

## Chapter 1

Louis gave a sigh of relief as his tired horse crested a hill and he sighted the town that was his destination. He should reach it before sunset and spend the evening in a proper bed rather than the hard ground of a makeshift camp or the flea infested pallets of a road hostel.

He was riding a piebald gelding that appeared to be past the best years of its life, and his clothing looked as though it suited the horse. He was a young man of twenty something years, of average height and with floppy russet hair, the ends of which fell into his deep forest green eyes.

He shifted in the saddle and sighed again, admiring the countryside. The plains of Vamelon were covered in undulating hills that were carpeted in golden ripe wheat. The autumn sun still gave the days a pleasant warmth, even as the nights were starting to cool. In the north, in the Duchy of Laroche where his home lay, the cold had already turned to freezing. The peasants were no doubt finalizing their preparation for winter and the coming snow. Here in Etendulat Duchy, they prepared to take in the harvest.

As the wind picked up, a cold shiver ran down his back. The town, Somfaux, grew larger as he approached and he realized that town was probably a touch modest for the settlement, although not yet a city, at least not officially. In the Empire, sometimes it was more about the status of your ruler than the reality of the settlement. Somfaux was physically larger Rocaille, almost certainly had more wealth and was more populous. Despite this, Rocaille was the seat of power for a Duchy and as such would forever loom larger in the Empire's estimation. At least, this was true among the nobles of the Empire who dealt in politics and power. The merchants had more interest in trade and the only reason to visit Rocaille was if you were interested in obtaining precious metals at the source.

He shook off his philosophical thoughts and turned his attention back to Somfaux. There had been enough growth that he could see a shanty town had sprung up outside the wall. In time he knew a second wall would be built, protecting the slow urban development outside the center town, in the same manner as the center town had grown up around the castle that was the original seat of the barons of Vamelon. The castle still rose broodingly over Somfaux, nestled among the foothills of the Lumiar Mountains.

Louis noticed with interest that there were canals flowing through the town itself, dug by man and filled by the Vemique River that flowed down from these foothills to Claudin's Lake many days travel away. Those canals were the reason Somfaux had grown here, drawing hundreds of workers and this population explosion had caused trade to expand in the region. Eventually, this trade led to Somfaux becoming the almost city that it was. All because some noble in the distant past had had sufficient gold to entice workers to dig canals.

The shanty town was showing evidence of evolving from a slum into a respectable poor quarter. Closer to the wall, the houses accorded a sense of permanence and the people represented craftsmen and lesser merchants more than beggars and whores. The gates to the town proper stood open with no indication they had been closed at any time in recent memory.

The town bustled with commerce and Louis thought he detected an atmosphere of excitement beyond the usual. He had dismounted at the town gate and walked, leading his horse. In time with the fading

light of the autumn sun, the streetmen of the Civics Guild were spiraling out from the palace, lighting torches in the main thoroughfares as they went. He stopped by a street vendor and bought a cup of wine, providing his own cup as was the custom.

“Good evening friend,” he said, knocking the cup of below average wine back and paying for a refill, “The streets seem busy for so early in the evening.”

“Good evening to you as well,” the vendor said, “Aye, it’s harvest time and as though that’s not enough excitement with all the farmers coming in and spending their money, the Lady Yolanda, she being our Baron’s Countess, is coming for a visit.”

“Why would she be coming for a visit?” Louis asked raising his eyebrows in surprise.

“Well now, you know of course that his Grace, Duke Gaspard, died and him having no child yet to take on the Ducal mantel?”

“Of course,” Louis agreed.

It was news that was three months and the Ducal Seat of Etendulat was still open with no certainty yet as to how a Duke would be appointed. It was the first time in the nearly two thousand years since the founding of the Empire that a Ducal bloodline had failed. Before, even with no direct heir-apparent, there had been those from the extended line who had passed the *Trials of Dusang* and one of them was appointed as heir. This time, the line of Eten had failed. There was no heir and the Eten *Dusang* was likely to fade into the mists.

Before the Freedom Wars, the legends say that an open noble seat could be claimed by martial means. There were rumors that some of Counts of Etendulat Duchy were maneuvering to take the Ducal city and seat by force, though Louis had heard no rumors of Barons shooting so high.

It was not at all certain, however, if there would be scope for such military engagement. Given the importance of the Duchy of Etendulat and its harvest, the Emperor had moved the imperial army in to ensure that the harvest at least was safe. It was unclear if the Emperor planned on keeping the army in place in the Ducal City or withdrawing his forces, allowing the barons and counts to battle it out for the ducal throne. It was also possible that with his forces in play, he could simply appoint a new duke. No edict from the Imperial Court had been forthcoming and protocol on the topic was entirely lacking.

“Well, the nobles, they all be visiting each other, shoring up alliances and such. No one knows if it will come to war or if the Emperor will appoint a Duke or if there will be some other means of settling the matter,” the vendor echoed Louis’s thoughts,” So, everyone be preparing for everything.”

“Ah. Well, such be the way of nobles I suppose. Thank you for the wine, friend.”

Louis walked on, leading the horse. The presence of Countess Yolanda la Cham could complicate his mission. He would need to take a few days to gather information as well as gauge the mood of the city. Notwithstanding, if the nobles were preparing for war in Etendulat, the security was going to be tight.

He sighed and turned down a narrow street close to the wall. The inn he was seeking had a birch leaf painted on a wooden sign. The street, while a step up from the streets outside the town wall, was not

one of the better ones in town. It reeked of refuse and old booze. There was a beggar sitting in a barrel that was clearly his home, across from the entrance to the inn.

Louis gave the man a few copper pennies and asked him to keep an eye on his horse. Beggars could be useful people if properly sweetened over time. He tied the horse out front and entered Silver Leaf Inn, pausing to give his eyes a moment to adjust from the dim light of the ally to the bright lantern light in the inn's entrance way. The common room of the inn was large and filled with rough wooden benches. Rushes a day or two too old covered the floor.

Through a door to the left he could see the smoky interior of the tap room where the serious drinking happened. At the back, a stairway led up to the second story where the rooms for rent would no doubt be. A tall, lanky man with a growing bald spot bustled over.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, friend," Louis replied, "I need at least a week's room and board for myself and my horse."

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A quarter *taperion* or so later, Louis placed his pack in the chest furnished with his room. He had his own lock, but he knew it was only as secure as an ax to the chest and made sure that nothing in there could be traced back to his mistress.

His money he kept secured on his person. An obvious purse containing mostly coppers and silvers, and a purse under his tunic holding his more valuable coinage along with a few gems he had brought as a means to transport greater wealth.

Completing the ritual he always used before he went to interact with strangers, he touched his purse, his heart, his lips and his hat. His hat was important. It reminded him who he was. Today he wore a flat canvas cap, such as any working man or farmer in the Empire might wear.

Down in the tap room he seated himself on a high stool at a counter. It was a slow afternoon and the barmaid didn't take long to see him without a drink and make her way over. She was a busty girl with red hair and freckles. Her eyes were a muddy green and her level of cleanliness suited the Silver Leaf, which is to say; she hadn't bathed this week, but she wasn't gutter ripe either.

"Hello friend," she gave him a grin and he noted that she at least had all her teeth, "And, how are you?"

"I'll be all the better for a beer," he grinned back at her, "I am called Louis, And you my dear?"

"I am Nina," she looked at him with more interest and he knew at once that she padded her pockets by entertaining the patrons of the tap room in a more vertical fashion.

Louis nodded at Nina and asked for a beer, "to start with". He didn't really want to bed the girl, but she might be a good source of local information and partaking of her other talents was the fastest route to turning her into an asset.

Nina went to the simple bar, swaying suggestively and throwing him a look over her shoulder as she tapped the beer. Her serving dress clung to her body in good places and he thought better of riding below the crupper. He did not wish to be more distracted at this moment however, so he smiled back at her but let his eyes wander over the other patrons. It was a mixed crowd of mostly men clad in worker's smocks, though here and there a guildsman's badge flashed.

For the moment he was content to simply sit on his high stool and observe. He had a few plans for how to carry out his mission, but as per usual when his missions took him so far from home base, his plans were at best ideas. He intended to spend at least a week surveying the town and its people before he tried anything.

The door to the tap room swung open as a lanky man with a baggy hat, that had the appearance of a scholar's cap, and rich looking tunic swaggered in. He bore down on Louis without hesitation and scowled at him.

Louis looked back, shrinking in his seat, playing the part of a cowed farm lad in the big city.

"You're in my seat," the newcomer growled.

"I don't want no trouble," Louis said, slipping off the stool, "I didn't know it was your seat," he said, thickening his voice with the local accent, "I'll jus move."

He wondered if the man would take it further but apparently, he was satisfied with running Louis off 'his' seat. Louis simply took a seat closer to the bar and waited for Nina to come by again.

"Who's that?" he asked, ordering another beer.

"That's Farin," she said softly, "It be good that you give him his seat," her voice dropped further, and she leaned towards him to whisper fearfully in his ear, "They say he knows Sang Sorcellerie."

"But that's death to know," Louis breathed back, allowing the horror to reflect on his face.

"Aye, but he's still here", she nodded significantly, "And in that rich doublet too. They say that there be *someone* high up who doesn't want him to go to the fires," she glanced around and said, "I'll just be fetching your beer then."

Louis, thoughtful, watched her go, his mind very far from her buxom bottom.

It was interesting that the rumors about the man were so rife that she spoke of them to a stranger in a bar. He wondered what she would reveal in private. He cast a furtive glance at Farin and noted that the man was strictly left alone by the other patrons. He leaned on the counter before him and let his mind wander. How deep did the rumors go, and was there any truth to them?

## Chapter 2

Louis decided to explore the market square and see what insights he could glean. Large as Somfaux had become, it offered few permanent shops, mostly commerce was still conducted on Marketday in the traditional yard set aside for such enterprise, where the local craftsmen hawked their wares, and farmers displayed their produce in stalls rented from the baron for the occasion.

He took each of his hats carefully out of the chest. Gently, he ran his fingers over the myriad styles and placed them next to each other on the bed. They possessed their own personalities, and it was those personalities he saw when he looked at the hats, and those personalities he considered carefully in this, and every endeavor.

The farmhand would be fine if all he was looking for was everyday talk, but there would be more interesting information to be had, especially as the Countess was coming and this news would attract rumor, gossip and merchants. The farmhand could speak with farmers and servants but would have little cause to speak to merchants. Even less cause to speak to such merchants as those who dealt with the nobility. The farmhand wouldn't do for Marketday.

