch of the gate, in the middle of a lively chat with the guards. They were busy playing cards in the shade of a tree. One of them was searching the back of a cart and he accepted a bribe in plain sight. It was all common knowledge, and since their pay boiled down to a few coins a week, no one blamed them for capitalizing on the caravanners, who used Macline as a foothold between the two major markets in the kingdom: Mag-damee at the center and Massore on the western coastal shores.

One of the guards signaled to Seïs when he noticed me. He looked up and watched me stumbling closer without any intention to help me with my purchases. He was just standing there, next to the table, hands in his pockets. He was smiling, visibly entertained. I wanted to hit him with my cast-iron pot and wipe that smile off his face.

I stopped in front of him and, not bothering to greet his companions, I shoved the pot right into his ribs. He winced and took his hands out of his pockets just in time, before I dropped it on his feet.

"You're angry," he noted. "What are you whining about? I'm here, am I not?"

I replied with a dismissive shrug, and after a quick nod towards the guards, I headed off to our house without waiting for him.

"Your cousin has quite a temper," I heard one of the guards say.

"A bad temper, that's for sure! And that was not even the worst of it," Seis said with a sneer. "Alright, see you around."

"Hey! Don't forget what you promised."

"Don't worry. That's not likely. I've got it covered."

I shook my head at the last words, exasperated. Seis had a way of getting mixed up in shady business. As a rule, I never asked him about his whereabouts, but I knew how he spent his days. The Hive neighborhood was the den of all kinds of dealers, headhunters, whores, and heavy Herbs of the Prophet smokers. It left little to the imagination.

Seis caught up with me when I left the king's road, which connected Macline and Esmir Port, to follow a small woodland trail. He adjusted his stride to match mine, the iron pot in his arms. Lost in thought, he watched the treetops in the distance, set ablaze by the sun.

"I've heard every city in the west received a letter announcing the new Mantore elections," he said. "What does it matter? A thousand dreamers hoping to be selected?"

"I take it you have no intention of enrolling."

He chuckled. "No, absolutely not. I told you, I have better things to do."

"Such as stealing from Fin, for instance, or fooling around in the Hive brothels."

This earned me a scathing look, but I could see a shadow hovering deep in his dark eyes, like a cloud in a blue sky.

"Don't look at me like that. Do you really think it's a big secret?"

He didn't answer and looked down at the bushes bordering the path.

"Of course, I already knew about this," I said. "I would have to be blind, and deaf, not to hear Sirus and Athora complain about you."

He shrugged in stubborn silence.

"Yesterday afternoon, you never went to work in the blacksmith shop with the Crisspe father, did you?"

At first, he seemed surprised by the question, but then he burst out laughing, proudly exposing the space between his front teeth. It granted him a perpetual, irritating air of boldness. With a smile, he could seduce or make an enemy of anyone.

"And waste my time and my youth hammering steel all day long to earn three coins? No thank you, I have other plans for my future."

"Oh, really? And what plans would that be?"

"Easy. I don't feel like spending my days raking dirt like my father or work wood like my brother."

"So what do you have in mind?"

"A wise man isn't the man slaving away, it's the man who finds a way to live his life without ever having to work," he proclaimed with his arms outstretched to the sky.

I sighed. “Wherever did you hear such nonsense?”

“Where do you think? I’m quoting myself, and it’s only common sense. In fact, I live a comfortable life already. Don’t sweat it.”

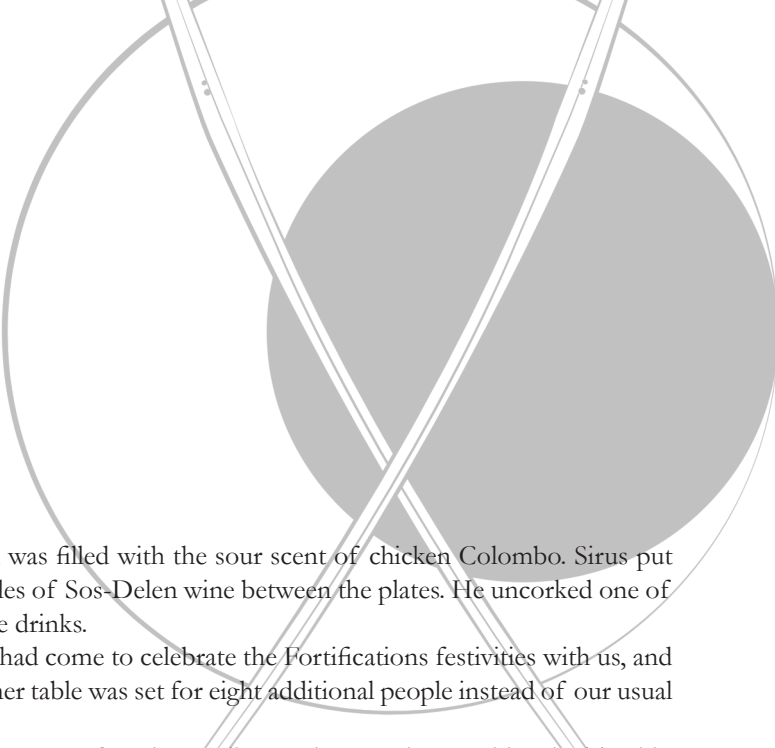
I frowned at his self-confidence. “You’re not the one I’m worried about,” I interrupted curtly, “Your parents are worried sick about their self-centered son who believes stealing from other people is an honest way to make a living.”

“I don’t care what you think, Naïs!”

His tone told me I had a point and just scored a fragile victory, but that did not last long, unfortunately.

“It’s all well and good to lecture me,” he went on bitterly, “but what about you? If I were you, I would start to think about marriage and having kids with a worthless husband living an honest life. At least I could have my bedroom back and my parents would have one less mouth to feed.”

He cracked his neck and picked up the pace on the rocky path, which was gently sloping up a hill. I cast him a murderous glance and he glared back just as coldly.



The kitchen was filled with the sour scent of chicken Colombo. Sirus put down two large bottles of Sos-Delen wine between the plates. He uncorked one of them and poured the drinks.

The Patis family had come to celebrate the Fortifications festivities with us, and the massive oak dinner table was set for eight additional people instead of our usual seven.

There was no shortage of topics to discuss that evening. Besides the Tenshin election announcement, which had caused quite a stir, and the Fortifications celebration, my uncle had learned from a neighbor that another pack train had been attacked by the Red Scarves on the Magdamee king's road. They were road bandits that only targeted merchant caravans, and sometimes secluded houses. They were proliferating all over the country. The monarchy was unable to stop them. They didn't live in the cities, never entered them, and were always on the move from one region to another. The fact that they were not an organized group was not in the authorities' best interest. The Red Scarves sometimes killed each other over a turf, but the absence of leaders and premeditated attacks and planning rendered ineffective any repression attempt, as well as expensive. Every time the regent sent troops to apprehend them and ferret them out, they only ever found cold ashes and hoof prints.

Fer was hung on every word, whereas Teichi was lost in contemplation of Philippine, the Patis youngest daughter. She was a pretty girl with golden curls, the tanned complexion of farmers, and small eyes, well-defined and enhanced with kohl. Antoni was glancing around with his typical vivacity. Meanwhile, Seis was staring out of the window with a vacant expression. He seemed very far away, and I always wondered where his thoughts drifted out to.

"It's the third attack in the span of a week," Fer explained, his voice strained. "Three pack trains looted; the merchants slaughtered. Last week it was on Astin Road. I was expecting a white wood delivery from Ulutil. It never made it here."

"You'll be waiting a while," Hector said, the eldest Patis son, a six-foot-tall lad built like an ox and one of the best rokush swordsmen at the Six Cities tournament. The rokush was a bamboo stick, extremely sturdy, that could withstand the blade of a sword if handled properly. Its swordsmanship was one of the oldest martial arts in Asclepion.

Fer's pitch-black eyes caught the candlelight. He clenched his fist next to his plate, then loosened it as though his hands were closed around the neck of a Red Scarf.

"They proliferate like weeds. It's slowly rotting the country."

"You're right. The king's roads are no longer safe," Athora said, sticking her fork in a mixture of green beans, carrots and onions. "The Trade Institute is always promising better trading conditions, but these are just empty words."

"The regent has spent most of his time dealing with noblemen quarrels and squandering his money to temper with them," Sirus added. "As a result, the country's finances are not enough to properly protect the roads anymore. The Red Scarves know how lucky they are, and they are making the most of it. They will not cease their attacks until the Tenshins get involved once and for all. The elections of new apprentices may very well be the answer we've been waiting for. Some new blood and a better distribution of the masters across the country could contain the threat posed by these bandits."

