

# My Brother, My Killer

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## Chapter One: A Long Way From Home

“Go ahead, finish it! End my wretched life of misery and pain.” His grating and deep voice boomed through the tent of leathery hides. In his eyes burned a fiery madness, -the kind only the corrupt gods can invoke- but deep inside the turmoil of his warring pupil lay a deeper emotion: a begging weariness. From within the cage of his former life it looked as if he was pleading for mercy. The young knight hesitated, torn between his own sanity and adrenalin-fuelled anger. Is this man, my brother, really devoured by the corruption? Shall I never again see his calm smile? Is the gentleness of his eyes truly devoured by evil? His heart had become a stone just mere hours ago, bent on the destruction of this terror. The grotesque mutations, granted by the fearsome power of pestilence, had deformed that smile into a grim mass of flesh, boils and rotten teeth. The one eye not overgrown by a green pus, was bloodshot and dotted with darkish blue and purple spots; it most certainly held no gentleness. The torture of this shell of despair could be ended right here, right now, by his righteous hand but somewhere deep within, hidden beneath the layers of decaying flesh, was the man he once knew, travelled with, respected. So he did what every man would do; his hand stayed. Can a man find true redemption for his greatest sins?

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From the entrance of the fiendish pavilion a silent witness watched as the man she once loved lay at sword tip on the ground, the handle held by the man her heart now belonged to. Whatever the outcome, a part of her would die today. Are there any true winners when fighting these powers? It's easy to discard these turned warriors as human, to demonise their existence and end their misery without a wink, a thought or a tear. In the end whoever this tainted creature was, once it was just a man or woman who had the misfortune to stray too far out of ignorance, guilt or sadness. The lure is just too great for us mere mortals. Once a father, a mother, a brother or sister. It's easy to freeze our emotions for these malignant beings when their face is an unknown one, their history not ours and their existence diminished to a passing event.

"Oh, brother, how did it come to this?" A lone tear ran down the young knight's cheek, more clouding his vision. "Speak to me once more, friend, for I long to hear that wisdom again. Pray, tell me, everything will be fine."

The creature grinned its wicked smile and its answer drove an icy and poisonous dagger in the knight's heart. "I ought to thank you, brother." The bloated shell stressed a lot of hatred and sarcasm in that last word before he continued. "Your betrayal threw me in the arms of the true gods, opened my eyes for the true powers. The truth: your treachery and hers made me embrace the pure forces of this world." It threw a baleful glance at the woman in the entrance who did not return the gaze but guilt-ridden averted her eyes from her former lover. "How does it feel to know what you really are? How does it..". The knight never gave the creature to finish its last sentence as the sword finally drove through the layers of pus, fat and flesh until it pierced its windpipe.

Instantly a change trespassed in the eye: it turned back to that sorrowful pearl the young knight had come to know. It is known that true redemption lies beneath that black veil of death. It is said that the last breath of the deceased hold truths and words to console or warn their beloved. Whatever monster he had become, now it were the words of a broken man, hackled by spasms of pain and gurgles of the nearing end. "And what can I tell you? My brother? My killer? What can I possibly say? I guess that I miss you. I guess I forgive you. I'm glad you stood in my way." A few more pathetic spasms and its eye turned upward, the nightmare no more. Whatever solace his last words would be in the years to come to the young knight, it made the entire situation worse at that moment. Tired of fighting, of losing and of the pain life gives us all, the once proud knight wept bitter tears for his fallen brother, memories fouling his attempts to regain his composure. How did it come to this?

## Chapter Two: Prologue to Destiny

A strong wind swept through the high grasses, the blades of green and flowers rustling in the quiet noon sun. The air was warm and smelled as spring ought to be: holding strongly unto that promise of summer with reborn youthful lands and soothing the threat of winter for its denizens. The sun had almost finished its descent, now doubting at the threshold of

the horizon, colouring the sky and scarce clouds in every kind of orange. A tranquil and serene landscape only disturbed by the passing presence of a single knight and his retinue. Astride his strong and proud warhorse, Simon Gastinois, kin to the ducal family of Gisoreux, had temporarily abandoned his ancestral forests in search for that which all knights who come of age, coveted but only a select few gained. Here in the flat and devoid of human life lands of Quenelles, Nicolas Pinsson had built his home out of wood and stone. A motte and bailey erected against the horizon, dominating the landscape from afar. Though he was barely nearing his thirtieth spring, Nicolas had chosen a hermit's life for reasons unknown to all save himself. Though the tongues of the envious credited his self-imposed solitude to a disfiguring wound which thereby hindered his skill, most agreed that he had become tired of the hundreds - maybe thousands - requests of every lord, high and low, to train his son in the noble arts of swordplay. Indeed most called the young swordmaster to be the reborn Landuin, that impressive was his skill with the blade, some even whispered that the noble and still untainted blood of Mousillon ran through his veins, descended directly of the fairest of the companions, claiming him to be the rightful heir of duchy. Whatever his reasons, Nicolas had fled the crowded halls of kings and dukes to this remote land of peace and seclusion.

Simon was more than an average fair lad, bright green eyes that shone as two perfect emeralds and long soft auburn hair which playfully whirled in the wind. Leanly built, his body hid his true strength. As a true chivalrous knight his mind was as pure as his physique, spiked with haughty grandeur - as befitted a youth -, and which had brought him here. However the epitome of the knightly ideal he was, his skill with the blade was decent at best and not up to the standard the young knight's mind was fixed on. Though he passed his errand with flying colours, he would not take pride in the accomplishment and immediately left the keep of his beloved father in search for a mentor which could guide his hand to perfection. True legends carve their own words in the stone of time. Simon had ever lived and trained by these words of wisdom of his father. A true hero isn't born but is a sacrifice: he must be ready to abandon his family and loved ones for the greater good, be prepared to lose them by the hand of the wicked and survive all which could be thrown at him in his path. In his mind Simon was more than ready than to take up that banner and become the paragon the land so dearly wished for but if he were to vanquish his relentless foe his skill with the blade needed to be invincible.

Only a few hundred yards to cross and he would finally meet the fabled knight which had perfected the king's hand, exercised with the great heroes of his youth and became the youngest guardian to be honoured to sip from the grail since Louis the Rash. His legacy was vast in spite of his young years: indeed it was widely known he looked no more than twenty cycles young and his vigour remained still at its peak. Simon was excited to take the next step: there was no doubt in that youthful head that Nicolas would be inflamed by his desire, struck as it were by his bright destiny and would agree where others had failed. Surely the Lady would inspire the weapon master to recognise his potential.

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Finally the small company crossed the wooden gate of the makeshift wall of tree trunks about seven feet high. Fleetly it crossed Simon's mind to pause and wonder about this provisional defences at best. Surely a legend can afford better? If not the king than some great lord of the land would support this great warrior? Or has She forbidden him luxury so not to poison his mind with trivial and earthly matter? Inside the gate a second surprise made the young knight wonder: it was indeed an odd sight to see not serfs but the refined hands of a noble take the reins of the horses. Silently these sons of other lords took their horses and led them to the stable to be groomed. Baffled Simon saw these knights do other simple tasks and maintenance around the small fort which he never before had seen handled by blood of a lord. They weren't even mere knights of low stature: indeed the young knight recognised several of liveries as renowned warriors of every corner of Bretonnia. Why are these men wasting time and breath on meaningless chores? Doesn't Nicolas have any commoners in employ? Or don't these fine examples of chivalry have some servants to chop wood, clean the stables or even cook? Dismayed Simon saw a knight stirring a bowl of stew, made from small game. By the descending darkness he could distinguish several other buildings as makeshift as the walls where other important camp business was concluded. A small wall of stacked stones lined a deep well with their fresh water supply.

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From the steep dug stairs, made from hardened ground, leading to the top of the hill where the young knight presumed the keep would be, he nimbly emerged. Nicolas was a rugged man with sharp and bright eyes peering underneath his bushy brows. His long, dark and unkempt hair covered his neck to his shoulders. Completely covering his chin and surrounding his mouth, a wild beard had grown since a couple of months. His muscular body betrayed to be capable of great feats of strength and endurance. In spite of his legendary skill with the sword, he didn't look as nimble and agile the stories had made him look. A man built as a mountain takes a lot of time to turn.

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While the living saint was still overlooking the scene, Simon addressed his hero in the words which he had been rehearsing in his mind for the entire journey. "Lord Pinsson, I humbly beg an audience with you. My name is Simon Gastinois, cousin to the ducal family of Gisoreux, blooded at the Battle of Ypres, satisfactorily fulfilling my errand in valour and glory in said field. Your renown has me riding this far to search for the fabled knight who single-handedly slew the Wyrm of Winternight and is called Landuin reborn by all." Anxiously and his heart thumping wild, Simon awaited his reply. His hand felt clammy in his gauntlets.

Those discerning eyes of the chivalrous incarnated had fixed on the young knight from the moment he addressed him, stern but with certain patience towards the youth. As soon as he had finished, his practised reply rolled off his tongue. It were the exact words he used every time: for indeed there had been no doubt to the why of the sudden visit of Simon. "Gisoreux is a long way for tale and hope, young one, even longer will your return be. I am sorry but I do not accept students anymore. I know what brought you here, hopes held high, just like the five others I receive every fortnight. Whether they were born high or low nobility, it makes no difference to me: every single one thinks they are chosen to be tutored by me. Return home, young warrior, fulfil your duty to your land and kin and leave the tales of legends to those who are damned to perform them." Nicolas turned and walked once again up the stairs, his shoulders tense, his hands clasped behind his back.

Somewhere hidden in his eager mind Simon had taken in account to be refused but the sudden and abruptness of the answer stunned him. Irritation born out of his young years took over as he sped up the stairs. The slowly mounting legend did not even turn around but kept his solemn pace. Nor did he challenge his burden with words but remained silent until Simon spoke to him, flushed and ireful. "That's all you have to say? You, sir, have barely laid your eyes on me for a heartbeat and you judged me already?"

"As I tried to explain before, there is no difference between those that bother me in my solitude." Nicolas made eye contact for a second before returning his attention to the stairs. In that small second Simon saw no arrogance and disrespect but gentle and somewhat tired eyes. They were certainly not the eyes of a man who had faced a demon of the abyss and lived to tell the tale. "Every time they arrive with the same haughty manner, heart stoned with their own greatness and virtue. Every time they get angered at my response, trying to challenge my experience and wisdom. Every time they haste their way from here not a bell later. Forgive me then that I lack the patience to answer each and every one of you at length."

