

PROLOGUE

It is given to every man to live not one life but many—until his spirit comes to understand the great truth that lies behind the Wheel.

Wisdom of Viero

Gaspard sawed at the reins of his horse. The young palfrey had taken fright and raced through the forest, leaving Gaspard's betrothed and the other hunters far behind. Bit between its teeth, the horse leaped over a fallen log. Steel-shod hooves hammered into the ground, disturbing a boar digging furrows in the soil.

Gray fur curdled, baring long tusks as the beast lifted its maw. Gaspard dug his heels into the horse's flank, but the treacherous footing gave way beneath them. A terrible scream tore from the palfrey as it collapsed to the forest floor. Gaspard jerked clear of the stirrups and tumbled from the saddle, landing hard, but on his feet.

His breath froze in his lungs. The boar's eyes shone crimson. The beast whirled and lunged at the struggling palfrey.

Scrabbling for his sword, Gaspard backed away. His slender duelist blade would be of little use here, but some weapon served better than none.

Yellow tusks gored into the horse's belly and it thrashed sharp hooves against the berry bushes, shredding ripe fruit with its death throes.

The red-eyed monster lifted its blood-flecked maw, scenting the air, and Gaspard braced himself. His marriage was only a week away. He would not die here.

The huge boar stank to the heavens, hot breath steaming in the morning air. Mane flaring upright, the beast snorted, powerful hindquarters bunching, cloven hooves digging into the churned loam.

Surely his huntmaster had heard the shriek of his dying horse. Gaspard only needed to survive until they found him. He put his back to a tree and brought his sword up into the guard position.

The boar charged.

A desperate dive almost cleared the beast, but a searing pain ripped across his hip—a glancing blow from the tusks shredding hunting leathers and flesh alike. The spray of splinters and crack of wood punctuated a brief halt to the boar's charge.

The copper taste of blood ghosted in Gaspard's mouth as he drew on his elämä. Power flooded his mind, manifesting as a shaft of light gathering in his hands as he brought dusang magic to bear. He flared the incandescent spear at the boar, hoping to blind the beast and signal the hunt. The animal scraped its head against the ground, whining in protest.

Did his eyes deceive him or did the boar's crimson gaze clear?

The salty scent of blood soaked into the clearing and dark shadows flitted through the summer leaves. The boar's muzzle rose, its eyes as red as the gules tassel of Gaspard's sash.

Flooding what remained of his elämää into his legs, Gaspard fled. The Talten River forked no more than fifty paces ahead. If he could put water between himself and the boar, he would stretch the wick of his candle enough for the hunt to catch up.

Lifting his arms as a meagre protection against the lashing branches and slashing ferns, he raced through the forest, gritting his teeth against the pain in his hip.

His foot caught on a root, and he barely turned a clumsy fall into a controlled roll. The tassels of his ducal sash caught on a branch, jerking him back as he tried to rise. He ripped himself free, leaving the sash behind.

What else would be lost today?

Snorting its rage, the boar crashed through the undergrowth behind him. Thoughts of the future deserted Gaspard, and he ran. He broke clear of the trees crowding the top of the small cliff that bordered the river fork and hurtled over the edge, legs and arms windmilling. Breath burst from him as he struck the water and plunged down into the green depths.

Clamping his mouth closed against the burning needs of his lungs, he kicked for the surface. The water still held the chill of spring and ate hungrily at the strength in his muscles, even though summer had come to the land.

He surfaced and looked back, gasping.

The boar stood atop the cliff, snorting in the wind. Gaspard gave a shaky, relieved laugh and between gulping breaths, struck out for the riverbank. He paused mid stroke. Despite the freshness of the fast-flowing stream, the tang of blood filled the air. Trying to identify the source of the smell, he struggled against the current, paddling strokes turning him in a slow circle.

An elemental roar jerked his gaze upstream. A wall of water bore down on him, gray-green and crowned with blood-red foam.

Like the boar's crimson gaze.

Gaspard scrambled for the bank. Kicking and yelling, he thrust his feet at the muddy bottom, seeking purchase. He stretched for the shore, fingertips touching reeds and scattering dragonflies.

The wave broke over him, pounding him down, tumbling him into the stones of the riverbed. His vision waned as breath escaped his lungs.