He could go as a merchant. He touched the baggy merchants' hat with the bright tassels. A merchant with a fat purse and no merchandise, looking to change gold to light, easily transported goods.

Perched on the edge of the bed with the merchant hat in his hands, the others carefully packed away, he gently, almost sensually, rubbed the exotic fabric. It felt right. Leno the merchant was an established identity that he had put some work into the last time he was in the South. It would be the ideal opportunity to bring out Leno again and see what he could procure, along with the information that came with the goods, of course.

He had noted that there was a back way out of the tavern through the stables when he visited his horse last night before he and Nina made the beast with two backs. The girl had, in the end, been easy enough to bed. She had washed before the rendezvous, which he appreciated, and tipped her extra for.

Nina, Jenkin and Jon would be expecting the common man for breakfast, so he would do that. Leno's clothes would go under his farm smock and Leno's hat into his saddle bags. Yes, that would work.

As was his habit, he ran through the plan in his mind, considering the angles. A muttered curse escaped his lips as he realized a flaw. He would not be able to speak to the beggar if he took a back way out of the inn. Establishing the beggar's goodwill was a careful endeavor. Street dwellers were skittish creatures after all.

So he would ride out. The horse didn't suit Leno - he would need to stable it somewhere and continue to the market on foot.

The revised plan played through his mind and he decided that it suited his needs for now.

He dressed with care, making sure that none of the rich fabric of the merchant's tunic showed anywhere and all anyone would see would be his farmhand smock.

The town clock sounded ten gongs as he made his way down to the common room of the Silver Leaf. Nina smiled at him coquettishly and he smiled back ruefully, a man wondering if he could afford another roll in the hay.

“Breakfast for you then?” she asked, “Though I don’t know if our breakfast will be big enough for you,” she added saucily.

Louis blushed a little but kept his comment to “Yes, thank you,” and watched as she sauntered off to the kitchen, letting her hips sway in an enticing way that brought a completely unforced smile to his lips and blood rush to his loins.

Breakfast was as uninspiring a meal as dinner had been the night before, consisting of day-old bread, yellow cheese and a porridge that was on the watery side. Meat, it seemed, was reserved for the evening meal only. Louis ate with little relish but made sure to finish the whole meal and left the inn, heading to the stable.

He spent some time with his horse. Hyas was getting old now but he had been Louis’s for a long time, and he was quite attached to the gelding. He brushed down the horse’s roan coat and saddled him. He’d make time to curry the horse properly before or after supper he decided.

As he rode out of the stable, he passed by the beggar in his barrel who poked a grime stained head out of his burrow and stared up at Louis blearily, not unlike a surfacing mole. Louis leaned down and give him a small coin.

“Perhaps when I return you could warn me if Farin has come?” he suggested in a friendly manner.

“You should be careful of that one,” the beggar slurred, showing broken and rotted teeth, “He’s a bad one he is.”

“I know that,” Louis said, “But he seems to have taken some offense to my face. I’d like to know if I need to slip into the inn by another way when I come tonight.”

“I get you,” the beggar tapped his nose knowingly, “I’ll keep a weather eye out,” he said, the coin and beggar vanishing into the barrel.

Louis straightened in his saddle and rode on. A handy hostler in a busy street, too harried to pay much attention, stabled Hyas for the day. He made sure the horse was safely in his stall with hay in the net and clean water in his trough before he took the saddle bags and slung them over his shoulder like a shoulder sack.

Once away from the hostler he found a secluded alleyway and rapidly stripped off the outer clothes, slipping the smock into the saddle bags that he now carried as a shoulder sack. He took the merchants’ hat out and settled it on his head.

Carefully he touched his purse, his heart, his lips and the soft merchants’ hat. Leno the Merchant walked out of the ally that Louis the Farmhand had entered.

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Leno had not been to Somfaux before. He had come close, but the journey from Lumeaux where he made his home was a long one without an adequate chance for profit. However, chaos breeds opportunity, so here he was, ready and willing to do business with anyone who wanted to turn their small treasures into gold.

He found the marketplace of Somfaux fascinating. Lumeaux no longer had a scheduled stall and wagon market as this clearly was. Instead, merchants had established shops that were open all the time for trade. Farmers sold in bulk to merchants who in turn supplied variety to the population.

Somfaux was clearly leaning in that direction, caught in a strange state where it was neither fish, nor fowl, nor yet good red herring! There were stalls that clearly carried the fresh produce of the farms, and the craft-stores of the guilds. In contrast, dotted here and there in the less desirable and thereby cheaper stalls in the market square, Leno could see that merchants had started setting up permanent shops to serve clientele no matter the day or week of the month.

Somfaux was transitioning from the traditional weekly marketplace to a substantial city of commerce.

Leno browsed the stalls, ignoring the general trade goods and farmer's produce, instead getting acquainted with the jewelers, the gem cutters, and the traders in the rare and exotic. He moved through the various stalls learning names and faces.

At the third stall, he had a small good fortune.

"Leno?" the gemcutter who had introduced himself as Jacqui said thoughtfully, "Did you do business with Byran the Jeweler from Bronbad?"

"I did indeed, a few years ago," Leno confirmed, keeping the particulars of the deal to himself, as was his custom.

"He speaks very highly of you. He's one of my main customers, travels here from Bronbad twice a year to trade in gems."

"Well, I appreciate his absentee vote for my character," Leno smiled.

He spoke to Jacqui about the quality of gems in the Somfaux region for a short while and then steered the conversation to nobles by the simple expedient of asking if they shopped with Jacqui.

"The Baron patronizes a few jewelers for his wife," Jacqui replied and smiled, "All of them buy their gems from me," he added proudly.

"That makes sense to me," Leno said with a laugh, "Any gemcutter who is a primary source of Byran has the quality fit for an Emperor."

"I thank you," Jacqui said with a small bow of his head.

"And what of Countess Yolande? Is she a frequent visitor?"

"Not so frequent," Jacqui replied, "I have heard though that the Baron is looking to purchase a gift for the Countess. A welcome gift and perhaps something to prove his loyalty to her."

"You think she bids for the Ducal Seat?" Leno asked thoughtfully, "Should one provide her with a gift that she might remember if she achieves it?"

"It might be that she does, although she is getting on in years. It will likely be on behalf of her son and he of course will lead the armies if it comes to that. Only in Treval would they expect a woman to take the field herself, here we do not expect such things of our mothers and daughters," he laughed.

"Naturally not," Leno agreed, "What if she's here the other way around?" he asked, "Could the Baron be seeing himself rise to Duke?"

"I don't believe so," Jacqui dismissed the idea, "Baron to Duke is a long step and there are many in between. Now would you like to see the merchandise?"

Leno did end up buying a few gems, the man's work was of excellent quality and there was a sapphire and two opals that were worth the trouble of transport. They went into his sack and he continued along the market, buying here, selling there, and gathering information as he went.

It was close to noon and he was starting to consider finding a street vendor in order to buy a napkin lunch when he struck gold. He happened on a merchant who dealt in books, rare enough in a society where few could read. However, his luck was even better than just finding a book merchant, this merchant had a collection of books that dealt with the mystical elements and the history of mysticism in the Empire.

"Good Afternoon to you," he said after reading the titles on display, "I am Leno of Lumeaux, merchant of the rare and exotic."

"And good afternoon to you," his fellow merchant said, "I am Chert, merchant of books and matters arcane."

"You have a magnificent collection here," Leno said indicating the books, "It appears to me that some of these books are part of a matched set. Was this a noble's collection or some such?"

"You have a discerning eye," Chert smiled, "I did indeed purchase a noble's collection recently. At his tragic departure of this life, a splendid library passed to his heir who regrettably held no great love of books, preferring the hard coin of their material value to the wealth of knowledge they offer."

"Ah, a lucky find," Leno smiled slyly, detecting that Chert had almost certainly paid the nobleman's heir a fraction of the worth of the books, "And was this all the books? I might have a buyer for a few specific items. I don't like transporting books in the hopes of finding a buyer, the risk of damage is too high, but a specific book for a specific buyer is another matter of course."

"There are a few that I have not put on display," Chert replied cautiously, "Do you know what title your buyer is interested in? Or mayhap the works of a specific author?"

Leno tapped his finger against his nose and glanced around. He leant slightly closer and kept his voice low.

"You would not happen to have *The Life and Times of Robenaire*?"

Chert stared at him for a long moment.

"It is not exactly forbidden," he said slowly, "But that book..."

"I have a buyer in mind for it," Leno replied, "A man of scholarly bent who studies the histories and considers how they influence our world today. I assure you, not a man who would seek practical instruction or one who would attempt to use the scholarly knowledge that may be inferred from the text."

"It was in the collection," Chert said carefully.

"Have you found another buyer for it then?" Leno made a disappointed face, giving no more than that.

"I have not," Chert said after a few moments of hesitation, "I have been in two minds about selling it at all. I have been considering letting it either gather dust or..."

"I understand," Leno agreed, "One doesn't want to be tainted by forbidden practices. However, as you say, the book is not forbidden and I assure you, there will be no taint on you with my buyer."

Chert and Leno regarded each other for a long moment.

"Very well," Chert said finally, "Eight gold nobles."

"Eight?" Leno gasped, "That's more than the book weighs in gold!"

"It's a dangerous book and I've had it in my possession for long enough that I want a cushion against something going wrong," Chert replied.

"But I'll be taking it off your hands," Leno countered, "Four."

They bargained back and forth, both enjoying the exchange, settling finally on a price of six gold nobles, the rare coins mostly used by nobles and merchants. Leno paid and took the book, carefully wrapped in a silk cover.

"Thank you, Chert," he said, "You will not regret today's bargain. Tell me, what is the shortest way to the baronial castle from here?"

"Turn left at the gemcutter's stall at the end of this row and take the broad road to the castle," Chert said, looking a little surprised and a little suspicious.

"Thank you again," Leno said and left, taking the directions as Chert had given. He felt the book merchant's eyes on his back until he was well out of sight.

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Louis had convinced Nina to wear a golden dress for him that afternoon. They had rollicked in the hayloft and now she was naked and sweating his arms. He had chosen the hayloft for two reasons. Firstly, it gave him more space to work with than his cramped pallet in the room at the inn, and secondly, he could see through the slats and detect anyone entering or loitering.