"Even so, sir, it is custom to at least offer a fellow knight a warm bed and hot food for the evening at this hour." It was a cheap shot to question the man's chivalry. Cheap and unworthy but by now disillusion and anger had become his ill advisors.

Nicolas merely flinched a sad smile as he replied. "All of you also seem to think a man of my position should be holed up in a keep, dispensing wisdom to travellers. Once again I apologise, my young friend, but this is no fort but a chapel which I once built myself with nothing but my own hands and wit. I can offer you refuge for the night but nothing more." Simon stopped in his tracks as Nicolas pushed the two heavy doors open. Beyond stood no more than several wooden benches, facing the altar in the middle. In a far corner there lay the armour and shield Bretonnia had come to revere just as the ducal and royal ones: indeed the grail supported by a red rose on a black and white divide was a celebrated sight in every city and battlefield across the land. It was mind numbing to see that proud red rose so weathered and worn on his badly-kempt armour, dented as it was by misuse and partially as the paint chipped off his shield. Pinsson's eyes followed his younger peer's to the corner and his sad half-smile returned. "Let it never be said that a life of devotion and piety is an unrewarding one." One last stern look before he closed the doors fixed the youth's eyes. "But it certainly takes its toll."

When night falls in those lands, it quickly drains the last warmth to return to its hibernation. Huddled around the campfire, Simon drew his blanket close. He was welcome to rest safely and warm in the chapel but his proud mind forbade his tired body. His two squires remained his two silent guardians with their dull eyes. Didn't they care their master had been refused so quickly and definitely? If so their hearts are a closed book to my mind. The young knight sighed out of weariness, because of the cold and because of his sense of helplessness. Simon buried his face in his crossed arms as the starry sky wheeled overhead. In the depths of nowhere they seem ever more radiant, countless in an endless dance, too complicated for man's mind. Long fiery tears scarred that sky as the world of the gods looked down on their progeny. He had travelled many a mile to become that legend he had made himself believe in. In his best dreams he had imagined the long and heartening ballads the bard and minstrels of every court would have composed and sung. In fact the past month he seemed ready to face everything and anything as his confidence roared as a mighty lion. A Roar it might but when challenged it was but a mouse. His heart was heavy now as his anger subsided by more powerful and lingering emotions: shame and sadness. Challenge his honour? What in Lady's name had he been thinking? This was a man who had stood alone in the face of every peril man has ever faced in his young life and every single time he emerged victorious, his bravery and sword having cleared the path to the legends.

“Don’t worry, son, the worst has passed.” The sudden voice startled the train of thought of Simon as he turned his head to look upon the one who addressed him. The night obscured the stranger’s features but the knight’s heraldry betrayed him to be family to the castellan of Mont Vernoux but his specific heraldry rang no bell. “Mind if I join you?” The unknown knight sat down near the fire, not waiting for a reply from Simon. A silence ensued as the man warmed his hands by the fireplace. By the flickering light of flame Simon could now discern a man of middle age, no distinct features, a knight as any other. From the corner of his eye he noticed Simon was looking at him. “The name is Jean de Garlande. It be a surprise if you’ve heard of me.” Indeed, the name of the knight brought no memory forth. Simon awaited patiently for Jean to continue. “Been here ever since my sixteenth winter when the world was still bright and adventurous. Lured here by the promise to be taught by the world’s greatest living knight. Just like you. I heard him say nay and be done with it. Trust me, lad, the rejection is the worst part. When you are on your way home, you’ll see your bright future and the adventure ahead once more.”

“Did you, sir?”

The question seemed to pain him as his face darkened. “That’s a keen question, lad. As sharp as a sword’s blade and as potent. A fair warning: keep it to yourself. Most of us here are sensitive to it.” The knight sighed and continued. “Slighted honour and all that. To answer: no, I didn’t. But I don’t blame Nicolas for it: he has ever treated each and every one of us as equals, a pleasant man if you get to know him instead of the distant knight that he has to wear as a second skin. Our society raises us to be paragons of virtue and masters of war, stressing the part for heroics and noble deeds. They force us to look to the sky and the men that reside there. But, lad, they hold no obligations towards us for anything. That’s why we linger here, I guess. If we can’t become that warrior, we reside in his company, trying to bask in his glory. One day Nicolas -willingly or not- shall lead us to our destiny or death in a battle that will shake the ages. And we will have a part to play in it. At the moment our lives might not be worth much but we cling to that promise now.” The knight sighed as his eyes dissected the layers of the fireplace. “Best be on your way, lad...”

“Simon. Call me Simon, please.” “Simon. Leave this place on the morrow and lead a good life back home. It’s the best of us can do.” Jean rose to his feet, brushing off the dirt from his tabard. “You know, Simon, it might not be much but it is my home and duty here.”

The knight left the youth to his thoughts. Silence once again returned to the campfire, his two guardians already lying beneath their blankets. A guardian. The man has his own personal guard, devoted and loyal to him even when he had rejected them. A man bereft of his purpose searches a new one, a consolation. Being here gives them that in a world that would otherwise mock them for their foolishness and naive beliefs. Riding alongside a legend makes them feel part of it. This conclusion amazed Simon: knights who willingly subsided their pride and ego to follow a man to which they had no real tie or bond. A man who they deem more worthy to follow than their own father or liege. Nicolas inspires these men to a greatness which is the hardest of all: laying aside any personal glory in favour for another which erases their own name in history. His thoughts wandered and reflected on what lay home for him: a father with no real interest in his second son and a stepmother which revered her own clutch more. To sum up: a lifetime in service of his older brother. His sibling was dear to him but in some way the two never really had connected. Martin had ever reached for that which lay within his grasp, satisfied by his promised bounty while Simon was left to reach for higher goals. So I reached out to the sky, only to surrender.

The sun woke the young knight as it slowly crawled over the wooden palisade. The fresh morning air was loaded by the spring’s dew. The smell of baked bread still lingered over the encampment even as most had disappeared into the hungry mouths of the early birds. It couldn’t be later than the seventh bell of the morrow but still there was already a lot of activity. The knights of yesterday had already resumed their self-imposed duties to gather food and make small repairs to the compound. The rhythmic drum of steel against steel even betrayed the presence of a fort smithy. After he had refreshed himself with the cool water from the well, one of his silent squires handed him his breakfast: the bread, alas, had cooled off already in the morrow cold but the salted beef and lard more than made up for it. His father had always stressed the need for decent food before attempting a long journey and indeed the simple but refilling grub heartened Simon for his decisions to come. His two companions had already readied their gear and horses, acting on their impression that their business was concluded here. After wiping off the last lard of his plate Simon addressed them. “Jacques, Clement, you’ll be alone homebound. I have decided to remain here.”

If there was any consternation or surprise in the hearts of the two, they clearly hid them well as they silently looked towards their young master. Finally Clement, ever the smarter one, pushed his disinterest enough away to ask the logical question. “What shall we tell your father, young sir? He won’t be pleased that we be leaving you here.”

“Tell my honourable father that I may have found a purpose here between this group of knights. He’ll understand and won’t be aggrieved. If you see my brother, tell him I’ll be fine and if there ever arises the need for my sword that he can still count on him. I’m not abandoning my family nor duty, I’m just rendering my services to those in greater need for an extra hand. Now leave here and return my words home.”

His two companions didn't utter any objections but returned to their apathy. Not even a flicker of sadness over my refusal to return home. Have I been that bad to the lowborn? Apparently they can't even spare feigned loyalty for me. I have been a fool and not just to those two. With a weary mind Simon looked up to the chapel.

The bitter night had left a lingering cold in the chapel. By the morning's light, shining through the stained glass, Simon could now better see the room. The foundation was made by a pattern of natural stones, the walls and roof were no more than crudely-cut trunks of pine safe for the eastern wall - with the stained glass window- which functioned as a support for the entire building. That part of the wall seemed much older, its age betrayed by the crumbling edges. The upper part had been restored more recently with fresh stone but no master hand had a part in that. Fairly new tapestries tried in vain to cover the impermanent nature of the building. The benches only strengthened that belief, being no more than a board nailed to tree trunks as legs. The stained glass of the eastern wall depicted a kneeling figure in armour before a king of old though the colours had faded through years of being ignored for Simon to recognise. In a whole the chapel looked as provisional as the rest of the encampment yet Nicolas has dwelt here for more years than at the courts of dukes and the king. The only striking feature was the altar, though simplistic in nature and equally weathered as the stone wall. It was made of marble, the colour worn and stained with dark earth, every support was a turned away knight in prayer, carrying a mourning bed on their most inner shoulder. The bed was lined with lilies and banners announcing the deeds of the knight all revolving one particular battle. Try as he might, the young knight could not recognise which battle was displayed. On top of the altar lay one single piece of armour, a piece of a battered breastplate, rust settling in its grooves.

Of course Nicolas himself was in deep prayer, kneeling before one of the benches, eyes to the ground. If he noticed the entry of Simon, he did not show. As silent as possible Simon moved over to the closest bench and kneeled as well. He had ever been raised to be a devoted man to the Lady as both his father and stepmother are fiercely religious, bordering the edge of fanaticism. Before he could hail Her Nicolas's monotone voice interrupted. "Don't waste your breath on promises. Feigning adherence won't make me favour you. Please, don't sully this place of worship with your own selfish interests."

Though the unmindful words cut a path deep in his honour, this time he remained calm and replied gracefully. "Then my place is here for I wish nothing else but to honour Her with my naked devotion and simple virtue. We might not have started off the right foot but trust me when I say I'm here with nothing but religious reasons. Furthermore, I owe you an apology for any slight I might have caused yesterday. It was foolish of me to question your integrity and it was a wrong born from anger. Forgive the foolish words of an ever more foolish youth."

His dignified reply surprised the older knight who nodded slightly and returned the gesture. "Then it seems I owe you the same: for no reason I questioned your reasons for being here and for that I am sorry. It seems these days you can't predict any-one." A light smile brightened his otherwise so stern face.

A serene silence returned to the chapel as the two knights returned to their worship. In his mind Simon felt relieved that Nicolas held no grudge and was even a bit proud to have turned the argument against him by acting chivalrous. Even so it seemed as if Nicolas didn't mind his presence here. Who knows? Maybe someday he'll even give me a full smile. Maybe one blessed day he'll give me a few remarks about my skill. And maybe, maybe he'll allow me to fight alongside him one beautiful day. As he caught himself not being pious, he returned to his prayer. Humbly he asked the deity for wisdom and her blessing for this new path he was about to walk.