The sweet tang of blood still flooded his senses, even as his body surrendered the battle for life.

CHAPTER ONE

Claudin, he who was the first Emperor, gave to each noble who entered his Imperial Alliance the gift of dusang. So it was that every noble who sought to rise to the princely offices was required to survive the Trials of Dusang and prove their worthiness for the Sash.

The Tales of Claudin

Louis eeled through a knot of shoppers, the spicy scent of fried onions tantalizing his tastebuds. His belly reminded him that it had been a while since breakfast, but he ignored the faint pangs of hunger. He had a job to finish. The incomplete task lingered in his right pocket—a squishy reminder—but it would wait while he browsed the stalls. Before he completed his business in Lumeaux, he wanted to buy a gift for his daughter.

Bright colored cloth awnings shaded the trestle tables of the vendors, their raucous calls and emotional bargaining points raising a clangor louder than a battlefield. The ripe fragrance of too many bodies packed together formed the undertone for every other scent in the square.

Although Lumeaux boasted many permanent shops these days, Marketday's popularity endured with the smaller artisans, and Louis enjoyed the traditional bazaar. He stopped before a woodcarver's stall and touched a small bird dangling from the awning. A cunning string allowed the bright blue wings to flap when pulled, the red body remaining still on the suspending twine.

"A toy for your child?" the vendor asked, a carpenter's journeyman badge strung on a plain ribbon around his neck.

"Yes. For my daughter." Louis touched the black beak, and the bird twisted on the string, a red painted eye flashing at him. "It's a bluron?"

"Aye, I thought it might amuse some noble." The journeyman held out his hand, fingers splayed. "Not that I won't sell it to you, mind."

"Aren't they bigger?"

The journeyman heaved a doleful sigh, hair flopping into his eyes. "That much wood is expensive. But it would make a good gift for a girl. How old is she?"

"Eight." The corners of Louis' lips lifted and he touched the red body of the bird, so reminiscent of the hair color he shared with Loysa.

"Perfect size for an eight-year-old." An ingratiating grin accompanied the words.

Louis thrust his hand into his left pocket and brought out his money pouch. He avoided the right pocket with its soggy package.

"How much?"

The man squinted and ran his thumb over the tips of his fingers. "Two shekels."

Should he take up the offer to bargain? No. He had a job to finish. "Fine."

He paid over the coin, and the journeyman wrapped the wooden bird in a scrap of cloth. Louis slid the gift under his doublet and into his heart pocket with a tender smile. He thanked the journeyman and strode on through the market.

The broad thoroughfare spilled into the warehouse district and the smile dropped from his face. Three streets down, he turned into the alley next to the dilapidated shop where the cheap side merchant, Beryl, ran her business in second-hand goods.

The buildings crowded close here, eaves meeting overhead, casting deep shadows. Old beer and more noisome liquids splashed against his boots, but Louis ignored the stench. He retreated to the enclosing wall at the dead-end side and crouched down behind a broken barrel.

Long years of discipline stilled his breath, and he found the fourth beat of his heart. That life-giving rhythm led his mind down through blood and bones, and he reached for the core strength of his elämä. Dusang allowed him to gather the shadows to his hands, and the quiet darkness licked along his arms.

Magic sucked him out of the alley and into the shadow realm. The cold slipperiness of that not-place clawed against his mind. Intent focus guided him to the location he had scouted the day before, and the icy blackness faded.

As the world reformed around him, he held himself frozen in the same crouched posture, heart pumping. But he had judged his target right—the strongroom was empty.

Dim light filtered in through the chunky keyhole and under the door, just enough illumination to see by. On soft feet, Louis padded to the table in the center of the room. Outside, a shop bell rang—some thief coming to fence his take with Beryl, no doubt. Louis ignored their voices, extracting the package from his right-hand pocket.

The leather wrapping around the eyeballs squished under his fingers, soggy with the blood of his victim. Two steel rings tumbled out of the package, their plain bands stained crimson.

From the other pocket, he drew a clean azure cloth made of the finest silk. The eyeballs of the thief, resting atop the heraldic shade, would serve as the merchant's warning. Laroche Duchy did not tolerate thieves, nor those who bought diamonds stolen from the Winter Lady.

He cleared a spot near the center of the table and draped the cloth just so, positioning the eyeballs on the steel rings he had cut off the thief's fingers.