He had worked hard with the girl, ensuring that she didn't just earn money but that she had *enjoyed* herself and she was exhausted, and half covered in hay, draped in her golden dress.

"Tell me about Farin," he said, running his fingers up her side and smiling in satisfaction as her skin rose in goosebumps.

"Oh," she said softly with a gasp, "That is still nice. Why do you want to talk about him? I'd rather take another roll. You can have this one on the house."

Louis laughed softly.

"You might be ready, but I need a little more time. I'd like to understand though. Why is he allowed in the city? Why doesn't the Baron's men throw him out?"

"It's not that easy," Nina said, "They say there's no proof, just rumor."

"No smoke without a fire," Louis replied with a small frown, playing his hand over her breast.

She wriggled under his exploring hand, her hips grinding into the hay they had turned into a bed.

"Ohhhh," she breathed, "Well, maybe."

"Is someone protecting him?" Louis asked, "I've heard of things like that happening in the city."

Nine gave him a frightened glance and the reaction of her body under his hand stilled.

"You shouldn't speak of such things," she said, "It's dangerous."

"I'm sorry," and he was. He had moved too fast. He cupped her breast, picking at her nipple with his fingers and leant over her, "It was just that he frightened me. We won't speak of him again."

"I'm not sure..." she said, pushing at him.

"Wait," he said, "I'll get your mind off him and my silly questions."

He dropped his mouth to her other breast and rolled her nipple in his tongue. She reacted under him but slowly, much of the ardor stolen by their conversation. Louis slid his tongue in a long, wet line down her stomach and smiled up at her. She tensed in anticipation and fear left her eyes, replaced with desire as his hands slipped down to cup her buttocks lifting her up to his face and ready tongue.

## Chapter 3

Louis spent the next few days in Somfaux focusing his attention first and foremost on the city's guilds. The time had not been idly spent, he learned much about the town as he gathered some very useful intelligence. Somfaux was the ugly caterpillar town, wrapped up in its cocoon of disregard, ready to burst out a true butterfly city, no matter what the more prestigious Ducal Seats might pretend and actively proclaim about a mere Baronial Seat.

He had visited the Merchant Guildhall and noted with interest that it was no longer just a place for merchants to gather, but also proffered stalls in the outer parts of the building to trade with the town's population.

As Leno, he established a network of friends and engaged in a few trades through which he discovered that the Wine Guild was the most influential guild in Somfaux. The Head Vintner was a man called Simeon de Seguin who was from a minor noble family, but one steeped in the art of wine making. He had not contacted the Vintners yet. For that occasion, he decided he needed a new identity and he had not packed the right hat.

He could not be Leno for the Wine Guild, Leno dealt in small items, easy to transport. A wine merchant needed an extensive transportation network. Neither could he just appear as another merchant, one would look too much like the other, given the same style of hat.

It took Louis a long walk around the city to envisage the type of personage best suited to interact with the Vintners. With his flat laborers' cap pulled low, he strolled through the cheap streets, eventually stopping at a rough tavern called the Pickled Hen for a drink. To his disappointment, there were no pickled hens in the bar, however it was a favored watering hole for the city's day workers, those men and a few women with little in the way of skills, taking whatever work they could find for a daily wage.

Here he met a friendly fellow, Phillip, and the two of them shared a table. Phillip drank deeply and after he was well along in cups, they shared a very interesting conversation. Louis smiled as he thought back on the exchange.

"You know," Phillip slurred, "You're alright Louis. So, I'm going to tell you a story."

"I'd like that, Phillip," Louis replied, slurring his words slightly. He had drunk sparingly all night; however, Phillip certainly didn't need to know that.

"It's like this see," Phillip said, "My wife, bless her spirit, she's been dead near'n a year now. She was a good woman, too good for me really. She worked in the Dyers Guild. Not a guildswoman, but a skilled pair of hands, you know?"

Louis did indeed know and grunted affirmatively. As the guilds expanded, they took on laborers who were not even apprentices, selected for their ability to follow instructions and complete simple tasks.

"Well now, because of me wife, the two children are apprenticed to the Dyers Guild now, the master that she worked for took them on, in return for their labor."

Louis whistled appreciatively. Phillip's wife must have been a fine Solly for a Master to make such a concession. Normally an apprentice paid a fair a lump sum to be taken on and then paid an additional

sum of money annually towards their upkeep. It was why guildsmen were a rarity. You had to be either rich or part of the guild families to afford to even start on the path of becoming a guildsman.

Phillip nodded wisely at Louis' whistle.

"See now, Master Gofrey Rouway is a good man. He said that the Dyers Guild doesn't have enough members to ... well something about a council that I don't rightly remember, but it got my children into the Dyers Guild and that's good enough for me, you know?"

"Didn't the other guilds or masters object?" Louis asked.

"Maybe there was them that did, but Master Gofrey is good friends with Master Simeon de Seguin and when it comes to the guilds, there's no man in the city whose words carry more weight than Master Simeon."

"Ah, I see," Louis said, "Alright, I have the lay of the land, what's the rest of your story?"

"Well now, my wife had gotten the children settled. And all three of them were working together in the Dyers Guild. And then one day, the children come home. And they tell me that there was an accident. My Sarah, she was standing under a wooden arm and it came undone and fell on her and she died," Phillip sniffled a bit.

Louis made sympathetic noises and patted his companion's back.

"It does take me so, even more'n a year later. Anyway, my children still come home every now and again. And they told me that it was the Brewers Guild that had weakened that arm, on account of them not liking the Wine Makers, so they struck out at the friend of the Wine Makers. Isn't that just the darndest thing? Here I am drinking their beer and there's them that did kill my wife," he shook his head sadly, "I did think of just drinking wine after she died, but it sours my stomach so bad I can scarce work the next day."

"It's a sad thing indeed," Louis agreed and bought them another round of controversial beer.

It was this conversation that led him to consider creating a *Venée*, a man of the blade who held no honor, affiliated with no guild, nor lord nor troop. Men who were typically considered scum, but useful scum to the right cause. Of course, a *Venée* could not simply and readily meet the Guildmaster of the Vintners, nor yet the Dyers Guild. However, he could meet with Phillip and through Phillip offer his services to the Dyers Guild.

*Venée* were known for their loyalty to the contract; if they agreed to terms, they stayed loyal so long as they got paid. No official guild existed, but they were hard men who would put down anyone who claimed the name of *Venée* and broke contract. It was why they were tolerated on the outskirts of society.

For a *Venée*, he needed a special hat. A hat that would afford real protection given what he would be advertising. A hat that would leave an impression of why he was a *Venée* and at the same time deflect questions about his past.

A Western Sabreur's helmet provided the basis for his design. Its steel cap and the short brim were shaped almost like a pill hat, which would be covered in rich green felt. Atop the green fabric he would

add golden knotwork, such as the jewelers from the far west were known to use as a predominant motif, a design passed down from their ancestors before the Empire conquered the barbarian kingdoms of the West Coast. He would scuff the felt and embroidery, make it seem hard used.

Leno ordered the cloth easily enough and the purchase of the helmet was simplicity itself, he visited the Smiths Guild and purchased one already made. Louis, however, had to make the hat himself. The idea being unusual enough that he was afraid of someone remembering the request, were he to commission a local Milner to make the hat for him. For a hat that had to look new or a hat that had to have shape provided by the hat itself, he would never have trusted his elementary skills. It was, however, much simpler to merely cover the steel of the helmet with the felt and velvet. He possessed enough stitching skill to mend his clothes and this was not much harder.

This evening, as the autumn sun sank, Lance the *Venée* rode into Somfaux. He did not go to an inn, but instead made his way to a tavern called the Pickled Hen. There he met a man called Phillip, and without much effort, drew the story of Phillip's wife and his children and the guild out of the man.

It was getting late and Phillip rose from the table they shared.

"I need to be on me way," Phillip said, "'Tis a cruel early day tomorrow."

"Before you go," Lance said, holding up a small silver coin, "I need work here in Somfaux. My horse needs new shoes and I need to eat, and now only one of those two things can happen."

"I don't know any work for a *Venée*," Phillip objected.

"The Guilds sound as though they could do with the help of one such I," Lance replied, "All I need is the name of someone that I can speak to. I'll not bring you any shame, I will not even mention your name if'n you don't want."

Phillip looked at him in half-drunken thoughtfulness.

"Well, that might be," he said slowly, "That might be indeed. Tomorrow I can't speak to my bairns, but the day after. Come here then at sunset and mayhap I'll have a name for you."

"Thank you," Lance smiled and let him go, heading back to the bar.

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The two days passed slowly. Leno nosed around at the Merchants Guild, finding out what they knew about the feud between the Brewers and the Vintners. His fellow merchants had a great deal of gossip about the situation but little true knowledge. The Merchants Guild was choosing to stay neutral as they did business with both guilds and therefore, neither side fully trusted the Guild.

The gossip was that the Brewers were targeting the Vintners allied guilds, seeking to ensure that they returned to neutrality. The Vintners had not yet responded to these attacks, but the speculation was that they must surely respond soon or risk losing the goodwill of their smaller allies. Apparently, the Vintners had based their campaign against the Brewers on building an alliance of guilds that opposed the Brewers and that alliance was being threatened by the Brewers' violent actions. The violence had not yet escalated to blood in the streets, but there was a sense of building tension that might well explode.

Leno did not push for information in this regard, Lance would be better placed, and Louis did not want to cause a potential overlap of people who remembered Leno but met Lance.

At last, Lance found himself waiting on Phillip in the Pickled Hen. He hoped the man had a name for him. If he did not, riskier approaches would have to be followed in order to get an introduction to the Dyers Guild, one of the Vintners' allied Guilds.

Phillip came into the darkening tap room followed by another man. This one had mousy blond hair and hands that were clearly dye stained. His face was dominated by a broken nose and his belly showed him to be a man who enjoyed a good life.

Phillip glanced around and Lance waved. Phillip waved back and made his way over to Lance's table.

"Phillip," Lance said, "Sweet Night to you."

"And you," Phillip agreed, "This is Almun Baleorn."

"Dyer," Lance said slowly, "Greetings to you Almun Baleorn. I am Lance."

"Greetings," Almun said, "Let us get a drink and have a chat. What is your pleasure?"

"Wine," Lance said with a smile.