They were all listening to my uncle, as he thought out loud about these questions he often dwelled on. The past year, the Red Scarves had burned down our windmill downstream of the Lady of the night river.

Sirus grabbed his glass and drank it straight.

"I'm convinced that damn Renegade has something to do with the proliferation of these jailbirds," the Patis father argued, his voice rough.

Seis only slightly cocked his head when he heard the name, to avoid showing interest, but enough for me to realize that he was listening to the conversation more than he let out.

"Could be," Sirus granted. "Anything to show he's still there, I suppose."

Seis could barely contain the smile on his lips. He noticed me watching him and swiftly made it disappear, but his eyes were still sparkling despite himself.

"He stays behind the scenes," Fer said. "He doesn't have enough men or money to attack us head-on, so he is scheming to eat the kingdom away from the inside out. Just like a worm in an apple."

Hector and Sirus both nodded eagerly, while the Patis father frowned with a grim look.

"It makes no difference," Hector went on, holding his bock towards Athora and the jug of wine she was holding. "The fact is that our roads are no longer safe, not even in the countryside, that our supplies are not guaranteed to reach their destination and that we're losing money every time they cross the forest."

Seïs took a sip of wine, then put his cup back on the table. “Do you really think Noterre cares about these guys’ pathetic little looting?” he said calmly.

He didn’t seem to be looking at or talking to anyone in particular, his eyes turned to the outside and the vanishing sun behind the tree line.

All eyes turned to him. Sirius frowned. Athora pursed her lips to hide her irritation. The Patis spouses stared at him as though he had suffered a nasty blow to the head and was obviously not able to think clearly anymore.

There was not a single person in the kingdom of Ponant who dared speak his name, afraid with good reason or not that all the evils in the world would come crashing down on them. His name, his rank, any representation of him had been banished. That’s how it had been for more than two thousand years, so deeply rooted in our traditions that hardly anyone ever questioned it. We called him the Renegade, the Traitor, sometimes the Prince, sometimes...

“Seïs, you don’t even know what you’re talking about!” Fer grumbled, teeth clenched. Seïs smirked bitterly at his brother. “In other words, stick to the whores you bed...”

Sirius banged his fist on the table, effectively silencing everyone. “I won’t hear such words under my roof!”

Fer bit his lip and glared away from the grinning face of his younger brother.

“And Seïs,” Sirius added, “if you speak this traitor’s name in front of me again, I can guarantee you will regret it.”

“You’re all terrified of him,” Seïs talked back. “No wonder he’s been sitting behind his borders without a care in the world. Just saying his name makes you shit your pants...”

“Seïs! Cut it out!” Athora intervened.

Sirius was clenching his fist so hard on the table that if it had been his son’s neck, he would have crushed it easily. Athora leaned in and whispered a few words in his ear, her hand on his forearm. My uncle angled his face slightly towards her, stared into her eyes, and slowly unclenched his fist. Athora smiled at him, then straightened up in her chair and picked up the plate in the middle of the table.

“Would you care for some more meat?” she asked the Patis mother.

“Gladly,” the farmer answered. “The food is delicious, Athora, as always...”

Seïs didn’t unclench his jaw for the rest of the meal. He was scowling, eyes fixed on the courtyard behind the window, but then he poured himself some more wine. When he put down the bottle, his gaze caught mine and he held it before tearing his eyes away. When he moved, his leg brushed past mine under the table, sending shivers up my spine.

After dinner, Sirius went out to harness the carriage while the Patis sons smoked Thaumaturgus Herbs in the courtyard. From the window, Seïs was staring at them in envy. If Sirius had caught him smoking it behind the barn, he would have been in for a serious ass-kicking to teach him a lesson.

Once the cart was harnessed, it was getting dark, and it was time to hit the road if we wanted to attend the festivities in Macline.

Stuck between Seis and Teichi at the back of the carriage, I watched the trees pass by. The Shore-Ker forest was vast for a small country such as ours. It stretched from the grassy Sarroes hills in the west to the brown Sergale slopes in the east. It was at the crossroad of several caravan roads and the heart of the entire valley.

Sirus and Antoni were singing their hearts out while Athora was laughing out loud.

“Kiss me on... Ho ! Ho! Kiss me on... Ha! Ha! Kiss me on the cheek. Finally gonna touch your tiny... Ho! Ho! Your tiny... Ha! Ha! Your tiny heart so meek. Let’s open wide... Ho! Ho! Let’s open wide... Ha! Ha! Let’s open wide our eyes and take a peek.”

I caught Seis smiling, his head leaning on the carriage’s side.

A bump in the road sent us flying, cutting short the two men’s singing. I bumped into Teichi, who in turn bashed his shoulder against the carriage step. He let out a muffled curse and apologized right away. Sirus grumbled about the donkey. Silence surrounded us for a moment, only disrupted by the sound of the wheels on the dirt road.

I almost jumped when Seis’s hand brushed over mine. I kept my eyes fixed on the trees, swaying in the evening breeze like a foamy sea. His forefinger traced the curve of my hand, of my wrist, brushed against my fingertips. He pulled his knees against his chest to hide his little game from his brothers. I held back a smile. Heart pounding in my chest, I opened my hand, and he slipped his own into mine. Seis was watching the groves, the trunks green with lichen. His face was blank of any emotion, joy, or pain.

The carriage left the Crack-of-Dawn woodland path and mingled with the inflow of carts invading the king’s road. Sirus made our donkey come to a halt next to the rampart wall, in the shade of an oak.

My heart was fluttering with excitement at the thought of the festivities, but Seis snatched his hand back without warning. He stood up as soon as the carriage stopped and nimbly jumped over the wooden side rail. He barely spared me a glance, and with a neutral tone, he said: “Enjoy your evening. See you all later.”

He was about to run off when his mother reminded him: “You should be back at two in the morning and not a minute later, or else there will be chores waiting for you tomorrow. Now you know, Seis, and the same goes for all of you. Have fun, stay out of trouble and be on time.”

“Alright,” Seis grumbled.

She watched us all in turn, her bright eyes boring into our faces, and we all nodded in concert.

When I turned around, Seis had already disappeared into the crowd. Without further ado, I set off arm in arm with Teichi and Antoni, heading for the gate where

a squadron of liveried city guards welcomed newcomers. Fer parted with us and bid us a good evening, along with Athora and Sirius who had been invited for a drink at Lauchaud's private salon, an eminent scholar who fought for the peasant cause and to assert their rights in front of the corporations.

Although most of the shops were closed, the hustle in the overcrowded streets was disorienting. We got drawn into the multitude, lost in the fabrics and perfumes. Smells of spices, sweat, candies and alcohol spread across the avenues lined with oak trees. We elbowed our way through Notable Avenue, then took a shortcut through a narrow alleyway at the junction of the Market Town and the Golden Coin neighborhoods. Out of curiosity, we headed straight for the Mal-Han palace, where the town governor resided. As soon as we turned the street corner, we ran into a crowd of young people lining up to enter the palace through the porte-cochere.

"They've come to enroll," Teichi shouted to be heard among the raised voices.

A stage had been set in a hurry in the palace inner courtyard, between two flower beds. Several councilors and guards were seated at a table and wrote down in a register book the name of the young men willing to try their luck in the Tenshins election.

"Seis isn't going to enroll, is he?" Antoni asked, clearly disappointed.

I shook my head and watched the young men from seventeen to thirty years old, in the middle of a lively talk, discussing grand projects and dreams of battle.

"Not likely. He doesn't see the point."

"That's no surprise," Teichi said.

"What about Fer?"

Antoni's sparkling eyes were giving away the faith he placed in his older brother.

"I wouldn't count on it," Teichi retorted. "Fer already struggles with rokush swordsmanship and Seis with following orders. I hardly see them putting on the warrior attire."

"Oh! Now that's just mean, Fer isn't that bad with a rokush," I teased.

Teichi burst out laughing. "You're right, he's just as good as the old Patis donkey when it comes to hauling their carriage... Speaking of which, we should go to them. They must be waiting for us on Town Square."

"Yeah, just say you can't wait to see Philippine again," Antoni taunted.

Teichi shrugged and, our arms still linked, he led me through the crowd without another word. Antoni followed behind us with a sneer.

We pushed our way through people having a beer in the middle of the street. Counters had been set up outside the doors of every Macline tavern, so there were gathering of people in front of each one of them, and a great deal of laughter and cries.