The shop bell dinged again, and the wooden floor creaked under heavy footsteps.

Louis pulled in his elämä, and blackness folded around him as the weighty tumblers of the lock clanked. The slippery darkness of the shadow realm spat him out in the alley again, and he leaned against the wall. The fetid reek of the dank space assaulted him, making it harder to hold the contents of his stomach down.

Using his dusang magic twice left his hands trembling and his head spinning. He waited for the stars in his vision to clear before pushing off the wall and strolling out of the alley into the broad thoroughfares of Lumeaux.

The flow of people swept him away from the warehouse district and toward his current residence—Anchor's Rock Inn. Louis did not fight the traffic, keeping his pace even and blending with the crowd.

A thunderous wail of trumpets jammed up the road at the sash docks, and high banners peeked over the sea of heads. The stag of Etendulat Duchy pranced proudly on the gilt silk, but black lace edged the cloth.

A family death?

Louis wormed through the throng, using his shoulders to good effect. A bard rode at the head of the procession, his booming voice reverberating against the wooden buildings as he announced the death of Gaspard, Duke of Etendulat. Behind him rode a crew of nobles on tall horses, their gilt sashes edged with mourning black lace. In their midst rode a young woman with the argent sash of Treval, her eyes red-rimmed in a pale face.

Hadn't the duke been betrothed?

The procession vanished around a corner, and the trumpets wailed again. No doubt the bard would repeat his message over and over, on the way to the Marion Palace looming over Lumeaux from the high terraces.

Louis let the crowd's flow take him once more, his eyebrows knotting together. Duke Gaspard had been the last of his line to pass the Trials of Dusang. Without an heir, what would happen to the ducal sash of Etendulat?

His meandering steps ended at the door to Anchor's Rock, hanging askew on its leather hinges. He slipped up the stairs, ignoring the overflowing taproom. A pounding in his head warned him that his body had not yet recovered from the strain of using dusang.

Falling more than sitting, he lay back on the thin straw pallet. The bird in his pocket knocked against his heart and he reached for it, but his bloody fingers made him pause. He levered himself up and hefted the clay jug from the rickety stand in the corner. Soap would be nice, but in this inn, he'd have to settle for a rinse.

He extracted the bird with clean hands and pulled a red handkerchief with green edging out of his pack. His lips curved into a smile as he ran the cloth through his fingers. His daughter had given it to him as a parting gift.

It's red like our hair, Pappa. And green like your eyes.

With this mission completed, he could return to the north at last. He pulled the string on the wooden bird and made the wings flap.

Loysa would love it.

In the dim light trickling through the closed shutters, he could almost imagine an autumn afternoon in the forest with her small hand curled into his.

A high-pitched screech startled him out of his reverie. A bluron bird? In the poor quarters of Lumeaux?

He stuffed the handkerchief into his pocket and opened the shutters to see who merited receiving a message by bird here.

Crimson claws gouged into his windowsill, red eyes glinting in the morning light. The bluron shrieked its hunger at Louis, black beak gaping as it scented for its prey. Red and blue wings flapped, half-extended as it sought balance on the awkward perch. The bluron lunged forward, sharp upper mandible seeking soft flesh.

It was here for him.

Louis stepped backward, giving the bluron space to navigate its bulky body through the window. The bird ducked its feathered head, hopping through and landing on the bed. Talons clenched on the thin gray blankets and unblinking red eyes stared at Louis.

With a sigh, he unsheathed his dagger. The bird's blood-scent would not reset until it fed from his veins. Bluron could find anyone whose blood they had consumed, and they made excellent messenger birds—for those who could afford the cost of rearing and training them.

Louis sliced open a shallow cut on his left arm and sat down next to the bluron. It climbed onto his lap, mouth gaping open, beak plunging down. The sack-like lower mandible clamped onto the wound and the bird's tongue tickled along Louis' flesh.

Talons tightened on his leg, but Louis ignored the flash of pain as he unstrapped the wooden messenger tube from the red-and-blue back. Silver buckles held the hood to the leather harness, swaying up and down as the bird sucked at the wound. Louis pulled his arm forward to make the bluron stretch its neck. The bird lifted its beak, and he slipped the hood over the white feathered head.