### Chapter Three: All For One

It took a long while before the young knight became accustomed to camp life. The luxury of having servants working for one is often overlooked. Weeks passed before Simon finally started to get the hang of repairing cloth or his hands to get used to an axe. Slowly he settled in a daily routine of waking at the first rays of sun, pray until the self-appointed cook, a cynic old knight by the name of Charles de Crenan, had finished making breakfast and he divided the remainder of the day over several chores for the common good of the fort, maintaining and repairing his armour and clothes and sparring with the other knights. It surprised Simon that most of them were fairly skilled in duel and horsemanship. Likewise Jean de Garlande may not have been the greatest of warriors but Simon liked him nonetheless: his wisdom was unrivalled and his tales entertained the others many a night by the campfire. Every once in a while he saw his own reflection of a few months ago as a new youth rode down to their camp to introduce himself to Nicolas to no avail of course. The only way to notice the passing of time in the camp was when Nicolas sometimes startled them by setting off, unnoticed and without a warning, to answer an invitation of this or that neighbouring lord. Though the living legend often visited the courts of the high nobility, he never lingered for more than a day and never joined in a joust for his own personal reasons.

During the last month of spring as the days grew longer and the weather became increasingly more fair, he even got to know the man behind the legend. As Jean had mentioned, Nicolas was an amiable man who treated every single last of them as his peer. Even so; each time they got a chance to talk, Simon could not help but notice the tempered tone in his voice. Something was bothering him, this much was clear and if the others knew what they weren't sharing, just like they wouldn't tell him the meaning of his self-constructed chapel and to who it is devoted. Though Nicolas' life had been eventful up to now "Simon knew all the tales by heart as did any young noble-, his adventures to this day had been void of any sadness or regrets so Simon could not discern what was bothering the legendary knight. "

"Do you know that this hill was once the site of a great battle between the corrupted of the false gods and our own forefathers?" Simon was sitting at the edge of the hill overlooking the plains when Nicolas asked him that question. Intrigued the young one quickly shook his head. "Where Louis the Young knighted the Repanse de Lyonesse? Indeed the muffled screams of the wounded still dominated the battlefield as she found herself facing her one and only love -albeit its personification of it. Tales tell of the radiant light she beamed over the plains as his sword touched her shoulders ever so lightly. The same light, I imagine, as Landuin carried in his heart as he rode in the presence of his peers. The Lady inspired them to true remembrance. Places like these are forgotten while the true heroes are the dead that made the legend worth to withstand time. I arrived here on my travels to see the chapel where once her bodily remains had been interred, cast asunder by time. Her remains were returned to a bigger tomb in Lyonesse but I discovered the grave that held many of her soldiers. Forgotten by all. I remember wondering whether every hero had such forgotten graves of corpses. The dead that are scattered around them and they died for a cause not their own. And still they don't hold grudges. I think, that what makes a true hero, is not the great deeds sung in many ballads, but being a man who commands unquestioning love from those that follow him or her, even into death."

"Do you believe yourself to be capable of such feats, sir?" Simon contained his curiosity as to the why he had given such a lecture.

Nicolas sighed but he did not wave the question away. "I know in my heart the Lady has made plans for me long before I was even born. The Repanse for instance learned of her calling at our land's direst moment. I can tell you, young friend, that even knowing the will of our goddess doesn't change that uncertainty takes root. Under the reign of pressure and nerves, she almost made a fatal mistake what now turned out into her greatest victory. If she had doubted and chosen poorly, we wouldn't even be here discussing her. It is not easy to accept that there are plans over which you don't have any control. Your life, a puppet in the hands of the mighty. Are you to be famous or scolded for your mistakes? People expect me to perform miracles every battle, every joust they bet me to win and swipe every lady off her feet. But when it comes down to it, I too can die on the other side of a sword, I too can feel pain when unhorsed and ladies still can choose to ignore me. I don't feel chosen nor any more special than any other knight. Am I capable of being a hero this land needs? I don't know." He cast his eyes down.

"Milord, are you alright?"

"No." The resolution behind that one simple word startled Simon. "I feel myself to be a prisoner of fate which I didn't get to decide. Sometimes drowning under pressure, pushing me ever under. You know: every noble I meet wants to defeat me in a duel, their lords want me to lead their army and train their sons to become me and the noble ladies of this land expect me to treat them as a goddess or worse. Afterwards there is no room for gratitude: no, I just played my part in this theatre. The only ones who truly are grateful for the aid I render, are the lowborn." A silence lingered as Nicolas was struggling his own mind.

Simon decided to change the subject. "Is that why there are no commoners here?"

The question took him away from his doubts. "Yes, it's the only restriction I have for staying here. I won't let them give up everything back home to fulfil the whims and wishes of their masters." Another silence ensued as the two men saw the grassy plains being tormented in the wind. Afterwards Nicolas smiled and said. "You are the first not to try to strengthen my resolve by advising me to stand tall, remain proud and take heart in the plans of the Lady." Nicolas turned and vanished into the chapel, leaving his young peer to his thoughts.

Once adapted to the life in the camp, Simon quickly rose up into the silent hierarchy of the knights. Even without the teachings of Nicolas, Simon's skill with the blade surged by duelling and listening to the other knights. Finally it far surpassed the most skilled and even Nicolas came to admire his victories on the sparring field, standing on the top of his hill, with silent approval. It turned out Simon also had a keen sense for organisation and command as he successfully reshaped the camp to efficiency. The first among peers Simon came to be respected by the other and older knights. The nights were filled with the tales of Jean and the conversations with Nicolas. The latter seemed to open up more to his younger comrade, confiding in him. Slowly a bond grew between the personal guard of the living saint, a bond that exists only between those that live and serve together. Simon was proud to call them his "brothers" as they meant more to him

than his family back home. Â

The days of the year passed, a summer of sweat and an unrelenting bitter winter of scarce game, practically unnoticed by the young knight, until the one year anniversary of his arrival of the camp arrived.

Simon had just stopped paying his respects to Her when Nicolas interrupted. "It's been only a year and yet I see great changes. That annoying little tyke has sprouted to become a most agreeable young man. Indeed, Simon had grown, his shoulders even defying his old armour. That youthful spark in his eyes had been replaced by the stern gaze of adulthood. Hours ride from the nearest castle, he had become used to his hair and beard being unkempt and untidy.

Nonsense, I am still that charming lad that arrived here. It is you who has changed as time has dulled your thoughts, old man." Simon jokingly replied. This was also true: although the burden of destiny still tried to crush the knight, his temper had bettered over the months. Occasionally Nicolas had joined his guard of peers on their hunts and campfires, startling them at first but entertaining them later on with his own stories and knowledge of game. The band of brothers had noticed who had been mainly responsible for lifting the man's spirits and were grateful for it, strengthening the bonds between the men.

"Even so, my friend: it is odd how time can soothe wounds and change minds. Maybe it has dulled mine but the result will be the same. You have learned much over this past year. On your own, relying on your own wit and skill. Your advances are impressive, especially since they are mostly self-taught and born out of talent."

"Talent? I could barely lift a sword before I arrived here."

"Let me finish. It is easy to blindly follow the words of a man whose hairs are grey and arms weak. In the end you know only a style which is not your own, which might not even suit you. No matter how well you've copied his moves, how many times you shall wield a blade or how great a warrior your teacher is, your skill with the sword will be flawed. That flaw can't be corrected, not without a certain degree of talent. Even before I fled here, I rejected many a noble son because they lacked that. Your incessant sparring and learning of the others has increased your skill to a talent which I can help you perfect. If you're still searching for my aid, I'm willing to teach you perfection."

The offer shook Simon because he had put the apprenticeship long past him, wishing for no more than staying here with his adopted family and friends. Even so, his ambition now reared its head: the opportunity was too great. Yet his loyalty to the others won. "Why me? Why not one of the brothers?"

"They can't." Nicolas defiantly replied.

Headstrong as he was, Simon was not satisfied. "Why?"

"Because they don't have the right will, skill or the age. Because you remind me of a youth I once knew with the same determination and the same amiable demeanour. More so; you make me feel like a humble human once more, your greatest gift to me, instead of the walking paragon of chivalry everyone else sees. A gift I intend to repay in the knowledge you seek."

"You owe me nothing of such kind. This past year I have learnt more from you than my sixteen cycles before from anyone. For one I have consented in letting my desire not drive others."

"Be that as it may, my offer still stands."

"Then I'll accept it. Lady knows, I'm more than up to it." Simon jokingly added.

The sarcasm was lost on Nicolas that moment and he warned Simon. "Arrogance is the first step to greatness but drive it too far and at the end of that road you'll find oblivion." A disturbed look flickered across the grail knight's face as he recognised the disbelief of the youth. "Trust me, I know the depths that can only be reached by ambition and zeal. The wrong methods are still wrong even for all the right reasons. Now, these are my rules: first none of this leaves our trust. Agreed?"

"Agreed. No-one shall know."

"Second, we'll have a weekly hunt just us two. A hunt to others, a lesson for us."

"Just weekly? Won't that hinder learning any technique you pass on to me?"

"Of course not, you shall be practising those in your daily exercises with the others with me as a silent overseer."

â€œI shanâ€™t disappoint you, trust me.â€•

â€œIâ€™m sure you wonâ€™t but it still is a leap in the dark for both of us.â€•

Simon recognised the voice of doubt. â€œIâ€™m sure you shall not fail me.â€•

â€œIt is not you who I fear to disappoint.â€•

Thus it had been agreed and thus it happened. Progress was slow, testifying to the difficulty of the tasks Nicolas set the young warrior. Over the months Nicolas shared many wisdoms and truths about the noble art of the blade.