"Let's hurry," Antoni told us, "We're going to miss the opening of the feast."

By the time we reached Notable Avenue, the crowd had built up to the point

that we had to stop a few meters away from the square, we couldn't get any closer.

"Oh, come on!" Antoni complained, frustrated. "What should we do now?"

He made a disappointed face at Teichi, but his older brother only shrugged, helpless. Antoni's face fell. He jumped around to try to peek above the heads of the people in front of him, only to see more heads.

More disheartened by the minute, we could only watch the square swarming with people like an anthill. There was no way we would be able to see the opening of the festivities. Antoni was fidgeting, impatiently.

"Seis!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Hey, it's Seis... Seis..."

He pointed at a young man threading its way through the crowd like an eel, a cigarette in his hand.

"Seis, we're right here!" Antoni shouted. "Hey! Seis!"

How Seis eventually heard him in the surrounding chaos, I have no idea. Still, he looked up, scanned the crowd, and spotted his younger brother waving frantically. He gave him a little nod, and weaved his way to us like a fish moving smoothly among seagrass.

"What are you doing back here?" he asked when he reached us. "The show is over there!"

He pointed at the square of the Seven Kings with a mocking smile.

"Thanks, we're aware of that," I said, annoyed. "How do you propose we get there? Look at this crowd!"

He shrugged, taking in the sea of people currently blocking our way, then turned his attention back to us.

"Very well, we're going to see this show," he said with a sigh. "But make it quick. I don't have all night."

Without waiting for us, he swung around and headed for a side street adjacent to Notable Avenue, a straight, narrow alleyway that ran parallel to the square. He came to a stop next to the backdoor of one of the most opulent houses in the city center. The back of the building was made of cheap cob. However, the front overlooking the square was made of Red-Bridge stones, with black beams embedded in the mortar to form a Rose Cross. Overall, it was gorgeous, and yet despite its splendor, it had a chilling effect on the viewer.

The Rose Cross was the alchemists' symbol and, just like them, it inspired as much respect than fear. The power of the magicians was beyond comprehension. No one could explain it, no one knew which child would be born with such a gift, but instead of being pleased, parents were devastated when they found out their offspring were gifted in that way. Alchemists were not treated like lepers, but their being here was poorly appreciated when they lingered in a popular location. Most of them did not mind, they would much rather stay secluded in their laboratory to study in peace and put their talents into practice.

When you think about it, it was strange to realize that Asclepius feared the

alchemists' power, that only affected one child in a thousand, more than they feared the Tenshins', which we knew nothing about, neither its origin nor its scope.

Seis took a quick look around the street, then released the latch without difficulty and opened the leaf.

"That's Mr Hure's house," Teichi observed with surprise.

Seis walked into the entrance hall. "Yes," he answered succinctly.

"Hum... You're sure he's okay with us being in his house?" his brother asked, concerned.

"Well, if no one goes and tell him, he'll never know about it."

Teichi's eyes widened like saucers. "You mean he doesn't know..."

"... that we're breaking into his house, no," Seis finished. "Now get in before someone sees us."

Teichi hovered on the porch, looking left and right in the alley with suspicion. The only other people present were either minding their own business, or too drunk to care about four kids standing in a doorway. Teichi took a deep breath, walked past his brother who was keeping the door open with his foot, and entered the hall of the servant quarters.

"Naïs? What are you waiting for?" Seis said as I took an inquisitive look inside the house.

"How can you be sure Hure won't come back?" I asked.

He flashed a mischievous grin. "Because I saw him completely plastered in Blanqui's tavern and high on Herbs of the Prophet. He must be passed out in his own vomit by now... Come on, hurry. You wanted to watch the show, didn't you?"

With a little nod, he signaled me to get inside quickly and, having found no real reason to argue, I relented. I caught up with Antoni in a long hallway while Seis carefully closed the door behind us.

"First floor," he told us as we entered a vast hall.

Paintings, family portraits and all sorts of trinkets decorated the room in a messy kind of way. It looked as though Hure bought art pieces only to leave them in a corner and completely forget about it.

"Naïs, what are you doing?"

Seis was growing impatient next to the stairs.

"I'm coming."

Up the stairs, a long hallway lined with paintings was stretching all the way over the house, with multiple oak wood doors pressed against one another on either side of the corridor.

"That one," Seis instructed, gesturing at the first door on the left.

Antoni barged into the room without a second thought. Teichi considered him and shook his head severely. He looked up to his brother and said with a note of reproach: "Sooner or later, you're going to get us all in trouble."

Seis pulled the cigarette off his lips. "Yeah, well, it'll be the only troubles you

will ever get in. Don't sweat it. Between the both of us, we all know which one will take the blame."

Without another word, he followed Antoni inside. Teichi looked at me in dismay. His shoulders stooped as if the entire world suddenly rested on his back.

Antoni had opened one of the windows and was looking down to the square. Teichi stood beside him and even though he kept telling him to be careful, Antoni was having his way. Seis hovered in the background, his cigarette smoldering between his lips. Only then did I notice he was wearing a Hedem waistcoat, a leather-like material but more durable, worn by adults. Its brown blended with the facetious strands of his hair and his dark eyes. With a smile, he pointed out the other window to me. I rushed to open it. Seis walked over to the fireplace and threw his cigarette in it with a flick of his wrist, then joined me, dragging his feet on the carpet. He placed himself behind me and put his right hand on my hip as I leaned down to admire the square.

From where we were standing, the square seemed on the verge of implosion. The imposing statues of our kings were lost in the crowd, swallowed up by the hundreds of bodies clustered together. Aymeri of Chasse was standing at the center of the stage, very noticeable in his velvet ceremonial gown, ludicrous considering the summer weather of the evening. Next to him, the herald proclaimed the festivities open. Aymeri raised an arm. In response, all the torches in the city went out one by one. The entire town was plunged into darkness. Seis's grip on my hip hardened and I shivered under the warmth of his palm.

"Wait. No... It won't do," he murmured. He grabbed my hand suddenly and pulled me back into the room. "We won't see anything from here," he shouted at his brother as he dragged me into the hallway.

"Seis, where are you going?" Teichi called. "You'll miss the show. Where are you both going?"

"To the tower."

Without further ado, he led me through the corridor punctuated with the strange faces of the Hure family, up to the very last door, which he opened with a twist of the key. He pushed the leaf open and headed into the darkness of a spiral staircase. He made me climb the steps at full speed until we reached another oak wood door. That one was closed, but we didn't have to unlock it. At the top of the tower, a large bay window opened onto the square. Seis hurried to it, moved the windowpane away and pulled me towards the edge.

We overlooked the entire city down below, from the square of the Seven Kings to the northern walls. Endless slate roofs were stretching as far as the eye could see. The oak treetops were silhouetted against the ink blue sky and the pale, pink flowers of the cheery trees looked like so many snowflakes suspended in the air.

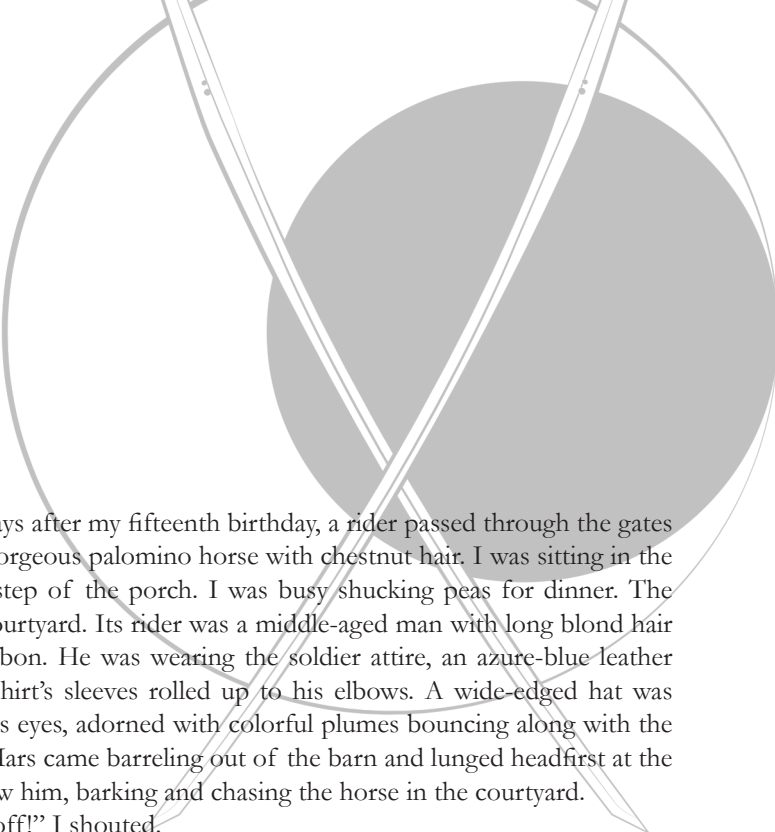
Aymeri moved towards the front of the stage. Everyone in the crowd had their eyes glued to him. Aymeri bowed before the statue of Landrie of Elisse, second

king in the bloodline, looming over the podium. Perched on his quadriga pulled by four golden stallions, Landrie's hand was opened like an offering. The statue's eyes, made of two embedded emeralds, seemed to follow the governor as he approached. Aymeri stepped forward, bowed to the king as if he were alive, and brought the torch closer to the candle. The wick caught fire straight away. The flame consumed the string that connected it with another candle, lighting it up in turn like dominoes. In a few minutes, all the candles in the square of the Seven Kings had lit up, and suddenly, like a blast, the fire spread through the four main avenues in Macline up to the fortifications.