With the bird taken care of, Louis turned his attention to the tube. No sigil interrupted the plain dark wood of the cylinder, but his slender fingers found a small, raised mark at the bottom. A tiny snake, no bigger than his fingertip.

A message by bird from Herself.

He unscrewed the lid and extracted the thin strips of tightly rolled paper. She had encoded it, of course. He dug out his cipher book and started to decrypt.

The final message made Louis check his work again. The stark command did not change.

The Blood Gate is threatened by the ambitious of Baron Tybalt du Mamel of Somfaux. Kill him and destroy his name and line. None with a claim to his sash may remain.

In Somfaux, investigate rumors of sang sorcellerie. If the rumors hold true, deal with the situation as appropriate.

Louis read the curt note again, then struck a sparker against his bootheel and burned both sheets of paper. He leaned back on the straw pallet, hands behind his head.

Somfaux was the nexus of the river barge trade network due to its position in Etendulat Duchy. And Etendulat had just lost its duke, with no clarity as to how a new one would be appointed.

Louis grimaced. He did not want to go to Somfaux. The baron had a wife, and if he remembered rightly, a child. He did not want to kill a child.

The red handkerchief in his pocket called him home.

Laroche's long summer days were already gone, but autumn lingered in his home duchy, orange leaves drifting past dark trunks. If he left now, he could be settled before the first snow. He wanted to enjoy the fleeting northern days and be snug and warm during the long Winter Dark.

But what he wanted was of little concern. If the Blood Gate opened, Aspidmalla would suck the life from the world. What was one family against that risk?

"If wishes were horses, beggars would ride." He said the words out loud just to hear someone speak as he made peace with his plans being changed for him.

Again.

A quick shove with his toe pushed his battered hat case out from under the shabby bed. He had packed the hats for Lumeaux and the assassination of a merchant. Somfaux and a noble target offered a fresh set of challenges, but the hats would have to do. The command had been sent by bird, the urgency was clear.

Investigate rumors of sang sorcellerie.

Louis shuddered and made the sign of the Wheel against his chest. In public, anyone would tell you that the art of blood magic had died with the trollkarls, but dark whispers spoke of forbidden practices passed from master to apprentice in crimson secrets.

Herself would not send him unless she believed some of the rumors. At least this part of his mission he could execute with a light heart. No one should live under the bloody paw of a trollkarl.

A small leather pouch peeked out of the upper pocket of the hat case, and he extracted it with respect due to his liege. It held Herself's blood-crystals. He'd send the bird back to her and acknowledge the order.

It was that or repudiate his family and honor both.

He pulled the red handkerchief from his pocket and laid it in the pride of place among his hats. It gleamed between their muted colors, shining as bright as Loyssa's face every time he came home. He laid the wooden bird atop the handkerchief.

"I'll be back as soon as I can." Saying the promise out loud gave it more weight.

The lock clicked as he closed the case. He had a long way to go and much to do.

CHAPTER TWO

A river barge brings you goods that come from far away

A river man rides a barge from home to far away

Iselra to Somfaux, a canal takes you there

Iselra to Somfaux, the canals were dug fair

Somfaux to Claudin's lake, drifting on the water

Somfaux to Ewart Town, spill in ocean broader

A river barge brings you goods that come from far away

A river man rides a barge from home to far away

The River Barge Way

Louis picked up the triangular felt cap and ran a thumb over the bright red feather. It belonged to Lorens, but that thief had no place here. The contents of his hat case lay strewn on the bed as he tried to decide who should visit the marketplace of Somfaux.

Setting the cap aside, he worked his way through the rest of the hats, probing their brims and crowns for damage. Satisfied that they had survived the long river barge journey from Lumeaux intact, he brooded over them. Each possessed a unique personality, and he evaluated them against his intentions to visit the marketplace, trying to choose the right identity.

The brown canvas cap of the everyday peasant would be fine if he needed everyday talk, but there would be more interesting information to be had today.

He could go as a merchant. The baggy hat's velvet cap crumpled a little as he lifted it. A merchant with a fat purse, looking to change gold to light, easily transported goods.

Perched on the edge of the bed, he rubbed his palm over the soft fabric. The blue lace band would hide his green eyes, always a useful detail.

This cap belonged to Leno, an established identity that Louis had used often in the south. Somfaux would be new ground for that scoundrel, but he suited the chaos threatening Etendulat.