Almun laughed and gave Phillip a few coins. The man went to buy the drinks while Almun and Lance sat down.

"Phillip says you're interested in a *Venée's* work?" Almun asked.

"I am indeed."

"And what side of the blade do you find yourself on?"

"I can wield the shield if needs be or I can wield the short blade," Lance replied, keeping his voice low. Admitting to being able to assassinate people was not something you did in a loud voice after all.

Almun gave him a sharp glance and Phillip arrived with their drinks.

"So, Lance," Almun said after they had their drinks, "Where did you learn your trade?"

"Most in the West," Lance replied, "I've travelled the length and breadth of the Empire though and learned many a thing from many a man."

"And what brings you to Somfaux?"

"The succession mostly. Well, the succession was bringing me to Etendulat. I thought there might be a *Venée's* work a-plenty here. Somfaux; I was passing through and my horse threw a shoe," Lance sighed.

"Well, it might be that we can do business," Almun said, "I can offer you food and a bed as a retainer, and a silver if you see combat."

"I don't need board or food," Lance countered, "I'd rather have 3 silvers as a retainer."

"Three silvers a week?" Almun asked.

"No, a day," Lance replied with a snort.

"Where do you plan to live?" Almun demanded, "The palace itself?"

"Depending on the level of exclusivity to my services that you need...." Lance left it dangling.

Almun narrowed his eyes and considered.

"Two silvers a day, one extra if your blade sees work, and complete exclusivity," he said slowly.

"Good enough," Lance agreed.

"Good," Almun said, "Come to the Guild tomorrow morning and ask for me. We'll sign a contract and discuss your duties."

"Cheers," Lance replied easily, lifting his mug and toasting the man. He had a contract with the Dyers Guild who were allied with the Vintners.

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Lance found himself waiting in a cool, little antechamber the next day. He had arrived at the Dyers Guild a half *taperion* or so after dawn and asked the first Guild's Apprentice he saw to notify Almun. The apprentice had guided him to this antechamber that was furnished with 3 wooden benches and a long trestle table that had a bowl of fruit, a jug of watered wine, some mugs and platter of bread. The Dyers Guild must be doing well if it could afford to have food waiting this early for any random visitor to the Guild. Lance sighed and wondered if he should have held out for more. If they were doing this well after all...

His musing was interrupted by Almun entering the antechamber.

"Lance," he said, nodding politely, "Follow."

Lance nodded back and got up from one of the benches, falling into step a pace behind Almun. The man led him to an office buried deep inside the Guildhall, a small room with a single small window that looked out into an interior courtyard. Illumination was provided by large reading candles. There was a sturdy desk and a series of four lecterns against the west wall, each of which held thick sheaves of paper. Behind the desk was a scribe's stool and before it was two comfortable chairs. Almun waved Lance to a chair and took the other chair himself.

"First, I have a week's retainer here," Almun said, handing over a small pouch that Lance took and vanished under his doublet, "Second, there is the matter of what we want you to do. We need an experienced set of eyes here in the Guildhall. The brewers have struck here more than once and it's just lack of experience that allows them act so. They're not true professionals, just apprentices that have been taught a few tricks."

"I can't guard the whole Hall myself," Lance said slowly.

"No, and I would not expect it," Almun said, "I need you wander around, look for trouble, look for people who don't belong. These apprentices don't come in and do murder, they sneak in and tip over a

vat, ruin clothes, cause damage. I need someone who can spot the people who don't belong, the button left undone, the rope that has been almost cut. Can you do that?"

"I believe so," Lance said slowly, "As long as you are clear that I can't be everywhere at once," he looked thoughtfully at the man, "That is not the work of the short blade though. Is there something else?"

"I want to send a message of our own. I want you to kill Marcel, the Under-Master of the Brewers," Almun said looking into Lance's eyes.

Lance raised an eyebrow and slowly nodded.

"I see. I will need as much information on him as you have," he said.

"Of course," Almun waved at the sheaf of papers on the fourth lectern, "I have prepared that for you," he hesitated a moment, "You can read?" he queried.

"I can," Lance confirmed, "May I take the papers?"

"No," Almun replied, "They are read here and stay here."

Lance's respect for the man went up a notch or two. Well prepared and careful with his information.

"Always a pleasure to work with a professional," he said, "Well, let me start. Can you loan me an apprentice for a tour of the hall? Then I will patrol and read in-between patrolling."

"Of course," Almun levered himself out of the chair, "Follow."

Lance fell into step again and for just a brief moment Louis rose in his consciousness, laughing softly at the irony of being hired to assassinate someone while being on a mission to assassinate someone else entirely. He was very pleased with this development however. It would give him ample opportunity to prowl anywhere he wished within the Guildhall and gain a true understanding of the guild feud and guild power. In turn, that might lead to some ideas of how to properly corner his primary target and ensure the death not just of the Baron of Somfaux, but also the destruction of his family and his name.

## Chapter 4

Lance endured two days of patrolling the halls of the Dyers' Guild. There had been no incidents of sabotage and he used the opportunity to get to know the dyers and to consume all the material Almun had on Marcel. The documentation was extensive, including patterns of guards' movements, mostly Brewers' apprentices, that either accompanied him or guarded his house. Clearly, Marcel knew he would be targeted. Lance wanted to survive this job, so he was looking for an opportunity better than breaking into a guarded house in the middle of the night.

In the large dye preparation chamber, he stopped to talk to Blanche, the master dyer in charge of the operations down there in the cellars of the Dyers' Guild.

"Well mistress," he greeted her with a small flirtatious smile, "How is the prettiest Master Dyer today?"

"Get on with ya," she laughed, "I'm old enough to be your mother."

Lance laughed with her, for it was true enough. Her hair was steel grey and tied up in a bun with strands escaping to the sides of it. By the end of the day, the bun would be very messy indeed from all the physical work involved in managing the massive dye vats.

"I've always liked older woman," he said with a fake leer and she laughed.

"I'm well enough," she replied to his question, "We're making red dye today, so those apprentices best be sharp."

Lance nodded with respect due to that particular hue. He had picked up that the red that held fast to cloth was one of the hardest dyes to make and definitely required a master's touch. The only dye more expensive and more difficult was the royal purple. For that, a small canister was kept separately from the main dye vats and only a master dyer was permitted to touch it. So far, he had not seen any of the royal color made.

He let his eyes wander about the room carefully looking for anything out of place. If he were the one trying to embarrass the Dyers' Guild, he would strike at the main dyes when they were making one of the rare, rich colors favored by the nobles, like red. Accordingly, he included the prep room in his patrol, even though it would be difficult for an outsider to reach. Any saboteur who did reach the room would have his efforts rewarded with multiple targets for sabotage that could truly hurt the guild. With this in mind, his inspection paused at the ventilation shafts set high in the left wall. The shafts were critical in preventing the buildup of poisonous fumes in this underground chamber. The center-most duct caught his eye. The normally open entrance appeared to have acquired some strange internal lines. It was however, hard to see in the darkness, so near the roof, nearly five meters straight up.

"Mistress Blanche," he said, "I think you had better put the room to the rights and leave for a while. I see something I don't like, and I'd best investigate it."

Almun had briefed all the masters on Lance's job as preventer of sabotage so she knew immediately what he meant.

"I cannot leave for long," she said slowly, "I have already set the *svamma* to boil, if I take the heat off, they will be ruined, and the cost will be enormous. If you ask me to undertake that cost, there had best be something dire wrong."

Lance hesitated, considering.

"The *svamma*, are they poisonous?" he asked.

"The fumes can be," she replied, "But only if they are allowed to build up."

"Then help me with the ladder," he said, pointing to the highest ladder in sight leaned up against one of the great vats, then up to the suspect shaft, "I need to check that vent."

Together they moved the ladder to the wall with the suspicious vent and Louis scrambled up. He drew his sword one handed and probed upward at the vent, still at least the length of his arm above him, even using the tall ladder. His sword definitely encountered resistance, more than just a cloth stuffed into the vent which had been his first thought. He hesitated. He could bring it down, but what if it was something that could cause the old Master Dyer harm if it fell?

"Mistress Blanche," he called down, "Back up to the door. There is something stuck in here and I don't know what exactly."

He watched her move up to the door and stop the apprentices, who had finally arrived for their shift, from entering. Lance took a deep breath and jerked his sword back. Sliding out of the vent came a cloth sack bearing something heavy enough to cause his wrist strain as he flicked it out into the room. There was a loud cracking as it crashed to the floor, Lance close behind as he slid down the ladder, protecting his hands with his sleeves. As he landed, he heard a sinister hissing that made his blood run cold.

Down here in the south they had a creature that was to the scorpion what the lynx was to the cat. It grew to be almost a meter long, it had pincers capable of snapping a man's bones and its poison, while not more virulent than that of a scorpion, was delivered in such a large quantity that a man stung by the creature would be dead in minutes. And it made a very distinctive hissing sound that ended in a soft whistle as it moved. The same sibilant threat Lance heard from the smashed box near where the sack had fallen.

Lance crouched and picked up the sword he had dropped down ahead of him to slide down the ladder. He held the weapon pointed low and forward, and cautiously approached. If it was a *nappan*, it could track his movements through vibrations in the earth and strike with unnerving speed. If it was not...he cast the thought out and focused on the moment at hand.

Cautiously he placed one foot before the other, like an acrobat on a balancing beam, cautious to step only where he knew was safe. It was on his third step that the *nappan* rushed him. It came at him with that weird whistling hiss, scuttling at great speed, its pincers gaping above its head and its tail quivering, a huge drop of poison glistening at the end of the stinger.

Lance leapt upwards, grabbing onto one of the great dye vats and planting his feet firmly on the side. A heartbeat later he dove off the vat towards the floor, holding out a bent arm to absorb the initial impact and guide his body into a roll. From the roll, he lunged at the thing with his sword, but his thrust caromed harmlessly off the thick armor plates of the creature's low flat body. In response it lashed out at him with one of its pincers. Lance, already recovered from his lunge, leaped onto a table. The *nappan's* pincer only grazed off his trousers. Lance knew there would be a bruise there, but no more than that.

Perched on the table he cast around, looking for something to help him deal with the creature. How his sword was going to penetrate those hard, red scales, he did not know. The *nappan* scuttled below him, its barbed stinger curled and ready over its body. It reeked like a nest of scorpions, oily and thick. He stared down at it, ready to leap away. Without a clear means to defeat it, his best option was to stay out of the way and hope everyone cleared the room so he could run. He could maybe shut the door before it scuttled out and get a heavy crossbow or something...