I was spellbound, my eyes brimming with light. The entire city was like a starry sky.

"Thank you," I whispered in Seis's ear.

He turned to me with a smirk. "You know I'll do anything for you."



A few days after my fifteenth birthday, a rider passed through the gates of our estate on a gorgeous palomino horse with chestnut hair. I was sitting in the shade, on the first step of the porch. I was busy shucking peas for dinner. The horse entered the courtyard. Its rider was a middle-aged man with long blond hair tied back with a ribbon. He was wearing the soldier attire, an azure-blue leather waistcoat with his shirt's sleeves rolled up to his elbows. A wide-edged hat was pulled down over his eyes, adorned with colorful plumes bouncing along with the tread of his steed. Mars came barreling out of the barn and lunged headfirst at the stranger when he saw him, barking and chasing the horse in the courtyard.

"Mars, knock it off!" I shouted.

The sharpei turned his ears back, looked at me, clearly frustrated, and started trotting behind the man. The rider dismounted at my side and approached me while Mars was sniffing his legs warily. He removed his hat and saluted with his fist on his chest.

I stared at his white and gold feathered headpiece and noticed the Elisse sigil shining at the top of his chest: the Astree crown and the tower standing in the middle. My eyes went wide, and I jumped to my feet.

"Hello, Miss," he said with a charming voice.

I licked my lips and awkwardly tried to smooth the creases on my dress, promptly covering my upper thighs.

"Hello," I answered, self-conscious.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the Elisse house sigil sparkling on his coat. He caught me staring and smiled.

"Let me introduce myself. My name is Marien Loveleaf. I am the bearer of a message for Sir Seïs Amorgen of Macline. Is this the Amorgen domain?"

I stared at him, dumbfounded. "Yes, yes it is. But... hum... Seïs isn't here. I... Wait a moment."

I stuck my head through the half-opened door, trying to see if I could find Athora bustling around the kitchen.

“Aunty?”

“What is it?” she mumbled, dropping a massive brass plate on the table.

“There’s an envoy at the door... he’s here for Seïs.”

She looked up. “An envoy?” she marveled, and I nodded. She wiped her hands on her dress, swiftly making her way to the courtyard. “An envoy?” my aunt repeated as she went out on the porch.

She openly studied the young man, eyes widening as she admired his elegantly made suit. Her eyes froze when she noticed the royal dynasty sigil stitched to his waistcoat. The Astree crown was eye-catching. It didn’t matter if it was a simple embroidering on a garment, or a large banner: every eye turned to it.

Loveleaf bowed to my aunt. “Good day to you, Lady Amorgen,” he said in a refined way that was not common in our region.

It was no secret that the customs in Elisse City were nothing like the rest of the country. Elissers had a different way of life than the country folk. Parties were more frequent and more lavish. Every ceremony was overseen by Regent Calette the Great himself. As a rule, Elisse inhabitants had the unfortunate tendency to consider themselves better than the rest of his Majesty’s subjects, on the flimsy pretext that the dynasty bore their city’s name and that the royal palace towered above their houses. Their so-called superiority of culture, their manners, the way they talked, all of this widened the gap with the country people, who laughed at the notables’ gaudy finery, at their powdered faces and their effeminate ways. Just like the Elissers criticized our crude manners and our inappropriate, vulgar language in return.

“Hello,” my aunt responded after she was done studying him. “How may my son help you, young man?”

“I am the bearer of a message of the utmost importance for gentleman Seïs Amorgen,” the courier said with curious pride.

“Gentleman,” I mocked under my breath.

Athora gave me a stern look that made me realize I should have kept my mouth shut.

“Seïs is not here at the moment and Orde knows when he will be back.” She turned to me and told me: “Be a darling Naïs, go tell your uncle that an envoy is here, and then go fetch your cousin.”

“Yes, aunty.”

I shot the courier a quick look and he politely bowed his head. I rushed through the courtyard and darted along the path cutting through the groves.

After having passed an oak tree line, I reached a sun-soaked clearing. I could see the outline of Sirus’s crops: pieces of land of various sizes delimited by low mounds, with tracks connecting them together. Sirus was plowing the field alongside Teichi. They were turning over the soil and aerating it, in order to plant the spring wheat seeds that were to be harvested in the summer. Teichi was hoeing the weeds with dedication, as though his whole life depended on the quack grass he

pulled out. Sirius was working on another piece of land with Ponce, a robust, black draft horse dragging the plow with difficulty behind him.

I rushed to my uncle. His shirt was stained with sweat, turning yellow near the armpits and the neckline. With the back of his sleeve, he wiped off sweat and sticky strands of hair from his forehead.

“Nai’s, what are you doing here?” he asked when he saw me run towards him.

I was panting when I reached him and tried to catch my breath, hands on my knees.

“There’s an envoy at the house for Seis. Athora is asking for you.”

He frowned and promptly let go of the plow.

“Teichi, you take care of Ponce and then come back to the house,” he shouted. He wiped his hands on his old-fashioned linen pants and glared at me. “You left your aunt alone with a stranger! For heaven’s sake! How many times do I have to remind the both of you? Don’t let strangers into the house.”

I was left speechless as he made his way back to Crack-of-Dawn with long strides, still grumbling. “You and your aunt would let any ruffian who comes your way into our home. He could very well be a caravan robber and besides not caring in the slightest, you two would go so far as to make him a cup of tea. You never listen to me... Teichi, hurry up and go take care of Ponce!”

Teichi dropped everything he was doing and jogged to the horse without haste. He blinked at me on his way to Ponce, who was snorting under the scorching sun.

“But...come on, uncle, Antoni must be home too”, I muttered.

He turned to me as if I had lost my mind.

“Antoni and his ninety pounds, tops?” He broke out laughing. “Go fetch your fool of a cousin and meet us back at the house, quick.”

Sirius had just showcased the evident hostility of the Shore-Ker farmers. Of course, most of them had reasons to be wary of strangers. There were too many thugs roaming the forest, and too many notables eager to buy back all their farmlands. A lot of small farming estates had already fallen into the power of either one of them. The Trade Institute was a company affiliated with Elisse central power, and ransomed country folks without any accountability. They liked to put farmers in financial difficulty, only to buy back their life’s work for a song.

Stationed in the middle of the field, my hand shielding my eyes, I quickly went through the various places Seis could be hiding out: he could be in the Hive neighborhood, or basking in the waters of the Lady of the night river – it was such a lovely day –, or in the abandoned Lamure cabin where he sometimes brought romantic conquests... No, not today. It was too hot for this kind of things.

I broke into a smile when Teichi echoed my thoughts: “He must be under the old lime tree,” he told me.

“Definitely,” I agreed. “He didn’t come back to the house last night. He must be sleeping right now.”

Teichu shrugged before detaching the plow from Ponce. “He’s living a good life,” he said, matter-of-factly. He stretched his back, arms outspread like a cross. Relief passed through his face as his muscles relaxed. “He gets home late. He stays idle all day long while we slave away to make money for the family.”

He let out a long sigh and let his arms fall back to his sides.

“Don’t worry, I think things are about to change. Sirius told him he didn’t deserve to eat at our table if he didn’t work, and there was no reason he should enjoy the hard-earned privilege of others if he wasn’t making any efforts to pull his weight...”

“Dad told him that?” Teichi cut in, flabbergasted.