â€œTo be able to maintain a dance of swords, every swirl, thrust and feint must be efficient, saving your breath.â€•

â€œBalance is the key to any fight: use it and youâ€™ll shall open the door to victory, lose it and you shall forever stand before a locked and cold door.â€•

â€œMany of the worldâ€™s monsters can withstand an awesome amount of pain before they start to weaken, more than you can anyway: by gauging its every move and thus prepare your own to be lethal, one can survive such an encounter.â€•

â€œThe elves have an inbred battle calm which makes them more capable in a duel. Stay focussed and train yourself to become an elf during battle. Even so our bodies are more hardened and fit for battle: our endurance makes us more resistant to pain. Be assured in the knowledge that what we donâ€™t have, we can learn but what we do have, they canâ€™t even achieve.â€•

â€œFighting the powers of corruption is worse than any other battle: every spawn of their horror-soaked world is a long and wearying nightmare in itself, one has to conquer your voice of fear every single time before being able to subdue your angst long enough to destroy it.â€•

Three years had passed since Simon had ventured from the forests of Gisoreux and a strong friendship had grown between the two noble knights, born out of mutual respect and founded on their same love for their land. The skill of the adolescent with the blade had become as impressive and legendary as his mentor. Though the young knightâ€™s swordplay was challenging to him, it did not rival his duel with the sword. As a master he knew his pupilâ€™s every moves and abilities, turning it against him with the aid of his vast experience. Simon had no choice but to accept the seniority of his friend and instructor, even though it was a slight disappointment to him. Jokingly between the two of them they chalked it up to the extra boon of sipping from the grail. Despite their best attempts to cover his progress, it soon became clear to the other knights from which wind Simonâ€™s improvement blew. Their hunting parties with just them two had already been a point of discussion and curiosity amongst their peers but when the youngâ€™s knight advancements became apparent, the truth was quickly discerned. Even so it did not change their undying respect for their appointed leader nor did jealousy turn the camp sour for his young charge. In fact Simon quickly became the campâ€™s leader based on the trust Nicolas invested in him. If there were those who coveted the young oneâ€™s position, they did not reveal so. Only once did the small brotherhood ride forth during those years in line behind their two captains. The arrival of the great champion of the land heartened the army who faced that green scourge of old. The waves of the greenskinned were beaten down, overturned, rallied and all but wiped out before the wrath of Bretonniaâ€™s sons, a victory to rival the remembrance. Simon found himself in the thick of the fighting, piercing the brutish ranks of orc and their smaller kin, and finally defeated their warlord in an epic duel. His star was rising, his tale of legend born in that battle. Even so it marked the end of his youth. An urge was building momentum, a vocation that deeply burned passion into his blood: the Lady had her eyes on that promising knight, her calling an ethereal kiss that crossed the borders of the two worlds.

One day, not long after that fabled battle, the mind of Simon was made up: his departure as swift and determined as his blade. The brothers would miss him but accepted his decision. Nicolas merely smiled: his approval -and more important his blessing- expressed in that trademark smile of his. Accounting the travels and adventures of the questing Simon is not a part of this tale as they feature in many a ballad and this tale is about their friendship. Far and wide his deeds and renown with the longsword travelled, strengthening the spirits of nobles and winning the hearts of fair damsels. His search lasted for a bit more than two years after which he returned home triumphant.

## Chapter Four: One For All

Snow drifted lazily to the landâ€™s domain, sporadically toyed by the cold wind. The latter hunting those that dared to



venture outside down with a stinging vengeance. None safe a lone rider and his trusty horse dared to defy the element of winter with grim determination. The sun hadn't been able to penetrate the grey fog that dominated the lands, Simon's telling him it was near dinner. Even wrapped snugly inside his furry cloak, the snow and frost remained: travelling for so long in that winter tempest had caused his cloak to get soaked and consequently covered with an icy layer. Whatever shelter it had provided against the abrasive breeze, it now had forfeited it. His months-old beard was caked with frost and snow, his steady breathing leaving quickly dispersing clouds. Wise men would have called it a day, warming their chilled feet at a roaring fireplace but Simon was known for his headstrongness and it had been too long. To be separated from his brothers for so long, to be alone on a road to which seemed to have no end, fighting battles, an unknown sword to cover your back at best and then the constant doubt to keep one awake at night: all made him long for the reckless and carefree days of before. But tested he was and he had stood his ground with valour and chivalry thus granted he was from that sip from the grail that only a select few had ever touched. And after all was said and done, he instantly made his way back to the only home he ever had, where he felt comfortable and wanted. Yearned, he had, for the wooden palisade and its makeshift buildings, the hill with its steep stairs and the simple chapel, to talk to the only men he had truly understood, to smile when he would be confronted with that inevitable grin of Nicolas.

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Finally he reached the border of those grasslands he knew so well. Waist-high they still stood, bent but recognisable under a fine layer of snow. From that place he should have been able to see the lone hill, rising from the horizon, tipped by a stone speck but a grey haze clouded any vision of the fort. Anxious he had spurred his horse into a trot, hooves leaving small clods of snow behind. The walls seemed smaller somehow but they brought joy to his heart nonetheless. The gate was closed to shield the compound from the wind but they were quickly opened as he pound on the cold wood. The man opening was no stranger to Simon at least: the black cloth hiding the scar which had closed his left eye permanently during their last battle together could only belong to Aubert, a sulky bear of a man but with a great sense of humour. His hair however had slightly greyed over the years, adding more weight to the ending of his middle age.

Aubert however didn't seem to have recognised the heraldry of one of his former brothers and Simon decided to test his mettle. In his most haughty voice, borrowed from his youth, he questioned the poor frozen warden. "Can I believe they have a one-eyed man standing sentry over this place. Makes me wonder whether the deaf man can actually blow the horn or where the mute messenger hides."

"I may have but one eye, ye spawn, but it sees more than the running brain of a cocky..." The aged knight seemed to be in no mood for another admirer but when he studied the rugged face and coat-of-arms some more, it dawned on him. "By the Lady's great, Simon! That'd be you? Never expected you to tell a decent joke, lad. Come on in, come on. I'll have some-one groom and take care of ye horse. Get inside the warm commons, the lads will want to hear about yer return."

"Can I say no to that, old friend."

Indeed the overwhelming warmth of a roaring fireplace greeted his entry. Conversations numbed and heads turned to see the one to entry. First some then others started to recognise their wayward brother. Familiar voices and face rose to greet him and congratulate him. Instantly he was guided to the middle of the room where one cleared a comfortable chair next to the fire for him, his cloak taken from him to dry as well near the hearth. Most of them pulled close some chairs and after their salutations had seized, they let the kid recuperate his breath. Simon smiled as he recognised most of his brothers, some were new to him but his legacy made him no stranger to them. "It's good to be home at last, brothers." Simon started as he overlooked their faces, flushed by the warmth and happiness.

"Good to have you back. Been a time, lad. Your stories have travelled long and far even to these remote parts. Nicolas even send minstrels here to make sure we heard about your new deeds." Jorge de Baille-Mal answered, a wide smile adorning his sleek face. "Nothing like hearing them for real though."

Simon laughed, giddy with joy. "Lady spare me! You'll hear them all, be sure of it, until you can hear no more. I owe that much to you. But for now let me warm myself while I hear the news."

Jean de Garlande stood next to the fireplace, looking down upon Simon. "You know this place: change isn't prone to vis much but it seems there will some in near future."

"Is that so?" Curiosity rose as he understood the hinted weight of his words to come.

"Nicolas has returned home." Jean casually said while he studied his friend's face.

"Home?" The surprise was not feigned: for indeed, the young knight ever expected Nicolas to remain there at the chapel with his heart true to the place. "You mean Pinsson Keep? In Couronne?"

“Yes, his dad passed away when the leaves started to drop. The king graciously nominated Nicolas as sovereign lord of Pinsson Keep and its estate.”

“Indeed.” Heymon, whose hairs had lost all colour and whose eyes “Simon regretfully noticed- seemed to have lost all potency, interrupted Jean before he could continue. “He left two moons ago to make arrangements.”

“Don’t try to convince me he abandoned you lot here.”

“Don’t be silly.” Jean replied. “Part of the arrangements are a permanent home for the brotherhood in his keep. A

“And the chapel? His devotion? Don’t try to tell me he forgotten about his self-appointed duty.”

“Of course not.” Vincent grunted, a silent but brooding knight with considerable skill with the blade. “Other concerns pressured him.”

“Concerns?” Simon incredulously said as he knew that Nicolas had actually tried to escape those by fleeing here. An awkward silence ensued as the brothers hesitated to reply, trying to avoid his eyes. “Jean, please tell me.”

Jean seemed unhappy to be addressed but his loyalty towards Simon did not falter. “About a year ago Nicolas rode to Bordeleaux to attend the yearly game tournament at the request of the duke itself. The stakes were the hand of his beautiful daughter, Agnès, in marriage.”

Simon interrupted as it dawned on him. “He jousting for her hand? Why?”

“Love at first sight, Simon. Mutual actually. There was no stopping Nicolas of course: one by one the other suitors fell before his lance and sword. They are to be wed when the spring rains have ended.”

A long silence followed as Simon sat speechless. Marry? Why hasn’t this crossed my mind before? One day or the other it was bound to happen. Somehow I seemed to have forgotten that Nicolas is human too. Finally he regained his resolve. “Why did I not see this coming?” The young knight thought for a moment before he continued. “Why didn’t you say directly?”

“Nicolas probably wanted to tell you himself, my friend. He’s overjoyed with her and it shows.” Simon laughed as he said “Odd, he never seemed that kind of man. Tense and honour-bound, I’d expected him to rest here until the Lady threw his destiny. No, I never imagined him sitting beside a castle hearth with a kid on his knee and his love behind him.”

The group of brothers laughed in reply. The initial shock disappeared and Simon felt happy for the two. Descriptions of Agnès made her seem a true lady with the appropriate manners when she had visited the fort right during an autumn storm. Defiant to the weather she talked to all of them with extreme politeness and patience. In fact it was she who suggested to give this group of homeless knights a place in her father’s keep for the time being. Of course then Nicolas’s father regretfully perished a few months later and he was able to ferry them all to their new home at the coast of Couronne. Throughout the evening many stories were shared, a hot meal and drink heartening Simon. One by one the others surrendered to their sleep while outside the wind and snow gained momentum. A brand new and sparkling white tapestry will be waiting tomorrow. A new beginning for us all. It seems a perfect moment to marry when the past is covered by purity.

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Simon awoke still in the comfortable chair that morning a warm breakfast awaiting. The commons had already been cleared by the knights who returned to their duties. A bright blue sky greeted Simon, oblivious to the tempest weather of that night. As predicted a carpet of snow had turned the landscape in one great plain of snow. Meanwhile it seemed that most of the activities of the brothers included clearing the wooden houses from all that was gathered here over the years which was incredibly much. An encampment gathers a lot of gear and objects which might not have a direct use for but one still keeps for the future. Most of his trusted friends were preparing the impending leaving while others were shovelling snow to clear the compound. “It doesn’t harm to be prepared.” Jean said to Simon when he helped him lift heavy barrel of furs unto a wagon. Simon quickly started helping out with clearing the buildings. It felt odd to him to move the furniture and utensils now that he had just come home but in a way it seemed a fitting start of a new chapter.