"Underbelly or base of the tail," a boyish voice called from the doorway.

Lance risked a glance, fearing to take his eyes from the *nappan*. The apprentice who had spoken was a burly young man who looked to be in his late teens.

"I'll lure him," and before anyone could react, the apprentice stepped into the room and clapped his hands sharply.

The *nappan* reacted to the sound immediately, swinging around and storming toward the apprentice who had leaped away, grabbing a piece of firewood and throwing it away from himself to where it clattered across the wooden floor. The *nappan* rushed the firewood, giving Lance a view of what the apprentice meant. At the base of the *nappan's* tail was a soft spot where the scales did not overlap. He did not see how that might kill the beast, but at least it would remove its most devastating weapon. He sprang from the table, once again rolling neatly to take the impact. This time, instead of lunging, he kept his body low and dived at the *nappan's* rear end, stabbing with his sword. The blade struck true and curved into the *nappan's* abdomen, and the creature's whistle shrilled through the room. Lance tried to jerk his sword out, but it stuck between two scales. He cursed and abandoned the weapon, twisting away from the *nappan* who had whirled to face its tormentor.

Lance rolled twice and attempted to stand. He got to one knee before the creature reached him and lashed out with its pincers. Lance managed to avoid one but the second raked across his left hand and he felt the hot sting of blood as it broke the skin. The burly apprentice suddenly clapped again, sharply and loud and the *nappan* whirled to face the sound.

Among warriors, they speak of the moment of *framír*. It is a moment of perfect stillness when the world slows down and your vision narrows until all that you see is the perfect time, the perfect place, and you know where to land the perfect blow.

Lance's world slowed down as he felt the *framír* enfold him and he could exactly where to strike as the creature's movement exposed a part of its underbelly that had no scales. He had no sword, but his knife was in a spring sheath on his arm and it snapped out as he punched it towards the soft spot. It was a long knife, a poniard with a sharp tip, and it penetrated the creature's hide. The creature emitted the whistling scream again as the blade dug into something vital.

Man and monster struggled back and forth, Lance grimly hanging on as the creature's pincers awkwardly flailed at him and its blood rushed over the knife, making the handle slippery. It felt like a lifetime, but in truth it took the creature less than a minute to die and Lance dropped to one knee beside it.

He looked up from its corpse to the burly apprentice who had entered the fight.

"I thank you," he said, his voice still rough from exertion, "without your assistance this fight would have had a very uncertain outcome."

“And it is not in keeping with the rest of the sabotage,” Lance said slowly, “That was more what I would call a normal plan. Damaged straps, the bung hole of a barrel left open, that does not seem in keeping with this plan.”

"No," Almun agreed, "It does not. I am very grateful to you, however. There is to be a feast at the palace in ten days and with it a knight's tournament. We need the dye to make favors for the ladies to hand out, not to mention gifts for the knights to buy their ladies. Such a tournament can keep the guilds' coffers full for nigh on six months, but only if we have the right colors and this batch of red is critical to our planning.

"A tournament," Lance said slowly, "And followed by high feast?"

"Oh indeed," Almun agreed, "And dancing of course. All in honor of Lady Yolanda's visit as I understand it."

Lance leaned back thoughtfully in his chair, wincing slightly as he hit a bruise. A tournament and a high feast meant a lot of strangers in town. Knights, their entourages, additional servants, merchants who moved around from town to town selling their wares at tournaments. It was a time of chaos and a time when a man could move around quite easily.

It was also a grand time to gather information and to plant rumors.

Yes, a tournament, a high feast and a ball offered him endless opportunities. Both for Lance's job and for Louis's.

He smiled at Almun.

"I love a good tournament," he said.

## Chapter 5

Louis spent an enjoyable evening with Nina but after she left, he mulled over the coming tourney and High Feast. He wanted to mingle with the crowds, both peasant and noble. He wanted to gather information and stir the rumor pot. He wanted this city rife with rumors of *Sang Sorcellerie* if his plan was to work. If it worked, it wouldn't matter if he missed some bastard child of the Baron's lineage, no one of the Baron's line would ever be trusted again.

Well and so: what hat to wear was the question. Neither Lance nor Louis would do, and Leno the merchant needed to remain a minor character, not someone hobnobbing amongst peers. Perhaps one of the gentry, someone who lived tournament to tournament. He had a hat that would do, a short sugarloaf design with a clip to affix a feather and a gemstone, giving the hat the needed flair. However, if he was such a Chevalier, why did he not compete in the tourney?

Either an injury, or perhaps he was not a very good fighter and thus knocked out early? But as an inferior fighter, how did he finance himself? Typically, Chevaliers came in two flavors, rich and bad at fighting, or poor and good at fighting on the way to becoming rich.

And if he hailed from a rich family, why did he not guest at the palace and attend the typical fetes and parties that such a Chevalier would be attending? No, if he wanted to be a Chevalier, it would need to be an injured one.

Louis frowned as he considered it. What if he slipped up while affecting the injury? Should he slip and someone notice, their suspicions might be aroused sufficiently to give him a second look. For his mission to be successful, the nobles - especially - had to be kept in the dark. An injury that had to be maintained throughout the tournament was just too much of a risk. He set the sugarloaf hat down on the bed.

Maybe it would have to be Leno. As he reached for the baggy cap, his hand paused above a small jester's hat. Unlike the fool's hat, this one had very short arms and tiny bells, a staple of acrobats and jongleur in the North, though seldom worn in the South. A jongleur was very visible, but in that very visibility existed an ability to blend into the background, especially on the night when a fete was in full swing at the palace and nobles were enjoying the thrill of drinking with the common folk of the city. He did not have a lute but he could remedy that by purchasing one, or he could make up a story to tell; his singing voice was passable enough to carry him as a street jongleur rather than a bard of the Bardic Guild.

Jongleurs sometimes belonged to the Players Guild, but not if they aspired to be a Bard. The Bardic Guild would never accept someone who had belonged to the Players.

So, he would go as a Jongleur. A jongleur from the North who had come South to seek his future and had fallen afoul of robbers and lost his lute, so here he was in Somfaux with a desire to be a bard and nothing but his cap to his name. Would the gracious noble care to hear a song or two? Or maybe he could juggle for them? He even had a few acrobat routines.

No, he wasn't a Player, just a jongleur who dreamed of being a bard someday....

Yes, it felt right. This personality he could carry all night while focusing on gathering information and starting rumors.

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Louis mingled with the crowd as Chevaliers and their entourages streamed into Somfaux. Well known Chevaliers were cheered by the city folk. During the past week, these celebrities had arrived sporadically, but on *Vendri*, the day before the start of the knockout bouts of the tournament and the

high feast, traffic had swollen in volume. It appeared that every person in Somfaux, who could find some reason to loiter and watch the Chevaliers ride in, was lining the streets.

Some of the Chevaliers, already famous enough that they did not need to joust in the lists for simple ranking in the knockout, built on their stories of generosity and wealth by throwing coins into the crowd, creating minor scuffles as the peasants tussled for the money. The roads were narrow here and in such a crowd, even a peaceful one, it was dangerous to lose one's footing. Louis noticed quite a few black eyes where the coins from passing Chevaliers had fallen.

He turned back towards the road as the crowd roared for a trio of knights each famous in their own right, as well as for romantic tales told of their friendship for each other. Symonet of the Sea, named so for he had survived three shipwrecks. Jacques the Gentleman, named so for the excellence of his manners towards the ladies; and Giraudux the Green, named so for his shield which showed no device and was deliberately painted green.

The three knights were mounted on their tall horses, smiling and waving at the crowd. Behind them rode three young squires leading an extra charger each, and behind that a wagon in which Louis spied a veritable arsenal, along with camp gear. Clearly the trio did quite well for themselves despite calling no man master nor yet any lord's castle home.

They were all three older than him by more than a dozen years, the eldest, Giraudux, was showing some signs of age. His black hair had turned grey at the temples and the crowfeet around his eyes sank deep. Rumors among those who frequented and followed the tourneys for the past few years suggested he planned to retire. Looking at him now, Louis could understand why. If he took a fall it would likely take weeks instead of days to recover, and a serious fall might leave him with an injury for months.

The tourney knights had a good life while they were active, but there was only so long they could keep going, thereafter, they needed a retirement plan. Louis wondered idly what Giraudux's was. The green shield indicated that the man was not welcome wherever he originally came from. As he mused the trio went out of sight and the crowd turned their attention to the next knight to enter. Louis decided to call it a day. He would see them all on the morrow at the tourney, after all.

He made his way back to the Silver Leaf Inn and flirted outrageously with Nina, convincing her to come with him to the tourney the next morning. On account of the tourney she had to work the afternoon and evening, with the inns and alehouses overflowing as both locals and visitors looked for watering holes and entertainment.

Once she started her work the next day, so would Laurie the Jongleur who had already met with a group of players the previous night and convinced them to buy a script for a street play from him, enabling him to at least survive till the night of the High Feast when he hoped to make enough money to purchase a lute and restart his dreams of becoming a bard...

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The tourney proved a spectacular affair. The jousting was, of course, the crowd favorite, but Nina and Louis watched a few swordfights first, though they did not stay to watch the final, instead they stopped by the field where archery butts had been setup. There they cheered for the winner of the bow before making their way to the lists. On the way, Louis bought Nina a blue ribbon for her hair. Not the most valuable color, but sufficiently bright and she seemed delighted.

At the lists, the Baron du Mamel and the Countess de la Cham were both in attendance, of course, in the high pavilion, while the lesser nobles gathered below them in the shaded marquee. In the open stands and on the grassy banks stood and sat the rest of the people watching the spectacle of Chevaliers charging at each other across the tourney field.

Since this was tourney jousting, a Chevalier who was knocked from his horse lost the match and his horse was forfeit to the man who had beaten him. Failure to deliver an unhorsing meant the winner of a bout was then the first to score three touches. A lance on the head counted for two points and one on the body counted for one. In order to count, a lance had to break, otherwise it was judged that insufficient force had been applied.

By the time Louis and Nina found a place to stand where they could see the action, the early ranking fights and knockout fights had gone by and it was down to four Chevaliers. The trio of knights that Louis had seen coming in the previous day and much younger man with curly golden hair.