“Oh yeah.”

“What did he do to make him this mad?”

“Well... Remember when Sirius managed to get your brother a job at Crisspe’s blacksmith shop?... Naturally, Seïs didn’t show up. He isn’t interested in working in a forge. It’s not good enough for him. So, when the Crisspe father went to see Sirius and told him his son was missing work and didn’t even have the decency to come and apologize for his absence, your father went furious. He ordered me to take him to wherever I believed he was. ‘For the sake of Celia, you’re going to do as I say,’ he yelled at me. My god, it was the first time he ever brought my mother’s name into anything, let alone to make me obey him. I brought him to the Hive. Sure enough, that was where we could flush him out.”

“You were right, I imagine?”

“Of course, I was. A hunter always goes where there are preys around,” I pointed out.

He smiled weakly.

“Anyways, it didn’t take long to get a hold of him. Sirius dragged him out from some tavern. This idiot was playing card games, and he was winning.”

“Dad must have been shocked to see him play cards. If there’s one thing he hates, it’s gambling.”

“That’s putting it mildly. He dragged Seïs outside by the collar of his shirt. He told him in the middle of the street that had no intention to pay for his card games, or let him waste his life, and that he certainly wouldn’t let him bring shame to the family loitering around in this filthy neighborhood. And you know what Seïs shot back?”

He shook his head and stared at me intently, urging me to keep going.

“He shot back he had no need to live off the family, and he had more than enough money to afford the tavern, if that made him feel any better.”

Teichi was looking a bit worried. “And what did Dad say? He must have been furious.”

“Furious? That’s an understatement. His face was so red I thought he would explode. He grabbed Seïs by the collar. He yelled at him, saying he was nothing but

a scoundrel who would end up in some dungeon with the whores and the rascals if he was lucky, or hanged from the highest tree. He told him he didn't deserve all the sacrifices we made for him or our patience."

"What about Seis?" Teichi asked, alarmed. He was absentmindedly stroking Ponce's withers.

"When he managed to get himself out of Sirus's grip, he only said he was making ten times the living his miserable little peasant life ever could in ten generations."

Teichi's lips quivered.

"Oh, yeah, Sirus slapped him so hard he fell on his butt. He told him: 'If it's like that, then you will pay a rent to sleep in our house and eat at our table, just like an inn. You will pay up like the young lord you so want to be.' Instead of shutting his mouth, Seis got back on his feet and he glared at your father with insolence, like he does so well. He took his purse out of his trouser pocket and threw it in Sirus's face. Your father was so stunned he could only watch as Seis swung around and ran away. Sirus was just standing there in the middle of the street. He was shaking so much, I thought he was having a seizure."

Teichi blinked in the sunlight. He looked away and used this respite to get Ponce out of his constraints. Holding the horse by the bit, he drew closer to me.

"Good heavens, where does he find all this money?" he asked, his voice low, as if it was a big secret and we weren't alone here.

He noticed a large clod of earth and quietly crushed it under his boot.

"Don't ask. It's better not to know."

His face darkened and he shook his head. Seis's life of leisure particularly saddened Teichi.

"He's resourceful, no one can deny it," he granted, "But it could get him into a whole lot of trouble one of these days."

I nodded, my expression both severe and mocking. "You know... I wouldn't worry about your brother," I said, walking away backwards in the direction of the forest. "He's like an eel."

"Right, and to catch it, you have to know where to look... in the muddy depths," Teichi joked.

I giggled and shook my head from side to side: "Because it's a fish that belongs in the shadows... always hiding away."

Teichi studied me with an unexpectedly sharp look. He broke into one of his subtle, knowing smiles. Then he curtsied, bending forward with a theatrical look.

"This is indeed an interesting way to look at my idiotic brother... Come on, you should hurry, if you take too long, you're in for a scolding. By the way, who is this envoy?"

"I don't really know. He says his name is Marien Loveleaf. He's a soldier from Elisse, I think."

“And he’s asking for Seïs?”

“Yes.”

“Curious,” he said, suddenly lost in thought.

He gestured at me to hurry. “Come on.”

I set out for the tree line hiding the Lounasfol stream from view, as well as a collection of low hills covered in bushes and thickets. I climbed up a mound covered with moss and large calcite boulders in shades of blue and brown, standing there like statues from another age. A big black, hairy spider was clinging to the lichen on one of them. I came up with an idea. I slid my fingers between its legs, making sure not to hurt it. It was a domestic house spider, often found in attics and dust-laden basements. Holding the spider in my hand, I continued on my way.

Behind the hill, a naked, sunbathed clearing was visible through the groves. There was another hill overlooking it, stripped of its trees except for one lonely lime tree with sleek branches, which offered an outstanding view of the forest.

I picked up the pace when I reached the bottom of the hill and progressed in my sandals through the lush grass, where a few black sheep were grazing. Careful not to make a sound, I went around the tree trunk. Seïs was leaning against it, facing the horizon. There was a ray of sunlight on his face and his bare throat was turning red. He had pulled his old, ragged hat down to his closed eyes. He was snoring loudly, so much that he was a serious contender for the black bird perched above him. I sneaked up on him from around the back and gently placed the spider on his neck. I suppressed a laugh.

The spider, enjoying its new-found freedom, went rushing up his chin and along his cheek. One of the legs went into the corner of his mouth. Seïs didn’t even flinch. He kept on snoring, completely unbothered by the domestic house spider now climbing up his nose. I frowned, disappointed. The spider moved to go up his hat; I knocked it over with a flick of the hand. It tumbled down his chest and sneaked under his shirt. Pleased with myself, I was about to back away when Seïs grabbed my wrist out of nowhere, pulling me towards him with such force that I spun around on my feet. I collapsed next to him, on my back, among the lime tree roots. Down on one knee, he set his hat right and looked straight into my eyes. He let go of my wrist and, without batting an eye, he removed the spider walking around under his shirt.

“You thought you could scare me with that!” he scoffed, putting it between my breasts.

I pushed it on the grass with the back of my hand. The spider took its chance, it didn’t linger and disappeared in the vegetation.

“Naïs... ah, Naïs, it’s dangerous to play around with a player,” he said with a grave nod.

I perked up on my elbows.

“A bad player. I have my chances!” I winked at him.

“Wanna bet?”

He slumped back on the roots and leaned against the lime tree.

“You weren’t actually asleep, were you?”

“I was dozing off. I’ve had a very trying night. I was having a little nap before you disrupted me. What do you want, by the way? You’d better have a bloody good reason to come here and be like a pain in my ass.”

I jumped back to my feet and straightened my dress. “More than a good reason,” I said in a clipped voice. “But in my opinion, with the state you’re in, the reason might want to run away very, very far.”

He looked up to me, puzzled. “What do you mean by that?”

I crossed my arms on my chest and, with a smile, I exclaimed: “You stink!”

“I’m not the one who came to find you,” he counters, shrugging indifferently.

“If it were up to me, rest assured I wouldn’t have come all the way here just for you. God, they must smell you all the way from the Patis farm. Where the hell have you been last night?”

I studied his dark expression, the three-day stubble on his cheeks and his bloodshot eyes.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

He glanced at the black bird above his head, mumbled under his breath, but then his face relaxed.

“Go ahead. Now that you’re here, what do you want?”

“Me? Nothing. However, a rider has just arrived at the farm and he has a message for you. If you ask me, it’s probably a sealed letter ordering to lock you up in the Amir for good.”

“On what grounds?” he joked, chin up, daring me to try to come up with a reason.

“Let me see... hum... theft, pilfering, slander, depravity and I could go on,” I said, raising my fingers one by one as I went on.

“You need proof to lock people up, brat, and the governor has a hard time finding any. He can do no more than throw me in there for a few days on the charge of inebriation and noise complaints. And I’m grateful for that. Only in a putrid Amir cell do you get off my back.” He spit on the ground and went on: “Who’s the rider?”

“Well, get up and you’ll find out,” I said, my back turned to him. I made my way back to Crack-of-Dawn, not bothering to check if he was following me. I rushed down the hill and entered the woods, all the while pestering about his trademark indolence.

I had just reached the Lounasfol riverbanks when I saw him going down the hill at a leisurely pace, among the rocks crawling with moss. I slowed down surreptitiously to let him catch up with me.

“So?” he said.

“So what?”

He sighed, impatient. “What does he want?”

“Who?” I responded, playing dumb.

I ignored his sideways glance and jumped over the stream, splashing his trousers with water in the process. He grumbled and followed my lead, jumping over to the other side scattered with pebbles.