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Nicolas returned in high spirits not a week later with several other men to help the last proceedings. His good mood even soared as he was surprised by Simon. He hadn't changed much over the two years but his eyes burned with a bright and cosy fire, fuelled by life and optimism. He had lost the beard though which underlined his smile even more. Simon couldn't help him but laugh as Nicolas threw his arms around him. Finally. He said to his younger peer. Finally. long. It amazed me how used I had become to your arrogant face. Tell me all, tell me everything! Or better yet, wait until we are reunited with my love. I trust these lot already broke the news to you?

They made it sound as if you had died, brother, but I'm glad to see that you have fallen skywards. I am sorry to hear about your old man though.

After she died, my father has never been the same. When the mind is not willing, the body quickly follows. It wanders and trails off in the distance, the light dousing as it can't remember anymore. It was peaceful in the end and I'm happy for it. The Lady's last merciful kiss, what more can a man want?

Not much, it seems. Tell me, does she let you stay up late?

Nicolas laughed and let him go. It's so good to you again, friend. By the Lady's blessing, I'm proud to see that burning your eyes. Tell me: have you already adapted your shield and armour? Nicolas quickly inspected his young friend and chuckled as he noticed the weathered and torn clothes. That hasty to return to our blessed lot, were you? No matter we'll sort that when we get to Entrevilles. His train of thought however suddenly trailed off.

When Simon followed his eyes, he saw what doused the flames a little. The snow-covered chapel defied the blue sky as it glistened in the morning sun. I wondered about that, you know. It wasn't easy but it was inevitable. Though this has served as a great refuge of devotion and solitude, it is no place for a lady of high standing. I'll build something more permanent here, I promised myself. It'll ever be my home away from home. Praytell, do you want a room with a view over the sea or do you prefer to be awakened by the morning sun?

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Pinsson Keep had a proud and long history as the foremost important city keep protecting the estuary of the river Mans on the most northern shore of Couronne. Situated on an extending peninsula it commanded a great and important view of the seas. Over the ages it had been fortified and expanded from one keep to a labyrinth of a citadel with a sturdy stone wall encircling the city of Entrevilles. The agreeable warm coastal wind had taken care of most of the snow, allowing the castle's high towers and sturdy defences to show themselves. The salty smell of the sea greeted them along with the north wind. Simon could easily imagine himself call this city and the castle home. The banners still hung half-way until the new lord was appointed in the ceremony of the next week. Later Simon remembered them and wondered whether they had been a sign for things to come.

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The city was bristling with activity for the great ceremony which even the king himself would attend. It seemed as if every citizen had hung out banners bearing the family sigils, small flags of Couronne and the king's heraldry. The stone streets were swept time and time again until the cobbles gleamed into the sun. All betrayed an eagerness of his soon-to-be loyal subjects to warmly welcome him home and start his reign on the best of terms. Many commoners stopped to greet the small procession of carts and knights and Nicolas graciously replied that greeting all the while beaming with pride and happiness. Simon had chosen for the room on the seaside of the castle. Its long and restless deep waters fascinated him as he looked out the window. His room was comfortable and big, even more so than his ancestral home in Gisoreux. Though not teeming in luxury, it commanded a cosy presence with a finely-decorated mantelpiece over the hearth as its main feature. It's been a while since I have even seen a bed, let alone ever sleep in a double one. I wonder whether I'll even be able to sleep without my saddle as a pillow and the hard ground to rock me to sleep.

It used to be my own. Nicolas had entered the room unnoticed and stood aside his friend, overlooking the vast expanse of water. It holds the most awesome view in the entire castle bar none. I thought off moving down here with Agnès but deep down I felt you should have it. It belongs to the brash and restless.

I'll never get tired of the view, I can guarantee you that.

Nicolas smiled as he nodded. I know you won't: I know I never did. Even the plains of grass reminded me of that sea but it's not even close to comparison. There is not a force greater than that off the sea, my friend, ranging from the soothing and lazy waves on a tranquil summer afternoon to the awe-inspiring mighty autumn storms when the wind and rains

ceaselessly try to batter the walls of this keep into submission.â€•

â€œSo... When do I get to meet the one that has so stolen your heart so deftly and sudden?â€•

â€œSoon, I hope. Though she wonâ€™t be travelling north until a few days before the wedding along with the ducal family. The duke insisted on this formality, I think he wants to keep her to himself.â€• Nicolas laughed at his own joke but then noticed Simonâ€™s pensiveness. â€œWhatâ€™s bothering you, Simon?â€•

The young knight frowned but had no answer for him. â€œI donâ€™t know. All these changes... After She blessed me with the grail, I went home to find the brothers and you, expecting to linger there for many a year until fate called us. But now I find myself somewhere else, surrounded by walls and luxury I did not expect, with servants I have no need of. Itâ€™s confusing me, I guess. It seems as if my world changed from the moment I put my lips to the cup. In many ways it did but apparently not how I suspected.â€• Simon paused as he drunk deep the salty air. â€œDonâ€™t mind me, brother, Iâ€™m sure a short while before I forget our previous lives.â€•

Nicolas smile felt reassuring to his former student. â€œAll grown up, my little upstart. If there is anything, donâ€™t hesitate to come running.â€•

And his friend left him alone to garden his thoughts. Grown up indeed but I never noticed I was in the process. A new start, new responsibilities. Simon berated himself. One canâ€™t keep on hiding in a private fort forever, the time of adventure and recklessness has come and gone. My hand holds the quill to write the next part of my life and so far I find myself in a comfortable world. His face turned sour as his nagging feeling kept bothering him. This all seems wrong. But why? They all say that they are beside me now... Then why do I feel so alone?â€•

Simon had never seen the king before. A tall but gaunt man yet his advanced years had taken away much of his strength. His reign had been blessed with relative peace and his rule was already regarded by scholars and nobles alike as inspired and progressive. Once a testimony of the code of chivalry, now his abilities seemed to rely on his experience and excellent orator skills. Blessed with a powerful and sharp voice, he can hold the attention of thousands who hang on his every word. The speech in which he remembered the old castellan, thereby approving his noble rule over the fief, repeated the responsibilities and privileges of any lord and blessed Nicolasâ€™ succession to his new position as a lord of this land, was as if written by the great bards of old. Simon had stood next to his former tutor as was his wish and had experienced the ceremony at first hand. Now he was wandering through the gardens looking blissful solitude from the crowd. I shall remember this day forever: not its majesty, nor the fact it involved my best and trusted friend but because today I saw a man beam pure royalty and command respect. He may be old and nearing deathâ€™s shroud but if age would look so kindly down on me when I near my sixties, Iâ€™d be grateful indeed. His son has big shoes to fill. It canâ€™t be easy to have to stand in the shoes of a man that great that his shadow will ever loom over you. Even when heâ€™ll be gone, his account will remain, threatening to engulf him forevermore thus dooming his reign to oblivion. Nicolas holds that man in the greatest of respects and I believe I see why: not his legendary skills, nor his way with words but how his presence ever dominates a scene, blinding lesser men into loving him and follow him to whatever end. He is what Nicolas wants to be: a true hero. â€•

Days passed as life settled back to normal in the castle and the city. Nicolas proved to an inexperienced but just lord but he still needed a lot of time and advice to come to a suitable decision. Simon and the other knights of the chapel didnâ€™t see him much those first few weeks after the ceremony. Even so, they themselves were busy with adapting to their new life: with much of the work now divided amongst the serfs, they had much more time on their hands. Boredom is a serious threat to any brotherhood of peers so Simon tried his best to keep them busy hunting, duelling and travelling throughout the fief. In spite of these measures tension sometimes grew too high and arguments were carried too far. Every need and wish fulfilled, they found themselves without a real sense of purpose when their leader seemed safe behind the walls of solid stone and too busy governing to have to protect him in the field. The personal bodyguard of Nicolas needed a new role and it was hard to find one.

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Unable to vent his concerns to the busy Nicolas, he turned to Jean. He found him sitting in silent study of an ancient text about calligraphy in the library. De Garlande looked up from the manual as he approached his table. â€œYou seem troubled, brother.â€•

â€œI guess you havenâ€™t heard of the latest dispute between Vincent and Jorge.â€•

â€œAh yes. The loyalist versus the doubter. What happened?â€•

“The usual: Vincent bored of this monotone life casually remarked that Nicolas was quick to abandon us when chance presented itself. He even insinuated that his devotion to the chapel had been faked all along.”

“Jorge did not take that well, I bet. Ever loyal but this long silence from our former leader has even made him doubt.”

“And doubt leads to aggression. He hit our brother in the face though I can’t blame him for once. I fear their discussion is causing a rift in our brotherhood between two factions, Jean.”

“And with all great changes behind us, we have no new ones to look forward to which makes us all tense and questioning our duties here. To who lies our loyalty now, we wonder? To Nicolas whose head is buried in matters of governing or to our land which could use any help we can give it? Or to surmise: stay here or abandon the cause we embraced for years. It’s a hard decision, one I’ve pondered myself before stumbling upon this extended library. In the end there is no clear answer, I’m afraid.”

“Thus we are stuck in inactivity. Unless we take matters in our own hand, we’ll have to bother Nicolas with this, Jean. He may never wanted this brotherhood but Lady knows he considers himself a part of it as well and the brotherhood will listen to him.”

“Listen to me for what?” Nicolas voice surprised the both of them. He looked weary and grim. “That one brother raises hand against another? Don’t worry, I heard. In fact from the moment my sergeant reported the matter, I dropped everything else and went to talk to the instigators. And now I know what has been troubling my companions of old.”

“Nicolas, I’m sorry: we should have...”

“Doesn’t matter, friends, what done is done. In mounting the steps I had an idea how to temporary divert their attention. Nicolas announced this with a certain degree of pride as he walked towards a shelf. He chose a book and showed its worn back to them: it read Laws of state: the noble decrees and enforcement. “This book mentioned a tradition of yore: it’s a title which these days is barely used anymore, partly forgotten safe for these tomes. Wandering sheriffs. Since I’m unable to travel the land myself as my attention is needed here at this time, my counsellors advised me to find another suitable solution. So, I’m willing to entitle those willing with powers to travel through my fiefs and its many villages and enforcing the law thus replacing local petty eye-for-an-eye laws that exist right now. I know it’s not the most honourable of work but it’ll have to suffice for now until my ultimate plan can be completed.” When mentioning his ultimate plan, a brief but oh so recognisable smile adorned his face.