Yes. He would take Leno to the market. Rising, he packed the other hats away and dug through his canvas pack for a brocade doublet. His gray traveler's cloak disguised the rich cloth, and he locked the door behind him.

Chilly autumn drafts swirled about his legs as he made his way downstairs, the merchant's cap hidden in the side-sack slung across his shoulder.

The morning candle had burned out by the time he entered the common room, and Nina, the barmaid, placed a candle on the spike of the plain wooden time board. She lit the day candle with a sparker and greeted him with a coquettish smile, a strand of blond hair escaping from her bun to curl golden against her brown cheek.

She had flirted with him last night as well, and he assumed she padded her pockets by entertaining the patrons of the inn horizontally. He smiled back at her, letting her know with just a touch of a leer that he'd be interested in buying her attention.

"Breakfast for you then?" she said. "To restore you some after your long journey?"

"Yes, thank you."

She sauntered off to the kitchen, hips swaying in an enticing fashion that widened his smile and brought a rush of blood to his loins.

Louis ate the uninspiring breakfast, washing the day-old bread, yellow cheese, and watery porridge down with cider. While equally dull, dinner the previous night had at least contained some unidentified gray meat.

He waved goodbye to Nina and left through the front door, leaving his horse safely stabled behind the inn.

The street that held the Silver Leaf Inn reeked of refuse and stale beer. Close to the ornamental walls embracing Somfaux, it played host to beggars, day-laborers and farmers selling what produce remained after paying their taxes. But its denizens could at least look down on those who lived on the dingy paths crisscrossing the shantytown that had sprung up outside the walls.

Across from the door hunkered a weather-beaten barrel, a red-rimmed eye peering out through a broken plank. The beggar called Mole had accosted Louis the previous night, and he had promised the man a coin today.

A grime-stained head poked out of the burrow and the man swayed forward, holding out a trembling hand, fingers half curled. Louis stopped and dug out an ein.

"Get yourself a bite to eat." He offered the small copper-colored coin to the man. Beggars could be useful if properly sweetened over time and this one lived right on his doorstep.

Mole offered a gap-toothed grin, and the coin vanished under his filthy smock. "I be thanking ye." He slurred the words, either drunk already or not yet sober.

As Mole vanished back into his barrel, Louis walked on through the narrow streets, strewn with the refuse of life, to the town's biggest market. He slipped into a quiet alley close to the square and stripped off the travelers' cloak, revealing the blue doublet with seed pearl buttons. The cloak went into the sack, the hat came out.

Settling Leno's baggy cap on his head, he pulled it to a jaunty angle on his crown, tip hanging to one side. He touched his purse and his heart, closing out the world. Following the fourth beat of his heart, he reached inward and tapped on the core strength of his elämä.

He held the hot power steady inside himself and imagined Leno's face overlaying his own, utilizing the habi technique called masq. As he released the magic, bones shifted, forcing his visage to a leaner shape. The power darkened his skin and smoothed out the slant of his eye sockets, disguising his northern heritage.

As he touched the soft merchant's hat, his well-disciplined mind boxed up Louis into a quiet corner, and he remembered—knew—who he was.

Leno the Merchant walked out of the alley that Louis the Traveler had entered.

Leno took a deep breath and smiled at the sight of the bustling marketplace. He had not been to Somfaux Town before, but how could he not revel in the opportunity to explore the heart of the Empire's barge routes.

Calling Somfaux a town made a mockery of the word. The network of canals that connected it to Iselra made it a hub of commercial activity. The wharves and warehouses of Somfaux never slept, and goods flowed through the town in a vast river of wealth.

Near enough to a million people called Somfaux home, but no sash-wearing noble would call it a city. Not that the word quibbles of nobles mattered to Leno, not when there was coin to be made.

Leno strolled past the still sparse permanent shops that dotted the edges of the market square and headed for the temporary wood-and-cloth stalls where farmers and guildsmen hawked their wares.

He browsed the stalls, learning names and faces, getting acquainted with the jewelers, the gem cutters, and the traders in the rare and exotic.

He ignored the farmers and common craftsmen. As a merchant known to deal in valuable commodities, he had a reputation to maintain.

The chatty morning left his throat dry, and Leno sought a street vendor selling wine by the measure. Oddly, the first few vendors he tried wouldn't speak to him after he asked for wine, though they seemed to have kegs of beer.