“Don’t get smart with me,” he said, looking at me with a queasy expression.

With his pale face, his reddened eyes, and his overall raggedy appearance, I harbored no illusions about his activities last night: throwing up all the alcohol he had ingested.

“Did the rider tell you what he wanted?”

“Only that he had a message for you, that’s all.”

He was left brooding for a while, only staring at the piles of pebbles rolling under his feet with a pasty expression.

“Does my father know about this?”

“Of course. I went to find him before looking for you. You’re afraid, aren’t you?”

“What the hell would I be afraid of?”

“To pay for all the mess you’ve been making. We only reap what we sow,” I remarked.

He grimaced, his mouth twisting. “Fucking hell, please spare me my old man’s lectures.”

“But they’re true, you know, and you should probably follow them more often. That will spare you a lot of trouble.”

He put his arm around my shoulders and pressed his burning cheek against mine. “Näis... For someone who knows me better than anyone, don’t you know by now how much I love trouble?” He burst out laughing. “There’s nothing less boring, more thrilling, than going against the public authorities who believe they have every right over us. If my father followed only a fraction of my philosophy, we would have gotten rid of the Trade Institute fuckers a long time ago.”

“And if one of his sons was willing to help out in the fields, maybe he would earn more money, to keep the Institute vultures at bay and away from his crops,” I retorted.

“Two more hands would make no difference in the great scheme of things. To fight with a wolf, you need to be a wolf yourself.”

He punctuated his words with a wild, cunning look in my direction.

“What about the vultures?”

He freed his arm from my shoulders. “It’s all the same. Ask yourself what a vulture would do when faced with the agonizing body of a wretch and you’ll know his next move. Sometimes, you have to out-trash the trash to counter its schemes. Self-defense is only so good. You need to change tactics after that, or you’ll end up

eaten by someone more vicious than you are.”

“Not if you want to keep looking at yourself in the mirror. Your dad is better than all of them. He’s a good and honest man.”

“Maybe so, but between him and them, who’s going to win?” he asked coldly.

“Stop playing that game!”

“What game?”

“Playing tough, Seis. Pretending to be a tough guy without feelings. That’s not who you are.”

“And you believe that?”

His expression hardened. He looked away to the field on his right, basked in sunlight.

“Yes, I do,” I murmured. “You’re not who you’re pretending to be.”

I almost didn’t hear the sigh he let out. “If you say so,” he said, absentmindedly.

That was the end of the conversation. Seis had shut down like a clam. He could deny it all he wanted, but on many levels, it was striking how much he looked like Fer. When he had decided to keep his mouth shut, it was pointless to insist. At best he groaned, at worst he shut himself up in obstinate silence.

We walked through the barn in silence. Mars came over and sniffed Seis’s pants, but he didn’t spare him a glance and ignored the dog frolicking around. He was walking with the same enthusiasm he had when he worked at the farm. Once in the courtyard, he sighed loudly, then took a deep breath before entering the darkness of the kitchen.

The entire family, except Fer, had gathered around the table. Teichi and Antoni were standing at the opposite side of the room. The youngest was gawking at our guest with his usual spirit, while Teichi was keeping a level head as always. Sirius had his back to the fireplace, arms crossed on his chest, and seemed relieved at the sight of the Elisse sigil on Loveleaf’s waistcoat. Athora was serving the rider a tea.

Seis came to a halt in the kitchen doorstep, looking around the room with a gloomy expression.

“There you are!” his father exclaimed.

“As you can see.”

Marien Loveleaf set aside his half-eaten biscuit and rose from his seat. He stepped over the bench and posted himself in front of my cousin. He saluted, fist on the heart.

“I am delighted to finally meet you,” he said.

He introduced himself, courteous. Seis was staring at him bluntly, his hands in his pockets. The difference in their bearing was striking. One displayed the effortless elegance of Elisse nobles; luxurious clothing, a measured voice and carefully chosen words. The other was more of a bandit than an honest citizen. His sullen face and his gruffy manners were not helping, making him look like a barbarian, barely literate, prone to use his fists rather than his mouth.

When the envoy was done with the usual pleasantries, the kitchen fell back into heavy silent. Seis didn't say a word and just stared at Loveleaf.

"You should both sit down at the table and have a talk," Athora offered after a while. "Help yourself with some more biscuits and finish your cup of tea."

Loveleaf turned to my aunt and thanked her. Then, he faced Seis again, waiting for him to sit down. For some reason, Seis had decided to stay right where he was. Sirius let out a grunt and came towards us with heavy footsteps. Seis pretended not to see him.

"Heard you had some news for me."

Loveleaf didn't seem offended by his lack of manners "Indeed. I have a message of the utmost importance. I am honored to have been given this mission."

Seis raised an intrigued brow. Loveleaf unbuttoned the hooks on his waistcoat, and he pulled out a parchment sealed with scarlet wax from an inside pocket. Different wax colors indicated the worth of the contents. Yellow was for the news of lesser importance or everyday life documents, green was for imprisonment letters, brown for pardons and red for announcements of great and utmost solemnity, directly related to the monarchy.

Loveleaf unsealed the letter with great care and adopted a formal stance as he unrolled the parchment. He studied Seis with a gleam in his eyes and started reading the letter in a declamatory tone: "In the year of grace 2074, at the behest of Master Tel-Chire of Elisse, Tenshin of the Mantaore Brotherhood, we hereby inform Gentleman Seis Amorgen of his eminent nomination within the aforementioned Brotherhood. His promotion to the rank of apprentice will be effective within the year. An emissary will come at his home on the day of the two moons to take Gentleman Seis Amorgen safely to the Brotherhood aforementioned residence. Concerned about the numerous sacrifices this nomination requires, we will provide compensation to the aforementioned novice's family. The envoy Marien Loveleaf will be bearer of a grant of 3000 golden coin, with entitlement to 5000 coins payable during Gentleman Seis Amorgen's apprenticeship. All queries will be addressed to the governor of Macline City, Lord Aymeri of Chasse, who shall forward them to the Hom-Tar Palace in Elisse. Aware of the pains of such abnegation, Master Tel-Chire of Elisse expresses his devotion to the Amorgen family and remains fully at their disposal. Please receive, Sir Amorgen, our sole and sincere devotion."

We stood in bemused silence as Loveleaf finished talking. He rolled the parchment meticulously, pretending not to notice the stupefaction written on our faces. Sirius had gone still, and had been from the very beginning of the letter. He was staring at the soldier as if he had lost his mind. Antoni was looking alternatively at the envoy, standing straight as an arrow, and his brother, oddly expressionless.

A laugh suddenly erupted in the stunned atmosphere of the kitchen, breaking the spell. Seis's face lit up. He started to hit his knee, convulsed with laughter. He

laughed with abandon, almost squeaking, tears welling up from his eyes. Loveleaf remained unperturbed and waited for the storm caused by his message to clear, with remarkable patience. He glanced at the parchment in his hand and set it down on the table like a sacred relic. Antoni was eyeing the letter longingly.

“Yeah, right!” Seis giggled, wiping his eyes. “Apprentice! And tomorrow I’ll be facing the dragons in Torn-Valley!”

Seis started laughing even harder. Still gloating, he passed by Loveleaf and picked up the letter. He unsealed it, unrolled it unceremoniously and skimmed through the missive. The writing, all swirls and curls, was beautiful, the letters adorned with mythical creatures and the ink a deep shade of brown with iridescent reflections. His went silent a moment, before cracking up again. Sirus walked over to Seis and snatched the parchment from his hands. He read it as well and frowned.

“Are we sure the letter isn’t a forgery?” Athora asked, quick to recover her practical sense.

One could doubt the authenticity of the missive. After all, the writing may be elegant, but any clerk in the capital could have done it. As for Tel-Chire’s signature, it had beautiful curves and a sigil like his coat of arms – the Mantaore crown on the antlers of a stag – but it was well-known. A few years back, the Tenshins had taken down a counterfeiting ring that replicated the Elisse seal and wax almost perfectly. Since then, the monarchy had ordered the creation of a new kind of wax, more difficult to access, the elaboration of which was strictly confidential. The seal was unique, just like the iridescent color and the glyph. There was no mistaking it.

Sirus studied the letter closely, inspected the seal, and nodded at last.

Seis wiped his eyes again and, regaining his composure, he moved closer to Loveleaf. “You mean to tell me this was hand-delivered to you by Tel-Chire of Elisse?” he asked, pointing his finger at the parchment.