“Ultimate plan, brother? What are you planning?”

“All in due time, Simon. For now confide in me. I entrust you with the task to send those willing to my chambers where I’ll instruct them in their new duties.” His friend sighed as if he suddenly remembered something and turned. “I’m sorry but I have other matters to attend to now.”

The solution in combination with the promise of something more in the future was sufficient for the time being. Once again peace returned to the castle and before long the snows finally completely melted, the ground thawed and the spring showers had passed. The date was now approaching quickly and Simon caught himself to occasionally wonder what a special woman Agnès de Bordeleaux really had to be to ensnare his brother so much. When her coach finally had arrived, Simon found himself standing in the courtyard, hoping to catch a glimpse of the betrothed. As tradition wanted however she was completely veiled until the exact day. The ducal family had received its own wing in the castle to accommodate them so there wouldn’t be much chance to talk to her neither. This somehow frustrated the young companion of Nicolas who felt he had the right to at least talk to her once. I have to make sure Nicolas has chosen wisely at least. As a friend and closest thing to a brother, it is my duty to protect him from harm, even from his own mistakes. Any attempts however failed.

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## Chapter Five: A Heart Divided

Later on Simon didn’t remember much of the big day of Nicolas and Agnès safe that any stories about the bride weren’t exaggerated. When she first opened her veil, Simon had to swallow to clear his dry throat. Her beauty by far surpassed any he had seen before in a mortal woman, even rivalling that of the avatar of the Lady he had seen. Though she was small compared to the groom, she drew all attention towards her. Her long, ash blonde hair fell over her shoulders as she

removed the veil during the ceremony, revealing her entire face. Every part of her face seemed to be the work of an artist but her eyes were her true marks of the divine: silver eyes swirled with an ethereal light that unsettled all who looked her in the eyes. The eyes in which an unwary man could drown in, grasping in vain towards the light of the sun above. A shiver ran down his spine as they shortly passed over him. After the ceremony Nicolas finally introduced him to her after which he quickly had to address some other guests. "So you are the mysterious Simon my love has bragged about ever since we met. It's a pleasure to meet such a good friend of his." Agn s shortly bowed to him which unsettled Nicolas even more.

"The pleasure is all mine, milady." He nervously uttered: he never was any good with women, especially the pretty ones. His life had ever been a single-minded thrust to his duty and the opposite sex he'd mostly ignored until now. Of course he had tasted of life's sweets "he was after all just a mortal man and it is amazing how many women would throw themselves at one's feet when one is slightly famous- but it had ever been fleeting and nothing more than an experience. He clumsily returned the bow.

She flashed him her pretty smile and continued, taking him by the arm. "So, please tell me, my good sir, how does one like yourself manage to be single here. We can't have that, now can we? After all one has to dance at a wedding..."

Simon's thoughts raced with the conflicting impulses. "Dance? I mean... Single?" Agn s seemed slightly displeased by the rude interruption but listened to his next words. "I don't need your help." Panic has an odd way of making forget one's manners.

Her face clearly displayed her malcontent. "And here I thought I could help you. But it clearly seems that your reputation, sir, is undeserved and your loneliness well-earned." She turned away from him, leaving him wondering what just happened.

Who is she to judge me and my reputation? Simon wondered indignantly as he wandered outside to the gardens. These were now filled with guests from all over the country and of every rank. He emptied his cup of wine and set it down on the counter. A serf instantly refilled it. I who faced more dangers than she can even count to, the spoiled child. What does she know of the world? Of life? The most pain she ever had to endure was when she filed her nails too short. Simon took another swig of his wine. She never felt the crude blade of a corrupted elf render flesh to the bone. His cup was again full but he didn't mind. If her dinner is late, she calls it a tragedy. Apparently she never had to live on nothing but roots and the knowledge having just a few drops of decent water left. He stopped a moment to remark that it was an excellent wine. For everything there is, she has a servant at the ready. I at least know who to dress a wound with just one hand. The nearly inebriated young knight concluded it had to be Bordelen probably. Just like that stuck-up bitch! The servant anxiously saw him drain another cup. I bet she really has a servant for her every need. Even that one! Lady take me if she was still a virgin! The servant emptied his jug in the cup and hastened down the cellar before that bothersome knight needed more. How can she take care of Nicolas? She barely knows him, I've had the honour to be his trusted for over five years. If she really loved him, she'd never asked him to leave the chapel. They'd make do with whatever they could get down there. Meanwhile Simon looked around for that infernal servant. Now Nicolas is in the hand of a spoiled brat, barely able to take care of herself, let alone Nicolas. Lady be damned, I hate that harpy. The rest of the evening was nothing but fragmented memories for Simon. After emptying another jug of wine on his own, Jorge finally found him asking directions to the nearest ship to a bush. The loyal knight endured an half an hour of drunk nonsense and gibberish before he managed to put him to rest in his bed.

When morning came, the worst headache he'd ever had seemed to throb just beneath his skull. What shards there were left of the day before in his memory all seemed to point out to one conclusion: that woman wasn't fit for Nicolas. However when he tried to prompt how he arrived to that decision, the armies of a thousand nations were drumming incessantly and painfully bothering his stream of consciousness. Every bite of breakfast seemed to cause a enflaming revolt in his stomach. Nicolas wore that annoying smile of his like he knew in what kind of pain he was writhing in now. That wife of his seemed to be the paragon of every table manner and courtesy but he read the anger in her eyes when she fixed them on him. After trying to swallow another bite of the baked eggs, the hung-over knight had to give up and had him excused from the table. This may not be my finest hour but, curses, I can't stand that woman.

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Over the passing months Simon merely tried to ignore her to the best of his cunning: sitting on the far end of the table, avoid the living quarters in her wing of the castle, had any message to her be relayed by one of the brotherhood, it came even as far as starting to dodge meetings with Nicolas when she'd be present. If by chance they'd encounter, he'd hurry out of her way. It wasn't long until Nicolas suspected as much and before a week was through he had Agn s confess why.

“Brother, we need to talk.” Simon did not like that tone: every time he used that particular voice there was something clearly wrong. He stopped overseeing the training of the new destriers and patiently awaited him to continue. “How has Agnès slighted you?”

The forwardness of the issue surprised him and he quickly answered. “Slighted me, Nicolas?”

“Ever since the wedding you’ve been ignoring her.”

“I wouldn’t dream of ignoring her, brother.”

“How come then that she absolutely has no success to talk to you?”

“She has been reaching me? But I’m right here.”

“Cut it out, Simon!” Heads turned to see what made their lord raise his voice. His former apprentice however didn’t stand in the middle of such attention. He couldn’t even remember the last time he had. He subtly tried to drag Nicolas away to a more quiet area. When he continued the anger still lingered in his voice, a fury in his eyes. “I swear to the seven signs of the Lady I shall hear the truth. So out with it.”

“Fine. But are you sure you want to hear it, brother? Because once said, it can’t be unsaid.”

“Agnès has told me of the misunderstanding on the wedding day. I’m sure you had your reasons to act as you did but maintain such hostility against the one I love? She has tried to make amends with you but every time she tries to near you, you’ve disappeared faster than wine on a Bordelen holy day. Agnès knows you mean the world to me, brother, safe for her and the brotherhood you are the only one I fully trust. So spill it out before it turns ugly and I lose my best friend.”

“She isn’t right for you.”

“What?” This answer baffled the legendary knight.

“She isn’t right for you.” Saying it aloud, made it sound more juvenile and petty than intended. “She doesn’t k could she? Her world has ever been a golden cage. Yours are battlefields and slaughter. She trapped you into someone you are not. She’s every little girl’s dream, right down to the ponies and the prince on a white horse. Well, her prince never rode a white horse and used to be famous to be the greatest sword wielder alive.”

When he finally rested his rant, the fury was gone from Nicolas eyes, replaced to Simon’s consternation- by disappointment. His voice bore no reproach towards his young friend. “Oh, Simon, you never even gave her a chance, did you? Do you really think I’d fall in love with a girl that believes in castles and ballroom dances? I’m... grateful you want to keep an eye out for your brother but this not a decision you are allowed to make nor did I make the wrong one, trust me. If you get to know her, you’ll see what I see every day when I’m tired or anxious. She calms and soothes me. She pleases me with her greater intelligence often lacking in women of courts. She is one of the smartest people I know and her beauty comes second to that. And she has talent.”

That last word shocked him even more than his clear disappointment. “Talent?”

“Yes, she’ll never be as great a warrior as you, my brother, but everything she has learnt, she taught herself with grim determination not to become another faceless bride. Her skill rivals that of any lord in this land, even her father’s. Please go talk to her, give her a chance for the sake of our friendship. I want you to train her just like I once did with you. My time is too scarce to grant her the attention she needs and no other is worthy enough to challenge her. It’d be very sad day for me if my best brother wouldn’t get along with the love of my life.”

This is insane: I’ve defeated the crazed boar of Meldew by staring down his tusks and then strike before he’d hit me and here I am standing before a door of a creature far less frightful and yet I can’t even move myself to knock. What am I afraid of then? That Nicolas is right and she truly is an amiable person or that I am wrong and she is worthy of him? Either way I am on the losing side. It took an age for her to open the door after he finally forced himself to knock. She sounded a bit surprised but after a slight hesitation she invited him in. “Sir Gastinois, please come in. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Grudgingly he mumbled the words he had rehearsed. “Milady, it seems I owe you an apology and an explanation for my behaviour at the wedding banquet. I’m truly sorry but I am not used having people worry about me and my private matters.”

“I gathered as much but that still doesn’t explain the months of hiding from me, sir.” Her tone was soft and forgiving.