At last, he found a man with a wineskin slung over his shoulder. Leno fished out a wooden mug from his side-sack and passed over an ein. The man tipped the skin forward and faded red liquid gurgled from the mouth.

"Good day to you, friend." Leno saluted the man with the cup and knocked the drink back. The sour liquid rankled on the back of his tongue, watery and bitter. Ignoring the taste, he swallowed and paid for a refill. "I'm new in town. Is it always this busy on Marketday?"

"Today be a little busier than most," the vendor said. "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?" Leno raised his eyebrows.

"Well now, you know His Grace, Duke Gaspard, died and him having no heir to take on the sash?"

"Aye, so I heard."

"Well, the Emperor, he moved an army into Iselra."

Leno's fingers went limp, and he nearly dropped the mug. "He did what?"

"Aye." The wine seller nodded, laying a finger against his nose. "The bards announced it was on account of protecting the harvest, what with us having no duke around. And then other dukes, they didn't take it well. So now we got armies on all the borders of Etendulat." He shook his head and poured himself a mug. "It be a terrible business."

Leno thought the man might be underselling the scale of the catastrophe. Etendulat's wheat fields fed half the Empire. War horses charging over the harvest would cause a disaster not seen in living memory.

"That doesn't explain why Countess Yolanda is visiting Somfaux," Leno said.

"Well, it's because we know we need a new duke or them armies are going to carve us up. So the counts, they be getting ready for one of them to trade their murray sash for a purple one." The wine seller rubbed his finger and thumb together. "War is expensive and Somfaux is rich. She's here to be making sure that Baron Tybalt is still steady in his oath."

"You think it will come to war?" Leno stepped aside to let two workmen with a bulky load pass. "Surely not!"

"No one rightly knows."

Ducal war without and civil war within—the situation in Etendulat had certainly grown fraught while he traveled.

Leno rubbed his finger along his chin. Yolanda's visit held potential for him, and he marked this thought for later consideration.

"I'll hold out for peace." He extended his mug for another shot of the inferior vintage. "Tell me, friend, why is it that the beer sellers wouldn't even direct me to you when I asked for wine?"

"The guilds be feuding." The man's brows knitted together in a glum frown. "It's fearful bad for business. Not all the taverns have taken a side yet, but they surely will if it carries on."

"Bad news indeed," Leno said. "At least the harvest was good."

"Aye, but it serves for naught if the guilds be making us all pick a side or the nobles be taking it all for war." The vendor swallowed a glass of his own wine with a grimace. "Naught to be done. Maybe my next ride on the Wheel will be in less exciting times, eh?"

"As you say! Thank you for the wine, friend."

He returned to browsing the market's wares and introduced himself to a man with a gemcutter's badge and an eclectic but high-quality set of gems on display.

"Leno?" The man stroked his chin. "Did you do business with Byran the Jeweler from Bronbad?"

"I did indeed, a few years ago."

"He speaks highly of you. Got an emerald from him that he got from you, or so he said. He's one of my main customers, travels here from Bronbad twice a year to trade in gems. I am Jacqui, Master Gemcutter."

"Good to meet you," Leno said with a smile.

He spoke to Jacqui about the quality of gems in the Somfaux region 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's chest puffed out. "All of them buy their gems from me."

"That makes sense to me." Leno buffed his nails on the blue doublet. "Any gemcutter who deals with Byran has the quality fit for a duke."

"I thank you." Jacqui inclined his head in a small bow.

“And what of Countess Yolanda? Is she a frequent visitor?”

“Not so frequent. Chamdor has its own guilds, small though it may be.” He sniffed, waving a dismissive hand. “I have heard, though, that the baron is looking to purchase a gift for the countess. Something to welcome her to Somfaux and perhaps something to prove his loyalty.”

“Would she welcome a gift from a merchant?” Leno arched his brows in inquiry. “If she rises to the purple sash, I would appreciate her patronage. Iselra is well within my travels.”

“She might, though I don’t know how much stock I put in her reaching for the sash.” Jacqui tugged at a velvet pocket showing off a large pearl on his table. “She’s getting on in years, so it would be her son who truly becomes duke. If it came to that, he’d lead the armies. Only in Treval would they expect a woman to take the field herself. Here, we do not expect such things from our mothers and daughters.”