"He looks very young," Nina said surprised, "Do you know who it is?"

"No," Louis replied, sipping from a wine cup he had procured from a vendor and handing her a sweet, "He must be a new Chevalier. Ah, they are announcing his name...."

The Herald of the Lists boomed out:

"Symonet of the Sea to face Lupe, Chevalier!"

A whisper rippled through the crowd at the lack of any other name or title. To be recognized as a Chevalier, the young man would have had to prove his right to the title to a Herald, so where were the rest of his names?

"Who do you think he is?" Nina asked, nibbling on her sweet.

"Well, Lupe is surely an assumed name," Louis said, "Maybe he is a high noble's second or third son trying to make a name for himself?"

"Maybe so," Nina agreed.

Louis watched with interest and Nina with excitement as the action unfolded in the lists and the two Chevaliers thundered towards each other. Their lances both struck with shattering impact against their opponent but Symonet's experience clearly told and the young man was swaying in his saddle as he rode back to his end of the lists.

"Symonet will win this," Louis said with certainty.

"But then, will he face one of his friends in the final?" Nina asked.

"Oh certainly," Louis said as the two crashed together again. This time, it was only Symonet's lance that broke, Lupe's lance caromed off Symonet's shield without shattering.

"I think that Giraudux will concede to Jacques, and Jacques and Symonet will give the crowd a battle royal. I have heard that they have done this before. Ah, the boy has not disgraced himself," he added as the young man managed to break a lance on Symonet's body in the third run, "Two points to three and against a Chevalier with at least double his experience."

"I still wonder who he is," Nina replied even as the Herald announced that Giraudux had indeed conceded to Jacques.

"Well, it may be that one of the Silver Leaf's patrons will know," Louis told her as they prepared to watch the final contest, "Being a newcomer who finished in the top four, he will surely be the talk of the town!"

"Yes, I shall be sure to ask around," Nina replied.

The final bout of the tourney was a spectacular one with both Chevaliers giving the battle their all. Their defensive skills were on full display and indeed they had to ride the lists five times before Jacques the Gentleman managed to break a third lance on Symonet's body.

The crowd cheered wildly and there was far too much applause to hear what Countess de la Cham said to Jacques as she crowned him the tourney winner.

"We must go," Nina said, "I have to get back to the Silver Leaf or Jenkin will be fit to be tied."

Louis nodded and the two of them wormed their way out of the throng, rapidly making their way back to the inn.

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Once again, Louis left via the front door of the inn and stabled Hys at a busy hostelry. He also greeted the beggar in the barrel who he learned was called Mole. Mole nodded blearily to him and pointed at his own eyes, indicating that he still watched for Farin.

In the early evening, it was not Louis who walked the city streets with his acrobats' cap but Laurie. Laurie had already earnt a pocket full of coins and was a few drinks down from several young nobles' parties. He had sung, he had recounted the thrilling tale of being robbed on the way South and he had even performed a few acrobat tricks.

Taking a short break, he eased through the central square where the temporary stalls for market day had been broken down and folded away, leaving a few permanent stalls dotted here and there along the edges.

In the middle of the square, marked by the town fountain, some rough benches and tables had been placed and quite a few enterprising merchants sold street fare, wine and ale to the nobles lounging about.

Laurie made his way to the fountain and dipped himself a cup of water. In many towns, the water from the town fountain was not safe to drink, but Somfaux prided itself on the cleanliness of its water. He sat on the edge of the fountain and listened to snatches of conversation going on around him.

"Lady Bria gave ..."

"The horse master is ...."

"And I overheard the Countess say..."

Laurie frowned and edged a closer to the group of young nobles who seemed to be discussing politics rather than the Baronial Court gossip.

"Of course, there would be tension if the Baron is going to try for Duke," a young man slurred, sloshing wine onto his fine vest.

"Oh, come on, he's not going to try for Duke," one of his companions protested, "He is only a Baron and if it comes to war, he brings a very small army against the likes of the Countess."

"But what if he has alliances that should by rights be hers?" the only young lady in their group asked.

"By rights?" the drunken one asked, "If she can't maintain her alliances, that's not his fault."

"It sounds like you're supporting the Baron over the Countess, Blancard," the girl noted.

His friend took his arm and shook it slightly.

"Nothing of the sort," the friend said, "Blancard was just speculating, as we all are. Come, I'll buy you a drink Lady Fransine and Blancard could do with a bite to eat, else this evening will end in far too young a state."

The three of them moved off and Laurie sipped thoughtfully at his cup of water. Talk of growing tension between Tybalt and Yolande, and the rumor of Tybalt trying for the Ducal Seat, was becoming more common, however the argument was still that Baron to Duke stretched a step too far. Personally, Laurie could see the right man with the right help making that step. It would not be the first time: *The Lesson of Lormais* was a well told tale in which a man who reached above his station ended up on the headsman's block. Such tales did not always end poorly though. The mighty hero Formeirre was forced to defend his family and rose to become a king who led his people to join the Empire peacefully, or so the story went. Personally, Laurie rather thought he had rebelled against his king in order to join the growing Empire, but to history he was a hero and that was the story even Laurie told.

Hmm, maybe a story that a noble with a temperament like Blancard would want to hear tonight? He grinned to himself and plunged back amongst the revelry. It was time to sing a few songs and tell a few more tales and see how his audience reacted to such tales.

Much later, he found some Players had taken over the town square and were performing a street play. As he approached there were drunken calls for "some new story, we're tired of the old ones". The head of the troupe bowed and smiled at the crowd, then his voice boomed out.

"You are indeed fortunate tonight generous patrons of our famous Player's Troupe! For we have a new tale. A tale from far away, a tale of action and betrayal and lies and deceit. A tale of glory and victory and heroes! Would you like to hear our tale?" he asked as two of the players moved among the crowd holding out their collection bags.

The crowd laughed and threw their coins into the bags and the troupe rapidly changed into costumes. Laurie recognized the play immediately from the opening scene announced by the leader as "The throne room of a kingdom from the mists of yore..."

It was his own play! He smiled with satisfaction and stopped to watch the action unfold.

It was a simple enough story, the king was old and the actor who played him did well, showing an old man who had once been strong but now could barely hold his head up speaking to his two sons. The scene proceeded with the Younger Son requesting his father's blessing to go out into the world and earn his fortune, as the crown and the kingdom's wealth would rightfully go to his brother.

The Old King gladly gave the Younger Son his blessing and the Younger Son set out into the world while the Elder Son remained to look after their sickly father.

In the next scene, announced as a dark forest glade, the Younger Son was speaking to an Old Hag.

"I very much desire my father's wealth, Old Hag," he said, "His wealth and his Crown both, but lo! Mine Elder Brother stands in the way of both of these matters. I would not turn to kin-slaying for surely I do love mine Brother, but there are other paths to power are there not?"

"There are paths to power of a certainty, but blood will need to be spilt if you want to walk any path I offer," the Old Hag replied.

"I care not about some stranger's blood," the Younger Brother declared callously, "Tell me what I must do."

"Go to the village and snatch a child," the Old Hag instructed, and the crowd gasped, "Its blood shall we spill and call forth the White Stag."

The third scene was announced as the Royal Forest. The Younger Brother slew the "White Stag" and the rest of the troupe applauded from the sidelines as citizens of the mythic kingdom.

The audience was icily silent, the fruits of *Sang Sorcellerie* were much despised.

On stage, the Elder Brother appeared on the scene and clapped the Younger Brother on the shoulder.

"Any man who slays the White Stag is said to hold the Luck of the World upon him! I shall stand aside for you, my Brother! Our father's crown and wealth shall be yours!"

A brief intermission was announced, and the audience started to hum with conversation. They discussed the evils of *Sang Sorcellerie* and the perfidy of the Younger Brother in using it to steal his brother's rightful crown. While they spoke, the collection bags circled. The troupe gathered yet more silver, clearly the new play carried the crowd's approval of a new story.

After the short break, the Leader explained that the situation in the kingdom was dire. Drought ate away at the kingdom's harvest and unchecked forest fires were destroying the wild lands, leaving barren whatever the drought had not already taken. The first scene was announced as a forest glade and it opened to show the Elder Brother waking up in a cold sweat.

"Woe is me," he said, "I gave my brother my crown in the hope that his luck would ever extend to the kingdom, but since I have left to seek my fortune the news from the kingdom is dour. And I have such terrible dreams of a child dying at the hands of my Younger Brother!"

A player then walked into the glade wearing a ragged brown robe.

"Dreams can sometimes be a memory and sometimes a warning," he said.

"Who are you?" Elder Brother demanded.

"I am a hermit and I know something of your Younger Brother and his hunt of the White Stag. That stag was painted red, for your Brother's rule is cursed instead of blessed."

"I cannot believe it," Elder Brother replied, "I shall return home and determine the truth."

The final scene resolved in the throne room of the kingdom. Younger Brother was there, wearing the crown. The Old Hag too was present, standing in a shadowy corner.

Elder Brother strode in, followed by the Hermit.

"Younger Brother, that stag that you hunted; did you do ought to taint the hunt?" Elder Brother demanded.

"Elder Brother," Younger Brother sneered, "Once, I loved you so much I would not think to kill you for this crown, but no more. Yes, I called on the power of *Sang Sorcellerie* and now I will do again. Old Hag, it is time my brother died!"

The Old Hag reached out towards Elder Brother with ribbons fluttering from her fingers to indicate power gathering there, but the Hermit fell upon her and bashed her on the head with a club; she crumpled to the ground, her body limp.

Elder Brother charged Younger Brother and they started to fight! The fight raged across the stage for nearly a minute until Elder Brother plunged his sword "into" Younger Brother, who fell to the ground with a cry. Elder Brother stood over him as the Leader announced:

"And so, it was, that the Younger Brother died. And even though he hated what his brother had become, Elder Brother cried and his tears became the rain that fed the Kingdom's rivers and streams and under Elder Brother's rule, all the evils of Younger Brother's rule were undone and he led the Kingdom to prosperity. And never again was *Sang Sorcellerie* tolerated in the Kingdom!"

The crowd cheered loudly, celebrating Good's triumph over Evil and for the third time the collection bags clinked as they thanked the players for their new story with silver dimes and copper pennies; and even here and there a gold from a noble or two who had joined the crowd to hear a new play.

Laurie smiled as he slipped away. The Players would doubtless speak well of the story and mayhap he could sell one or two more. As he entered the shadowy streets beyond the square, he removed his cap.