“If you wish an explanation for that, I can offer you none. Though it shames me to admit, there seemed to have been no

reason.â€•

AgnÃ©s seemed to weigh his words carefully before continuing the conversation. â€œOh, but there has to be one. But I believe this one to be rather harmless if somewhat endearing, sir. Your reason is one born out of love and loyalty to Nicolas, a careful friendship fused with mutual respect. Your love in this case turned into concern. Concern for your best friend which is perfectly natural. Which later on turned into worries and after our first meeting into misplaced jealousy and anger. Iâ€™m sorry it happened this way but I beg you to give me another chance, Simon. For I love that man with all my heart and I will find bravery there to face anything that would come between us.â€•

â€œI will try, milady.â€• Simon sighed: his fears had been realised twice. "Nicolas mentioned you having skill with the blade.â€•

â€œHe did?â€• Now it was her turn to be surprised. â€œHe must have had his reasons then.â€•

â€œHe did. In fact he wants me to help you continue improving your skill. Heâ€™d do it himself but his lack of time wouldnâ€™t allow your training justice.â€•

â€œHe does? My father strongly disapproved it of course, especially after I disarmed him.â€• Her eyes slipped into the distance as she reflected on her youth. â€œI had to be more ladylike: less waving swords, more small talk. I never stopped completely however, training myself in secret in my room with an old and battered sword. Nicolas was the first man to ever find out. Well, if he is sure, Iâ€™m willing to give it a try.â€•

â€œWeâ€™ll start next week if thatâ€™s alright with you, milady.â€•

Thus Simon started to teach AgnÃ©s the exact things Nicolas had once taught him. After a hesitant start Simon put his pride aside to give her the attention she needed. Surprisingly enough she progressed more quickly he could have hoped or wished for. There was definitely a talent hidden in her fighting style of dexterous moves and quick jabs. AgnÃ©s had fast reflexes and nimble feet which made her a daring opponent. Even so, Simon still had difficulty accepting her as a peer: she was still a woman and born out of high nobility. She spent her time in a sheltered keep with her every whim fulfilled. The turnaround came one spring night after they both returned from a neighbouring castle. Marauders had been sighted in the area but it was presumed to be just a rumour. Alas they managed to ambush them both, outnumbering them five to one. In the end they defeated the Norse raiders and sent them howling. The nimble maiden had saved his back more than once that evening. Letting all restraint go, Simon became more familiar to the woman Nicolas loved so much until they could boast a strong friendship between them. Soon they dedicated every spare time to the noble art.Â

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Two years passed in the peaceful Entrevilles, the seasons following each other one by one as is the natural order of things. It was then Nicolasâ€™ great plan was revealed to the brotherhood: near the south border a fort had been built with every knightâ€™s need. Soon the camp inherited the name of Nicolas, hence known as Camp NiÃ§oise. The brotherhood was free to live there as they pleased, to come and go as they wished. Needless to say they controlled and guarded it themselves with the helping hand of Nicolas close by. In return the fort swore allegiance to the family Pinsson and its heirs. Meanwhile the lord had become accustomed to the everyday governing of the fief and was able to spend more time with his two favourite people. It is hard to discern the actual shift but in those years Simonâ€™s jealousy of his friendâ€™s wife slowly transformed into a burning and impossible devotion. It has ever been a thin line between love and hate and Simon crossed it. Caught unawares, his affection for her grew thanks to their time spent together. When the knight finally realised his mistake, he tried to force himself to see that there was no future for this sprout. He tried to forget it in the arms of other women but every time it left a longing for her. Leaving was also not an option for he enjoyed the time the three of them spent together too much. Everything he valued lived within the now stifling walls of Pinsson Keep, even regular visits to brotherhood could not calm his anxiety. He swore however not to risk both friendships for the foolish whims of his heart. The young lady had nearly learned everything the young knight knew. Her blade was as fast as a diving eagle and just as deathly and accurate. Nicolas gifted her a masterwork shortsword, fit to her height and strength. Simon and Nicolas found it difficult now to win a duel with the tenacious and fast AgnÃ©s.

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One hot summer day however destiny caught up.

â€œYouâ€™ve been too long in the sun, Simon: youâ€™re slowing down.â€• The clinging of swords was mixed with scuffle of

â€œI wouldnâ€™t try to make me die out of thirst, Ange. Iâ€™ll last longer than you anyway.â€• The young man retorted, swea



down his face and hair. He lunged, trying to hit her sword arm.

“Now, see? You’ve gotten yourself a sunburn and it makes you dream.” She deftly danced out of his reach, all the while leaving small clouds of sand. The little pit where they were sparring lay between several dunes near the stony coast of Couronne.

“A headache is nothing compared to your whining.” Another thrust, once again nimbly evaded. “When will you learn that a duel is fought with your brain, not your tongue?” A feint to draw her closer, she fell for it but then -before he could strike- she instantly launched her own which he barely parried with his shield. “Nice.”

“Thanks.” She lashed out again, building momentum, to the unprotected left shoulder.

“Too predictable.” Simon’s sword pushed her shortsword away with relative ease. “It’s getting boring seeing you gain.” In fact he knew she was most dangerous when she became tired. Let her come at me.

“Enjoy it.” Feigning a ruse to make him step forward but he cleverly saw through her trap. “It’s the only time you’ll sweat and pant.” Abusing his sudden consternation she stepped in, aiming a swipe at his mid.

His shield is barely in time to ward off the blow. “Now it is my turn.” Before he can bring down his sword however, she unexpectedly backslashes, catching his shield, forcing him to drop it or lose a hand. “Lady be damned.” He then took a few steps backwards.

“Hah! You best forfeit now and save you the embarrassment.”

A confident look in her eyes. Something to exploit. “Never sell the skin before the actual kill, my dear.” She haughtily approaches but anticipating her move, he deals a massive blow. Efficiency: null. Nicolas, you’d cry if you see this.

“Desperate attempt.” Even so, she has to block it with her own sword, keeping her sword arm busy enough.

Busy enough for him to snatch the edge of her shield and pull it from her grip. “I don’t like fighting unfairly.”

A most unladylike curse escaped her lips: whatever advantage she had, was now gone. She took a short breather as the sea breeze cooled her incensed body. “Let me try something else.”

“You know what they say.” His eyes fixed on hers, determined to win. “Curiosity killed the cat.”

She steadily replied that gaze with her surreal eyes. “Indeed.” Agnès circles around the weary knight, trying to find the opportune moment.

“Shall this kitten try to claw yet or is she trying to lull the mouse to sleep?” Make your move and I’ll have you.

“This kitten likes to tease her helpless prey.” An altogether too feline grin now adorned her face. “For I have seven lives.” A risky thrust straight to the sword arm, difficult to counter at such speed. Only option left to Simon was to turn his own sword counter clockwise.

“Time for the kill!” Swiftly she raises her sword upwards, catching the hilt of his sword. The force and sheer surprise knocking it out of his hand. Silence, only interrupted by the protests of gulls on the shore.

They were both standing breathless facing each other: she holding a sword aimed at his heart, he disarmed. Sweat trickled down their spines, little cool needles in the wind. The sudden turnaround had even her surprised, not knowing what to do now. “You, sir, have been disarmed by a girl.”

A satisfied but weary smile reflected in her eyes. Simon didn’t respond, just keeping her eyes locked with his. A distraction is all I need. The cawing of the gulls intensified at that moment. For just a split second she diverted her attention to the noise but it was enough for the experienced knight: he grabbed her wrist of the sword arm, twirling her around with the other. With a forceful but gentle tug, he pulled her close and playfully twisted her arm behind her back, forcing her to drop her weapon. “Didn’t I tell you not to sell...”

Their bodies were pressed to each other, hearts beating and both sweating. Simon looked down into those ethereal silver eyes who are looking upwards into his and his sentence abruptly ended. The object of his desire was now so close. He could not pull away from those endless depths and neither could she. There was a deeper truth there, one bound to him and him alone. Desire poured from the dark places of her eyes. She would not resist. She wants me. She loves me. Though it fulfilled his every hope and wish, he could not. He had learnt to live with the shame and guilt for coveting the wife of another but now they all returned with a burning vengeance which he could no longer ignore.

Releasing his grip, he pushed her away and turned away, not heeding his discarded gear. The truth is twofold: she loves me but will not risk all or her longing is too great to combat. The former means she'll let me leave the scene of betrayal unscathed and we can start burying this incident. The latter will destroy everything what we have. Oh Lady fend, please stop this coil of a triangle.

“Simon?”

And thus we've doomed ourselves.

“Simon? Wait!” Agnès started to run to catch up with Simon.

It'll grow and become ever more luscious, this forbidden fruit. Temptation has been established and we're but puppets now in the hands of a cruel and unyielding master. One day we won't be able to control the beast and we end up killing that what we hold dear.

“Simon, we need to talk.”

“There is nothing to talk about. I have to leave as soon as possible.” He had no other choice but to sacrifice himself for he could not for the world demand Nicolas to do the same otherwise. He just kept on walking as fast as possible without starting to run. Guilt-ridden fear was driving him now.

“Don't. We'll find a way, I promise. Don't leave: I don't want to lose either of you.” Her beautiful eyes loomed the edge of tears.

“Don't do this. We'll both come to regret it before our lives are over.”

“Please, stay... I love you.”

Simon closed his eyes as he muttered a silent reply. And I you. We both burn too bright with passion. Nicolas' cool wits numbs us: something we both so desperately seek. His blessing to us but a double curse for him. Forgive me, brother.

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## Chapter Six: And The Wind Cries À

Betrayal is never a spur of the moment. It's a slippery slope on which one hesitantly has to descend as footholds crumble underneath. Both Simon and Agnès desperately fought the desire that lurked deep inside their hearts: the lessons were at an end and they would meet each other only with other people present to quell their lusting tide. It was a true hell to see her holding the hand of his former master but for now loyalty to the man he respected and loved, kept the malignant floods of desire as a dam made of stone at bay. She belongs to him and he to her. What right do I even have to interfere? What curse has driven me towards lust bordering near insanity?

Luckily for Simon the events of the Old World transpired to occupy his mind. The defeat of the Imperial fleet spread throughout Bretonnia like wildfire on a scorching summer day. Apparently as a flotilla had been amassed to patrol the waters north of the realm, a combined fleet of corrupted men, dwarves and elves cut their way through the entire command. Ships burned under the relentless fire of the fleet of tainted while survivors drowned in the poisoned waters. Only a few managed to escape the maelstrom of fire and magic, their crew were scarred by what they've seen and heard. A chosen one has arisen once more, a new lord of the end time. Once again the forces of good had to rally their armies and fleets against a force that knew no sleep nor peace. The combined ships of the free men and elves engaged the gigantic raider fleet in many skirmishes but their descent upon the lands of men seemed unstoppable. By the end of summer smaller armies has already started to plunder the shorelines of the northern neighbours. In such desperate times the king -though old, still guided by a divine wisdom- called forth all able knights and their retinues to form an army under the banner of the king. An errantry war was declared against the marauding forces of chaos thus rallying every righteous soul in the land. The capital became a huge, coloured mass of banners and pavilions as one of the greatest armies in history amassed. But knowing the king's weakness, the main question on the lip of the dukes was who to lead it.