“Naturally not.” Leno adjusted his sack, playing his fingers along the strap. Could there be conflict between Countess and Baron? “What if it’s the other way around? Could the baron be seeing himself rise to duke?”

“I don’t believe so.” Jacqui dismissed the idea with another wave. “Baron to duke is a long step and there are many with a more decorated sash than he. Now, would you like to see the merchandise?”

Jacqui presented an exquisite assortment of gemstones, and Leno ended up buying a few choice pieces, a sapphire and two opals well 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.



Louis returned to the Silver Leaf Inn after lunch, once again wearing his gray cloak, Leno’s hat safely stored in the side-sack.

The Silver Leaf’s common room occupied a single large space filled with rough wooden benches. Rushes a day or two too old covered the floor, limp and squeaky underfoot. Off to the left, through an open doorway, lay the smoky interior of the taproom where the serious drinking happened. At the back of the common room, a stairway led up to the second story, and the cramped confines of the rooms to rent.

Through a dark curtain that partly shielded the way into the kitchen, Louis could see Jenkin, the proprietor of the inn. Gleaming with sweat, a bald head crowned his lanky frame. A frown marred his amiable face as he spoke to a bulky man with a baggy hat.

The hat had a square band with a tasseled tuft that spilled from a floppy peak in a manner that reminded Louis of a scholar’s cap. The bright blue felt complimented the man’s brocade tunic—a deep wine-red patterned in bronze, buttons glittering in the firelight from the kitchen ovens. Jenkin handed over a small pouch with the telltale bulge of coins, his defeated expression speaking to a sour contract.

Louis turned his gaze away and headed to the taproom to find a seat by the bar. Five workmen played dice for einars in the corner. A friendly game of dreima, no doubt.

By the bar, a farmer, his wife and their two strapping lasses waited for the evening meal, nursing tankards of beer. Judging by the travel dust on their clothes, they had arrived in town earlier in the day with their harvest.

Next to them lounged a man wearing the badge of the players guild. Gray hair and a paunch precluded him from being an acrobat and he lacked an instrument. Not a jongleur then, more likely a magsman here to offer his stories. Another guildsman stood beside him, this one with a journeyman's badge from the cobblers guild.

Nina worked the taproom, her strawberry blond hair shining in the candlelight. For just a flicker of the candle, a vision swam before Louis' eyes. Green meadows stretched in his imagination and Nina picked golden daffodils in a fragrant bouquet. He shook his head, dismissing the momentary fancy, and paid for a beer.

Her hand lingered on his as she took payment and he smiled, leaning back against the bar, opening his stance. Not only would she be a welcome distraction, but she might also be a very useful source of information. He folded his fingers through hers for just a flicker as he took the mug.

The bulky man, who had been shaking Jenkin down, came striding into the taproom like he owned the place. He paused at the entrance and surveyed the room with narrow eyes. A nod to the guildsmen drew wary nods in return—their heads turned, eyes averted.

The big man's gaze drifted over the farmers in clear dismissal and slid past the dice players to settle on Louis. He bared his teeth in a smirk and bore down on the bar.

Louis shrank, cowering behind raised arms, playing the part of a farm lad in the big city.

"You're in my seat," the man growled menacingly.

"I don't want no trouble." Louis slipped off the stool. "I didn't know it was your seat." He thickened his speech with the sharp local accent. "Lemme jus' move."

He wondered if the man would take it further, but the big fellow sat down with a satisfied grin. Louis moved to the other end of the bar and waited for Nina to come by.

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

"That's Farin," she whispered. "It be good you gave him the seat." She leaned toward him. "Jenkin pays him a bit to make sure we don't get no trouble here. Farin runs a gang of bully boys and..." She hesitated a flicker and then breathed the rest into Louis' ear. "Some say he knows about dark and bloody things." She glanced around, her eyes shifting to Farin. "I'll just be fetching you another beer, then."

Louis watched her go, his mind very far from her buxom bottom. Dark and bloody things...would Nina reveal more in private? He glanced furtively at Farin. Left strictly alone by the other patrons, the man drank and left without paying.

Leaning on the counter, Louis sipped at his beer. Somfaux had a few interesting threads to pull. The guild war and a visit to the castle seemed the most promising.