Louis slipped noiselessly through the shadows. He had one more job to complete before the day was done, for tonight, Marcel died.

## Chapter 6

Louis tucked Laurie's clothing into a basket that he stashed on a low roof of a bakery he had scouted previously for this purpose. Gaining access to the shadowy roof needed a simple jump then hauling himself the rest of the way up. From here, a memorized route ran across the shadowy rooftops to Marcel's house in the richer area of town.

Louis ran lightly, taking care to stay off the center of the highest points of the roofs. The last thing he wanted was to be silhouetted against the sky. He had scouted this path encountered a local thief while doing so. Louis paid the requisite "thieves fee" rather than argue with the man. He didn't want to find himself at odds with the local underworld, that was just asking for unnecessary trouble.

He reached Marcel's neighborhood without incident and crouched on the last roof offering a vantage over the quiet streets. The houses here were free standing and most had their own walls around small patches of gardens. Guild masters, minor nobles and rich merchants were the most common residents here, and it showed.

The only sky path available would be to run on the walls and that would leave him very exposed. He dropped off the roof and drew in a quiet breath, feeling himself slide into the shadows, almost becoming part of it. Slowly, slowly he made his way down the street, sticking to deep shadows, avoiding torch braziers set outside large gates of particularly ostentatious houses.

He turned left down a narrow street and stopped at the back wall of Marcel's house. The man's security was good. There were no plants on the wall, no nearby trees, nothing to give good purchase. There were, however, no guards.

Louis crouched in the shadows some ten meters from the wall and waited. He would be exposed while he scaled the wall and he needed to be very sure that he was alone. He forced his heartbeat to calm and slowed his breathing, engaging the state of *ouïr*. He *heard* the rustling of the wind on the far side of the wall, the movement of a small bird in a nest, footsteps further away at the front gate. He waited, *listening* until he could place all the guards, and that he was alone and unobserved.

He exhaled fully and released the *ouïr*. Now was the time for action. He darted to the wall and leaped, feeling every corded muscle in his legs as he cleared easily three quarters of the wall in a single bound, his reaching fingertips finding purchase in a small gap in the masonry, the balls of his feet pressing into the surface.

He pushed off from the wall immediately, leaping up further, latching his hand over the wall. A long strip of overlapping spikes crowned the top of the wall, however, he managed to place his grip so that only a few of the spikes tore at the edges of his hand. He felt the sting of cuts that would surely be painful later. Instead of trying to find a position on the wall, he used his handhold to swing his body over and drop to the ground on the far side. The impact with the compacted earth elicited a grunt as the wind rushed from his body and he froze.

He stayed quiet and motionless for a long moment, waiting. No one came. His arrival had not been detected, which gave him the time to breath and recover. A strip of cloth sufficed as a bandage around his hand, ensuring that he would leave no bloody prints. He had expended a great deal of energy first in *ouïr*, then in scaling the wall, and still needed to gain access to the house.

As soon as he could feel the shadows around him again, he cautiously approached the house, using a rolling toe-to-heel step to avoid crunching down on any leaves or pebbles in the garden. He had not been able to learn much about the exterior layout, so this part of his mission was both dangerous and slow.

Finally, he made it to the door he had identified as the weakest point of the house's defense, the ground floor servants' entrance which led to where the two live-in servants stayed. He recalled the layout of the house from Almun's notes and knew that beyond the door was a short hallway with two adjoining tiny bedrooms, ending at a door to the large kitchen.

He slid his picks out from their special wool-packed pouch and gently probed the lock. It was not an exceptional lock and it took no more than a dozen heartbeats before the tumblers turned, and the door was open.

Louis crept into the hall, easing the door closed behind him and padded softly into the kitchen. At the far end of the kitchen was the big door leading into the main house. Louis paused there, next to the dough set to rise in preparation for tomorrow's baking. His *ouïr* was a well-trained skill, but even so it was tiring and he would need to engage it again here in the house. Maintaining silence, he drew a deep breath and stilled his body, setting aside the pangs of hunger rising from the skills used tonight, and ignoring the pain in his hands from the cuts inflicted by the wall spikes.

He *listened*, extended his ears to become his sight throughout the house. A cat moved around on the second floor, but he disregarded that. There, in Marcel's study he *heard* faint voices and the movement of two, no three bodies. Louis felt like swearing. The man should be in bed or at least alone. He sighed and released the *ouïr*. He would have to wait, however he could do it from a better location than the kitchen.

He slipped through the house, a ghost, and made his way to a shadowy alcove in the hallway that led to the study. The study door stood open which gave him a moment of pause, but he was wrapped in deeper shadows and they had the light from the lanterns in the study in their eyes. He padded noiselessly into the alcove and relaxed, becoming part of the background, listening to their conversation.

"Marcel, it will not be as complex a matter as that attempt with the *Nappan*?" a cultured voice asked.

"No, Hauken," a gruffer voice replied.

"Indeed, my master understands that such plans are too much counting coup and not enough direct results out here in Somfaux," a rough voice replied, and Louis frowned. It seemed that he should know that voice. He had heard it before.

"Very well then," the cultured voice of Hauken said, "We shall expect you to return with a package in one week's time and leave the vintners and the dyers in peace until then."

"Much as it pains me, agreed," the gruff voice of Marcel said.

"Right then, I'll see myself out," the rough voice replied.

"It is late. Hold a moment and I will come with you," Hauken said, "Unless there is aught else you wish to discuss, Marcel?"

“No, it is indeed late.”

Louis tried to slow down even his heartbeat and his breathing become slow and soundless. They would walk right by him, within arm’s reach in fact. He let the shadows embrace him and let himself sink into stillness. As they exited the study, he became aware of the cat again. The creature was heading in the direction of the study.

Louis remained still and quiet, waiting. The cat continued down the passageway, then past the study, and into the alcove. The man carrying the lamp turned it to follow the cat’s movements. Louis’s training in *fantôme* was excellent. He was a master of the arts of working with shadows. But skills had limits and light shone directly on your dark hiding place was one of those limits.

All three men froze as they became aware of his presence. Louis did not hesitate. The taste of blood rush into his mouth in a tangy, metallic tide. He leapt at Marcel, his dagger flashed into his hand, and dragged across the back of the man’s neck. It was a scratch, only a scratch, but it was enough as he called to the man’s blood, feeling Marcel’s heart as though it was pumping in Louis’s hand. Instantly a fountain of blood exploded from the small scratch, Marcel collapsed to the floor.

Louis felt a wave of exhaustion wash over him, but the other two men were coming, and he had to get away, no matter the cost.

He fell backward into a shadow, the taste of blood still filled his mouth as his mind flashed through the world of shadows and he kept falling, tumbling out of another shadow entirely, landing in a graceless heap. This shadow was in the alley where he had first dropped down from the sky path, *taperions* earlier.

Lying on his back he tried to lever himself to his feet to escape, but he could not make his muscles work. His use of *Dusang* had drained him entirely. He could not even lift his head.

A young face appeared in his vision. A boy with sandy blond hair that flopped over his green eyes separated by a crooked nose. Louis stared into those eyes. He knew this boy, didn’t he? And then the world went black and he knew nothing.

.....

Louis woke up in darkness. He could smell hay and feel it tickling his skin. A hayloft probably. What was he doing in a hayloft? His head was pounding and there was a faint taste of blood in his mouth. More pressingly, his mouth was dry as a bone. It felt as though his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. When he tried to move his muscles protested so loudly, he groaned, trying his best to stifle the sound.

“Oh,” a boyish voice said, “You’re awake. Here,” a hand felt over his face and found his mouth. A small stream of water poured from the hand into his parched lips. Louis swallowed with relief, his throat working greedily.

“Not too much,” the voice said and the flow of water stopped, “Let’s see if you can keep that down.”

Louis felt the water roiling in his belly, but it had already reduced the pounding in his head enough to focus his will on making sure the water stayed down.

“Who are you? Where are we?” he asked.

"We're in a hayloft of a stable close by the alley where you fainted," the young voice said in a matter-of-fact tone, "It was the closest uninhabited building that I could carry you to. And me," he hesitated, "You can call me Lupe."

"Lupe," Louis said slowly, "The young man who ended third in the tournament Lupe?"

"Yes," Lupe said after a moment's pause.

"I see," Louis said, "Well Lupe, I am Louis and I think I could stand a little more water and maybe you could help me sit up?"

There was a rustling in the hay as Lupe came closer and Louis felt strong hands shift his body into a sitting position. He felt a stab of pain, but the pain was definitely fading. He was as hungry as a dog with nine puppies however.

"You must be hungry after using *Dusang* like that," Lupe said holding the waterskin to Louis's lips, "I'm sorry, I don't have any food."

Louis managed to drink despite the momentary surprise that the young man had recognized how he had arrived in the alley.

"Who are you boy?" he said after he had drunk, "And don't say Lupe. If you could recognize the use of *Dusang* you aren't just Lupe anything."

"I'm trying to get home," the young man replied, "I can't say who I am, it's dangerous but I have *Dusang* skills of my own. I've never seen anyone fall through shadows though."

Louis considered that, but decided to drop it. The boy would tell him in due time.

"Well, I certainly owe you a favor for the rescue, so what can I do to help you?" he said instead.

There was a long moment of silence in the dark and then Lupe's voice came hesitant and very young.

"They gave me this gold figurine for the tournament victory. I tried to sell it for coin because I'm out of money but the man I sold it to tried to rob me so I killed him and I hid the body in that alley and I don't know what to do now."

The words came out in a rush and Louis listened in silence. The boy was clearly of high noble blood, very few of the lesser noble bloodlines retained *Dusang* skills. He had also lived a very sheltered life. Louis sighed. He should send him on his way and get back to his mission. He could give him gold and help him get back on the road to wherever home was, but he had a bad feeling that Lupe would be dead before too much longer if he did that.

"I see," he said, then, "Do you have lodging in the city?"

"No, I have a tent pitched outside with the other tournament Chevaliers."

"Ah. And with the tournament on, there will not be space for a mouse in the city."

Louis hesitated for a moment then reached into an inner pocket and withdrew a coin purse stuffed with wool to prevent jingling. He took out the wool and jingled the purse.