“Indeed,” Loveleaf answered. “The announcement of the apprentices isn’t yet official. In fact, it would be advisable to keep it that way for as long as possible, to avoid unwanted attention from agitators.”

“Agitators?” Seis pointed out.

“Yes, Sir.”

Loveleaf clasped his hands behind his back. “Many covet your apprenticeship. Master Tel-Chire of Elisse asked me to warn you about it, to ensure you will take any necessary precautions until the arrival of the emissary responsible for your safety. The nomination of the apprentices is always confidential if the elections are public. Except for the Brotherhood members, I am the only one privy to your nomination.”

His voice was seeping with pride.

Seis remained silent for a moment. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“There’s no mistake?” Sirus asked bluntly.

“A mistake, Sir?” Loveleaf marveled.

“About Seis, for crying out loud. Are you sure you have the right guy?”

A grin appeared on my cousin's face and he glanced at his father, visibly amused.

“Of course, Sir. The Tenshins would not allow for such an announcement if they were not absolutely certain with their decision.”

Loveleaf seemed baffled to see the direct order of a master questioned.

Sirus studied his son with a piercing look. He looked at him up and down. Then he suddenly broke out laughing. His fist banged on the table, several times. He didn't try to contain his hilarity, his face crimson red. In an opposite movement, Seis's face instantly darkened. His forehead furrowed in annoyance.

“There must have been a mistake,” Seis said, disdainful.

“I can assure you it is not the case, Sir,” Loveleaf pressed on.

Confronted with the crestfallen expression of his son, Sirus started laughing even louder. Athora covered her mouth with a hand to contain a laugh.

Seis was sulking. He crossed his arms on his chest and stared at Loveleaf as though he was about to go for his jugular.

“You want me to believe I was nominated?” His laugh was dripping with sarcasm. “There's no way... For God's sake! How do the Tenshin make their choice, exactly?”

“That's what I'd like to know!” Sirus managed.

I thought he would never stop laughing. His cheeks were bright red, and he was laughing so hard he was drenched in sweat.

“Well, I must admit only the Tenshins could give you an answer,” the soldier said. He glanced at Sirus in confusion. “I am not aware of the reasons behind their choices. We can only assume they choose knowledgeable young men with a noble temperament at heart and a highly capable body.”

“Then there's no doubt you've got the wrong man,” Sirus scoffed. “My son is barely capable of holding his own cock when he goes for a piss.”

“Sirus!” Athora exclaimed, brows furrowed.

My uncle only shrugged and cracked up again. Seis scowled at him. From the corner of my eye, I noticed his hands clenching.

“In any case, it's impossible,” he said, “for one simple reason: I've never enrolled.”

His words had the intended effect. Loveleaf gaped at him, eyes wide. He cleared his throat and adopted a meditative stance, shoulders back and head high.

“However, Sir, how could the masters know your name if it was not on the register books?”

Seis didn't seem to consider the question seriously, but his parents did. He only shrugged, displaying an apparent lack of interest. “I honestly don't care. I'm going to save our governor some trouble. When you return to Elisse, you will tell the Tenshins I'm not interested in their proposal yourself. Give them my thanks, and good riddance.”

Sirus stopped laughing at once and his expression darkened.

Loveleaf could hardly believe his ears. "I beg your pardon?"

"Let me clarify, you will tell the Tenshins I don't want to be their apprentice."

Seis was growing more confident.

"Sir, I don't mean to be rude," Loveleaf said carefully, "but I don't think it's in your power to..."

"To do what? To criticize the masters' decision? I don't give a damn. You'll tell them what I just told you. End of discussion."

Just like that, he was about to walk away when Sirus's voice made him stop in his tracks. "I'd like to see that," he snapped.

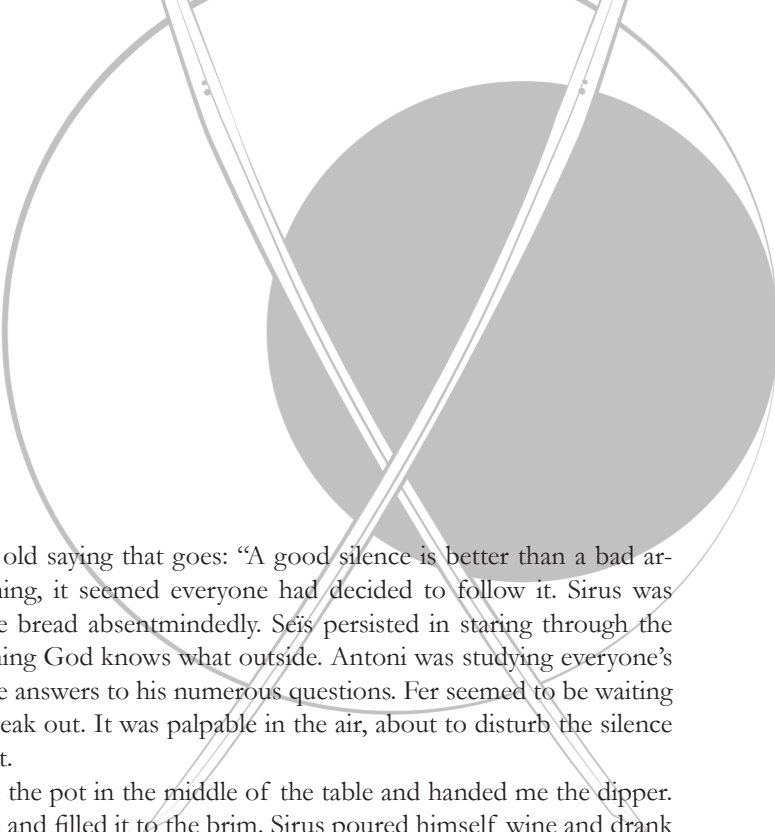
Seis turned to his father and, for a moment, it was like watching two wolves fighting over the same prey. None of the two men wanted to be the first one to surrender. Sirus was fuming. His lower lip was trembling with anger.

Even so, Seis didn't falter. He uncrossed his arms and, with an insolent tone, he said: "I won't go." Having said that, he swung around, bumped into me in the process and stormed out in the courtyard.

Loveleaf was stunned, his eyes wide. He looked over to Sirus, who was glaring at the door as though he could drag his son back into the room by the scruff of his neck. When he realized the soldier was watching him, he tore his eyes away from the threshold.

"He will go," he said in a categoric voice.

Loveleaf only shrugged. "You know, Sir, apprentices always do. Once the Tenshins have made up their mind, there is no turning back."



There is an old saying that goes: “A good silence is better than a bad argument.” That evening, it seemed everyone had decided to follow it. Sirus was brooding, slicing the bread absentmindedly. Seis persisted in staring through the open window, watching God knows what outside. Antoni was studying everyone’s faces, looking for the answers to his numerous questions. Fer seemed to be waiting for the quarrel to break out. It was palpable in the air, about to disturb the silence at any given moment.

Athora set down the pot in the middle of the table and handed me the dipper. I grabbed Fer’s plate and filled it to the brim. Sirus poured himself wine and drank it straight. Seis was fiddling with his spoon, rolling it over on his knuckles, his gaze fixated on the grove. Teichi’s eyes caught mine for a moment as he gulped down his soup. Out of nowhere, he suddenly set his spoon aside next to his plate and with a mocking tone, he said: “Mantaore, huh?”

All eyes turned to him, with the exception of the person concerned, who merely shrugged. “Or so it seems,” was the laconic reply.

The debate was underway.

“The Tenshins chose you,” Antoni said eagerly. “You’re moving to Mantaore, is that right?”

His eyes were like two little shining stars.

“Or so it seems.”

I swallowed with difficulty, studying Seis’s moody side profile. He hadn’t even bothered to look at his brother when he answered him. He rolled his spoon between his fingers before plunging it into his untouched bowl of soup.

Teichi chuckled. “God, how do they choose their apprentices?” he joked.

“Easy! It’s based on the number of times they were locked up in the Amir”, Antoni said with a playful look.

Seis eyed his younger brother with a smile, then shook his head. “Of course not, my guess is that it depends on the number of girls,” he retorted with a pat on

Antoni's shoulder.

"In that case, they never would have chosen you!"

Seis's smirk widened. "I've been with more girls than you'll ever see in your lifetime."

At the other side of the table, Sirius's face was slowly turning red. Fer seemed to look forward to the upcoming argument. Athora spoke first.

"It's about time you marry one, then," she said with a strained smile.

Seis snorted loudly. He pouted like a child. "Can't marry," he countered. "I'm going to be a master."

"You have a convenient excuse now," Athora said, smiling.

Seis burst out laughing.

Athora got up from the table and came back with a brass plate. The room filled with the scent of a rabbit stew. Sirius, still clenching his teeth, filled our bowls generously. For a while, we were too busy gobbling down our food to talk.

Fer wiped his hands on his napkin and, gnawing on a piece of meat, he said in a flat tone: "3000 golden coins."

Sirius looked up from his plate. "The Tenshins spare no expense," he said. "You were hoping for funding to import wood from Ulutil, there you have it."

"That's not my money," Fer argued, shooting Seis a dirty look.

It didn't matter how many coins Seis piled up in a corner of the fireplace; it was the furthest thing on his mind, mainly because he always found a way to scramble for money, whatever the means.

"This money was offered to the family," Athora corrected. "It's a compensation for Seis's departure. It's your money just as much as ours. Seis won't need it where he's going."

"I've already said I wouldn't go," Seis cut in sharply, his face sullen. Sirius shot him a stern look that would make anyone cower in fear. But Seis persisted, his fists clenched on the table. "You can give them back the cash. I'm not going."

"Stop acting like a child," Athora told him with a gentle voice. "It's an incredible opportunity to be admitted within the Brotherhood. Do you realize the privilege that's been given to you?"

"Since you like it so much, I gladly give up my spot to you."

Sirius shot his son a volcanic glare. Next to him, Fer assumed the nasty expression of someone eager for the storm to break.

"Don't talk to me like that," Athora said, brows furrowed.

Seis looked down, his hands still clasped. He seemed to be catching his breath. "I have no intention of leaving. I'm free to do as I please and none of you get a say in this... Dad insisted on charging me for the nights I spend here, I could just as well pay for a room at the inn if you don't want me here. Forget about me going to God knows where while you enjoy the benefits. I won't give the Tenshins the opportunity to control my life. I'm the only one at the wheel."

After he was done with his plea, Seis motioned to get up from the table under his father's fiery gaze.

"Sit back down!"

For a moment that seemed to last forever, Seis's leg stayed up in the air as he stared at Sirus. He braced himself, his face unreadable. He sat down again with his back stiff and his elbows on the table. He glared bitterly at the courtyard through the open window.

"We would like nothing more than not to have any say about your shameless behavior," Sirus said. "Let me tell you something, you're an ungrateful brat. You treat Crack-of-Dawn like your tavern. You have no regards for the people who feed you, who raised you, tended to your wounds and cleaned up your mistakes. You don't care about the dishonor you would bring us if you refused what you've been proposed. The masters chose you, and God knows why they want to bother with someone destined for the gallows. Don't look at me like that. Eyes down when I talk to you. That's all you are, Seis. One of these days, you'll end up hanged if you continue down this path. The governor is only waiting for an excuse. You think I don't know... No Athora, let me finish and don't try and defend him." Athora sank back in her chair, her expression troubled. "I'm not saying this to punish you, although you would have had it coming, but to get you out of this life you chose for yourself. If you consider it a good thing, then it means I have failed you as a father. But even so, I'm not giving up. You will leave for Mantaore, whether you want it or not. Mark my words. I won't let you waste your life because of your dishonest, childish behavior. I don't want to see my son with a noose around his neck."

When he was done talking, Sirus held his breath for a full minute before taking a deep breath. Seis had gone still. All vestiges of his previous insolence had disappeared from his face. Only his clenched fingers betrayed how shaken he was.

Fer was openly enjoying himself, while Teichi, Antoni and I were hanging back, lying as low as possible on our seats. We knew from experience it was preferable to steer clear of any quarrel between Sirus and Seis. Antoni had gotten slapped once, Teichi had been in for an ass-kicking, and I had been scolded more often than not.

"Alright, that's enough," Athora said. "This discussion is pointless. Whatever happens now, I don't think Seis has a choice." She turned to him. "The Tenshins have chosen you, and they will come for you whether you want it or not."

Seis glared at his mother, his lips pursed. "It seems you're all happy to see me go."

"You can't even imagine," Fer hissed.

"Quiet!" Sirus cut off with a reproachful look in his direction. He turned to Seis with remarkable composure. "That's not the point. Don't play dumber than you are. If we really wanted you gone, I would have kicked you out long ago, with a good kick in the pants at that. I never was foolish enough to treat you like that. I know you too well... Neither your mother nor anyone in this house wants you to

go. That being said, the message was pretty clear. I think it's high time you get used to the idea. And I truly believe it's the best thing that could ever happen to you."

"Good for you if you believe that," Seis hissed. "Don't blame me if I don't feel the same way. Why on earth should I bend over backwards in front of these men? What right do they have to order me around and ruin all my plans? I don't agree with their methods. I've never put my name in those damn registers. If I became an apprentice, it wouldn't be on my own free will. And I fully intend on letting them know. If I have to go through Aymeri for that, I won't hesitate."

"You think he'll do you're the favor?" Fer scoffed.

"He won't have a choice. He won't be receiving me as a Macline dealer, but as a potential apprentice of the Mantaore Brotherhood. He will forward them my message, he will, or I'll feed his own gown to him."

"Don't disrespect him," Athora said. "Your scheming against Aymeri has gone too far. You'll get yourself in trouble if you keep this up."

"Everything I say about this paunchy upstart is only the plain truth. You really think the Trade Institute is the only one buying off merchants and swindling farmers? Don't be naïve, Mom. Aymeri won't be the last. He's the one pulling the strings."

"It doesn't matter," Sirius interrupted. "Don't change the subject. Your strife with Aymeri is no secret and, even if he somehow agreed to forward your message, I don't think you can go against a master's decision. They choose you, and even if I struggle to understand why, I doubt they would free you from this apprenticeship for the trivial reason that you want to navigate your own life from prison to prison. At best, the only thing you'll prove is that you have no sense of duty..."

"That's precisely what I'm counting on. I want them to realize they have the wrong guy."

"What if there was no mistake?" Teichi said abruptly.

Seis stared at him in surprise for a while, then shrugged.

"I wouldn't hold my breath. And I think you shouldn't either. God, either the Tenshins have smoked so much Prophet Herbs they can't think straight anymore, or they've completely lost it. Can you really picture me with a sword? The last time, I was Antoni's age."

"Yes, and you were rather good," affirmed his younger brother.

"Yeah, good for a beating," Fer added with a venomous smile.

"If remember your rokush training correctly, you were knocked down more often than you were victorious. I would keep my comments to myself, if I were you."

"Oh yeah? And why is..."

"That's enough," Athora intervened. "You two are behaving like children. You're too old for this kind of bickering. It would be high time you realize that."

The two men exchanged venomous looks and turned away at the same time.

"I have a question," I blurted out, interrupting the upcoming argument in the

same breath. Since I hadn't made a sound for the entire dinner, I was lucky enough to attract everyone's attention. "Hum... I was wondering what the training in Mantore was, exactly... I mean, well, what will Seis do once he's there?"

Seis stared at me with an unreadable expression. Sirus cleared his throat, poured himself a glass of wine and explained in a solemn tone: "We don't actually know. The arts of the masters are a closely guarded secret. The Renegade himself never broke the vow. I can't answer your question, no one knows what the novices are taught during their initiation."

"What we know for sure, thought," Athora added, "is that the apprentices lucky enough to pass the Tenshins' training later end up holding the highest offices in the kingdom. They have their entries in the King's council, they are involved in the politics and military affairs of the kingdom."

"They are the commanders of our army," Fer clarified. "They are above dukes, princes, and some even whisper they are above kings themselves. Their duties are immeasurable. They give up their life to serve the country. You have to be strong to withstand the burden that comes with that life."

He looked straight into Seis's eyes as he said those last words. His younger brother didn't bother to answer.

"But as to what they teach the novices... it's a mystery," Sirus said. "A mystery closely guarded for millennia."

"Let me get this straight. Seis will be leaving soon for God knows where, to learn God knows what, and become one of the most powerful men in the government."

My rough summary should have earned me a few smiles, but it didn't have the intended effect. All eyes turned to Seis, who was biting his lip, and we were all left pondering, lost in thought. Picturing Seis as a military leader working for the monarchy sure was food for thought.

"You're forgetting something," Antoni said with barely contained excitement. "A crucial detail."

"Which one?" Teichi asked.

Antoni looked up, delighted to have hooked us in. There was a satisfied grin on his face. And with the voice of a storyteller at the fair, he declaimed: "The Tenshins are immortal."