"Alright, let's do this. I'll stay here, I'm in no state to move. You go get us some food and we will sleep here in this hayloft. If the owners come before we are gone tomorrow, well, I will pay them off. Tomorrow, we'll get you a room in the inn where I'm staying and see what we can do about getting you home. Does that sound reasonable to you?"

The silence in the darkness was filled with a pregnant pause and then Lupe took the coin purse from Louis.

"You'll help me get home?"

"Well, you'll need to tell me where home is and why you're on the run so that I can help you," Louis replied, "But I will help you. You probably saved my life back there, at the very least you saved my money. Had I lain unconscious in that alley all night I'd not bet a copper on me surviving to see the dawn."

"I'll go get the food and then I'll tell you," Lupe said, "But..." he hesitated, "Why are you staying down here? You must be noble too..."

"From the wrong side of the blanket," Louis smiled grimly, "My noble father lived long enough to put me through the *Trial of Dusang* but after he died, well, my father's wife didn't want a bastard hanging around clouding the line of succession so I left in a hurry, you might say."

"Oh," Lupe said, sounding a little embarrassed, "I understand. I'll go get the food and then I'll tell you."

Louis leaned back against a haybale as the young man slid down a ladder to the stable below. He laughed softly to himself remembering Nina's curiosity. It seemed he would be finding out all about Lupe. He wondered if he would share any of it with her. Somehow, he doubted he would.

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Lupe returned with food after what felt like ages but was probably only a little over half a *taperion*. He had gotten street fare, some sort of unidentified meat wrapped in bread, and a skin of wine as well as more water.

Louis fell on the food like a starved wolf. He was still weak from his exertions in the night and he was absolutely famished. He devoured one of the meat pockets and took a swig of a wine before prodding Lupe.

"Alright, Lupe," he said, "Tell me."

"My uncle is Duke Raffi de Tranchalam," Lupe said and Louis felt his eyebrows rise. The Tranchelag Duchy was the furthest south of the Empire and the Duchy most famed for its swordsmen. If the young man was a scion of House Tranchalam he understood how he had done so well in the tournament.

"So what is the nephew of the Duke of Tranchelag doing here?" he asked after swallowing his current mouthful.

"My father is... was my uncle's ambassador to the Imperial Court so we have been living there for two years now," Lupe continued, "It is interesting, but I liked it better back home. Anyway, about a month ago my father found out something that made him really worried. He had an audience with Chancellor Rennaurd about it."

"Brice Rennaud?" Louis interrupted.

"Yes," Lupe agreed.

"I see, carry on."

"Well, the night after the audience our estate came under assault," his voice trembled a little as he continued, "There must have been forty of them. We only had the ten honor guard Chevaliers. One's safety is guaranteed you know, by the Emperor."

Louis patted his arm. "I understand. Who were they? What happened?"

"They wore no badges and their armor was unmarked leather. They were skilled though, like soldiers, not like bandit rabble.

"The Chevaliers fell, swarmed under. The house has a narrow point in the entrance. My father told me to run, there was a tunnel that would take me into the city sewers. He gave me a purse and told me to just run. I felt him..." Lupe's voice sounded very young and Louis could hear him forcing back the tears, "I felt him use *Dusang*. I think he did what you did tonight, just used it all. I think there were still too many though, and when he fell, exhausted... I think he died. There were too many."

"Even *Dusang* has its limits," Louis agreed and patted the young man's shoulder sympathetically.

"So, you escaped of course," he prompted after a few minutes of silence.

"Yes, I thought it best to travel inland and try to get a river barge rather than go past Bron Inn. It would be longer and slower but if they were looking for me, they would be less likely to look here.

"I had my armor and my sword, but only a small purse. I knew I was going to run out of money and I knew Chevaliers made money by participating in tourneys, so I followed the rumors of a tourney to Somfaux and well..." his voice trailed off in the dark.

"I see," Louis said, "Well, let's get some sleep. Tomorrow we will see to your lodgings and then take stock of what I can do to repay my debt."

He felt more than saw the young man nod.

"Thank you, Louis," he said with a note of relief.

"No, my boy," Louis replied, "Thank you. I'll only count us square once I've helped you ... reach safety."

He hoped the boy didn't hear the hesitation in his voice, but he had no intention of sending the youth home on a road quite likely staked out by assassins. Tomorrow would be soon enough to discuss that with Lupe though.

## Glossary

### Magic

#### Sang Sorcellerie

The forbidden art of magic fueled by the spilling of human blood.

#### Dusang

An ability inherited in certain bloodlines which allows practitioners to do amazing things, like block every incoming sword blow in attack or kill a man with a tiny cut through which all the blood is drawn.

For a Child of the Blood to be able to use their *Dusang* abilities, they must undergo the *Trails of Dusang*, a test unique to each bloodline. If the child survives the Trails, their ability to use their House's *Dusang* is unlocked. If they fail, they die.

*The Trail of Dusang* is typically undertaken between the ages of ten and fourteen.

#### Habi

An ability to push a physical skill just that little bit further so that it becomes a near magical ability. Inherited through Consang bloodlines and unlocked through training. Examples include:

- Aramon: The ability to cling to a rockface or a wall with minimal handholds, seemingly able to almost run up a surface
- Bondu: A leap of prodigious proportions
- Fantôme: The ability to stand so still that body seems to blend into the surrounding shadows and become part of them.
- Framír: The ability to slow down the furious pace of combat and perceive the perfect place to land a blow.
- Ouïr: The ability to still one's heart and mind and use one's ears as eyes, perceiving that which hidden by obstacles to sight.

## Life in the Empire

### The Civics Guild

A mercantile guild that is loosely associated with the *Rechtshus*. It is partially funded by taxes and partially funded through activities like tolling bridges and ferries. Its duties include ensuring that their torches lit in the streets after dark and that a town's roads are kept navigable.

### Rechtshus

The courthouse and jail in each town. If the town is large enough, it will also have a separate *Vachstall* which is where the town guard operates out of. The town guard is maintained and operated by the *Rechtshus*. In addition to normal guardsmen, the *Rechtshus* will also sometimes appoint a few *Furannes*. These men and woman investigate crimes and act as lieutenants for the *Rechtsprecher*.

The *Rechtshus* is financed partially through taxes, partially through levying fees from shopkeepers and homeowners who want their districts patrolled and partially through fines issued for minor crimes.

## Rechtsprecher

Judges and interpreters of the laws. The *Rechtsprechers* are by tradition always female and must have successfully born and raised a child till the age of five. There must always be one *Rechtsprecher* for every ten thousand persons who inhabit a Barony or at least one per Barony.

Should a *Rechtsprecher* post stand empty, the local lord selects ten candidates among the woman who qualify for the post. The people of the Barony then vote and the woman with the most votes becomes the new *Rechtsprecher* for life.

## Money

The primary monetary unit of the Empire is the silver dime, called either a silver or a dime or silver dime.

The lower denomination of coin, the copper penny, is mostly used by the working poor and subsistence farmers.

The higher denomination, the gold noble, is used only by the rich. Nobles, merchants, high ranking guild members will often think in gold, but a peasant could live their whole lives and never see a gold noble.

Ten copper pennies go into a silver dime, ten silver dimes into a gold noble.

It is common practice to transport wealth as gems rather than coins if transporting great sums of money for some distance. The Gemcutter guild will turn gold into gems and gems back into a gold for a modest fee. For a slightly higher fee, they will even transport the wealth on your behalf and guarantee its safe arrival.

## People

- *Venée*: Mercenary soldiers whose given word is their bond. They do not switch sides and if they take your money, they will see the job completed, whatever the job might be.
- *Lacache*: Hidden Blades, assassins generally in the employ of nobles.
- *Sollies*: Servants who earn a weekly wage and are considered either unskilled or semi-skilled labor
- *Maitombre*: Shadow Master, a person who oversees the more shadowy activities of a guild or noble house.
- *Souvee*: Slang for thieves, murders, people who walk on the wrong side of the law

## Fauna & Flora

- *Svamma*: A rare poisonous mushroom used in making dye
- *Nappan*: An exceptionally large scorpion like creature. It is extremely rare as it is considered both a pest and dangerous.

## Expressions

- *Rattvis Bit*: An expression meaning that the trade was a good one in the eyes of the speaker, a fair trade that satisfied honor's requirements.

## Time

### One Day

A day is divided into 12 *taperions* which is a length of time that it takes for a taper candle to burn down one of the eight marks along its length.

### One Week

The week is dived into a week of seven days:

1. Lundri
2. Mardi
3. Mercdri
4. Jurdri
5. Vendri
6. Samdri
7. Dimdri

### One Year

The year is considered to start on the Winter Equinox.

The year is divided into four season, each centered around their Equinox.

Dates in a year is generally listed as to the season, which week in the season it is, starting count from the seasonal equinox and then the year of the Claudin

## Religion

### Viero

The religious philosophy of the Empire which is centered about the Wheel of Life that each person rides, life after life, until they finally manage to achieve a state of Lumiar and join the Ancestors in watching over the people of the Empire.

### Sabroch

A sand garden sometimes found in temples which a supplicant may rake while meditating on the Ancestors and the life the supplicant has led and the lives that were lived before.

All contemplation gardens in temples have a central alter where incense may be burned while meditating. If the garden is also a *Sabroch*, the supplicant must at a minimum remove their footsteps after they complete their meditations.

### Traverou

A relationship between two people that is considered to have started in a previous cycle of the wheel.

## Gambling

### Majard

A tavern where games of chance are played as the major form of entertainment. All taverns have some games, but mostly these games are just between patrons of the tavern. In a Majard hall, there are always games and the tavern staff organize the games.

### Venun

A card game where the faces of the cards of a player may go no higher than twenty-one. The player at the table with the hand closest to twenty-one wins hand.

### Prenur

A card game played between four to six players where the players bid on how many hands they will win. The winning bid sets the trump suite of the round. The round is won by the player who takes the most hands of the round.

### Dreima

A dice game where three dice is rolled by each player in at the table. If the dice come up “three sides”, that is, all three dice are the same, this is the best result, otherwise the highest roll wins. If there are two three sides rolls, the highest of the two wins.

### Numwa

A dice game where one dice roller, the felwurf, rolls five dice. Players bet on:

1. Gesam Bet: the total of the five dice
2. Kombi Bet: what combinations will exist on the dice faces, e.g. double 2s
3. Eizen Bet: the individual dice faces.
4. Lycklig Bet: combining all three bets into one. This is very rarely a successful bet.