The royal envoy made due haste along the road between Couronne and Entresville. Autumn was reaching for the door,

promising rain and wind. Surely the forces of corruption would attempt a landfall before the continuous storms would scatter them? Simon and Nicolas hadnâ€™t left their keep to join the army yet, preferring to complete any arrangements for their absence. After all their land was home to the sea and might be threatened while they would have been gone. The courier arrived to disturb the preparations with news they both anticipated. Lord Nicolas Pinsson was to leave at once for the kingâ€™s court at Couronne to assist the king in the choice of a general. He bid a long farewell to his beloved wife, a kiss that lasted for ages, and left the remainder of the preparations in the hands of Simon. Two lone souls witnessed as the small party of knights headed towards the south.Â

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The next day the young knight would leave, travelling past the brotherhood to gather the knights there. They would be prepared as well, armour shining and wills indomitable. Yet his mind was restless and still awake late at night. The soft knock on his door did not surprise him one bit. Simon prayed for it to go away but when he heard the third knock, he rose from his bed to open the door. In a white night gown there stood a haunting memory which had been plaguing his mind ever since. In a flickering light of torches he could see the glistening of tears. Solemnly he wiped them off her cheeks and wrapped her in his arms.

â€œIâ€™m scared, Simon. For Nicolas, for you. Scared I might not see the two of you ever again. I am bereft of a last night of solace in the arms of my lover yet Iâ€™m too weak to sleep alone. What will I do if the both of you die on that field? The knowledge of you two not returning home, has weakened my already battered resolve. I canâ€™t stand the doubt anymore. Please silence my anxiety.â€• Tears now welled up again and poured unhindered down her cheeks.

Simon merely nodded while gently stroking her hair. At least I can give her one last night of comfort and die with a satisfied smile. There wonâ€™t be any guilt on the other side. Slowly he kicked his door shut and guided her into his arms towards his bed.

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The sea was alive with thousands of ships, small and big, unleashing veritable wave after wave of corrupted kin upon the shores. The armies of men, dwarves and elves waited patiently as the chaos spawn formed up for battle. The combined fleet of the forces of light meanwhile was trying to intercept as many of the boats crammed with their warriors as they could but they took heavy losses in exposing themselves that way. Yet every cursed man, dwarf or elf that didnâ€™t reach the shore was a blessing for the army for the enemy was beyond count anyway. The thundering rattle of broadsides pierced hulls of wood and steel who in return fired their malignant weaponry on the gallant ships of the royal navy. The deadly display of fire and black powder was an awesome sight to behold so close to the shore. Wreckage and bodies already littered the seas and moved listlessly to and from the beach in the backwash.

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The brotherhood stood front and centre, the general at its core. If he had read the guilt and shame in one of his companionâ€™s eyes he did not show. The battle plan was simple: a strong push through the core of their army and throw them back in the boiling sea. Meanwhile the other armies would try the same against the enemies lined further down the line. Hopefully the remainder would break and flee back to their ships. They had awaited their build-up to make the most their first charge which should trample their army in one fell stroke. Finally Nicolas gave the allotted signal and row upon row of bowmen steadily marched to the front. When they would fire volley upon volley of arrows into the massed groups of the enemy, their infantry would also move up, ordered not to engage their flanks until the knights would plunge deep into the rotten heart of the tainted.

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Hundreds of horns resonated in the vale as the huge group of thousands of knights spurred their horses into a canter. Finding momentum in the slightly sloped hill down the horses soon reached full gallop, the valley echoing the thundering hooves. Arcane, missiles and other foul weaponry met them head-on as they stormed towards the enemy lines. A foul burst of hot gore splattered near the group knight, fouling the armour of several. Simon saw that the acid burned straight through to their skin, making them endure extreme pains. The wounded had no choice but to follow their peers down into the war: there was no escape from the giant unit. Finally they closed the last yards when they could discern their targets.

As one the lances were lowered, aimed for their marks.

A hundred yards. They are cursed men.

Fifty yards left. They gave into temptation.

Twenty yards and closing. They betrayed their kin.

Ten and the slaughter would be upon them. I betrayed my brother.

Three... two... one... We all deserve to die here, scum, so give it your best shot. Simon's lance imploded into the chest of one of their bigger warriors. The hulking man was dead before he hit the ground and the young knight drew his sword. His warhorse kept on running, trampling all those who were unlucky to stand in its path. Blade drawn, Simon started to cut a bloody path through, not even seeing the faces of the ones that fell beneath his furious blows. Å

An hour passed and still the slaughter continued. A knight was fighting some armoured warrior a few feet further until a moment later half his body and armour shattered in pieces. Simon saw the death of the unlucky one and followed the blast to its source, some pale witch of the elven kin. There was nothing but hatred in those cold, blue eyes. Another arcane spell sent a storm of ice shards towards Simon but his armour protected him from razor sharp bits. Now a hint of fear crept in the soulless eyes of the creature. Good to know you fear death just like the rest of us. She raised her staff to deflect the blow but to no avail as his sword cut deep into her shoulders and left her broken body behind.

Weariness meanwhile started to take its toll: a deflected thrust of a spear found its way through a plate, opening a wound below. Then as he the spear was tugged away, a great explosion of fire threw him off his horse. His back sharply connected with the ground as Simon groaned in pain. The shock had numbed his senses but as he regained his composure he found himself alone in a great crater filled with bloody and dismembered bodies. His horse was not to be found anywhere. All along the hole the fighting continued but Simon felt as if he was in the eye of the storm right now. Clambering his way up, he tried to recognise anything but chaos reigned in the swirling mass of steel and flesh and he could discover no other knights. Lacking a better plan he made his way downhill.

Thrust. Parry. Slash. Has the night fallen or will these dark clouds never disappear? Dodge. Counter and kill. Hours or maybe days could have passed and Simon was still battling his way to nowhere. The rush of battle had faded a long time ago, its numbing effects disappearing. A sharp pain reminded him of the wound at his side. Deflect. Thrust. Thrust again. Maybe I died and this is what the afterlife looks like. A man stormed towards him, axe held high. Simon just ran him through. Wouldn't that be a fitting reward for the warmongers and the innocent they drag with them?

The finale was near: whether it was the end of the battle or his own didn't matter, one of them was bound to come. Simon had passed the corpse of one of brotherhood not a while back, his jaw dislocated by a massive bludgeoning weapon. Slowly his name "Colin" had drifted to the surface of his consciousness but the healthy face to match it did not. Another faceless to join the dead. As if there weren't enough of them already. The cackling of lightning and the flashing of purple light drew his attention. On a heap of corpses there danced two lone figures, a duel which involved magic and swords. Nicolas! The Lady blessed you this day! His brother clearly was the more skilled of the two, easily deflecting his powerful but inaccurate blows and countering them with well-struck cuts on the corrupted. Sometimes the chaos spawn would throw a cowardly surge of raw magic but the blessing of the Lady soaked it harmlessly. Bleeding from many wounds this duel could only end in one way. Å

But then Nicolas tripped over something in the hill of corpses, falling backwards and dropping his weapon. Sprawled between the many bodies he lay, unmoving as he awaited the end. Simon surged forwards, ignoring the pain and protesting limbs, rushing past friend or foe heedlessly. As the foul sword descended upon the general of the royal army, the sharp blade of Simon pierced deep and hard until his hilt met the flesh into the side of their champion. The hulk of a man dropped his weapon harmlessly and fell sideward down the gruelling stack of bodies. A booming and hackled voice rose over the thunder of the battle. "You dared to slay the anointed on this day of unholy energy? You puny mortal! You have no idea of the energies you unleashed." A warped humanoid to who the voice belonged floated closer on a cruel disc. "The world of men shall fall and I'm its herald! The end shall come and you will lead its army! You shall bear the gift of the grandfather and return to us one day to fulfil your destiny." The creature started a foul incantation and for the first time Simon knew true fear. Helplessly he had to watch the shifting creature finish its spell, a ray of dark magic unleashing from its claw. Now it was Nicolas turn to sacrifice himself for his friend. The foul arcane hit the unfortunate knight who heroically threw himself in front of Simon to save him. The dark energies crackled like cinders in a fire and vanished. After hours of constant battle, the sudden silence was deafening. Simon noticed that he was holding his friend in his arms who had been knocked out cold apparently by the blast but was still breathing. Running his hand along his brow, he

suspected there to be a slight fever but nothing a few days of rest would not overcome.Â

The fever lingered for days alas, rest or no rest. Meanwhile great pyres were lit to burn the bodies of the corrupted. Priests sanctified the earth to bury the fallen knights and lowborn. Many corpses were mangled and mutilated beyond recognition by the fell and evil powers of corruption. Scores of commoners would never return to their land and family, given their lives to defend them. After that day many a heraldry disappeared from remembrance, its owner having made the ultimate sacrifice. Eleven of the brotherhood would never return to their fort, the corpse of Vincent never too be found. Simon searched high and wide between the many unknown knights who perished on the field of glory but nowhere he saw his familiar face nor the thrice crossed blue lines, spurring a black tower, on a white background. All battles end the same: mixed feeling of euphoria of the victory, the pleasure and guilt of having survived instead some other poor sod and a gradual understanding what the cost will be. It had been a great victory for the world of free men, a bitter and dearly paid but a triumph nonetheless : the enemy's army routed with most of them left dead on the last shores they would pester. Some had managed to escape inland but were not of any great concern, their number too few and too scattered. Their champion was once again destroyed by the light, just one other chosen whose name would fade in history as a story to scare children into behaving. Their monstrous fleet had retreated to the icy north waters after it witnessed the defeat of the army, harassed by the fleets in pursuit. Their own losses however was a stinging wound on any celebrations. Slowly the royal army dispersed to return to their homelands. The greatest blow struck to the nation of Bretonnia however was lying on a cod in a tent. Nicolas fever didn't lessen; on the contrary it intensified, burning the poor knight up. His last wish was to die on his ancestral ground so the surviving members of the brotherhood finally broke camp and left the stained field. For years it would remain a barren field where no wholesome plant would grow, the beaches forever defiled by norse blood.Â

Arriving home was a painful moment: Simon didn't have the heart to warn Agnès of the events. She descended, overjoyed with their return, but then she discovered the truth in his eyes which he could not hide: Nicolas was slowly dying, trapped in a furnace that is his body. Even the king's personal physician could not subdue the foul temperature, mages had no solution to fight the disease that was slowly incinerating his will and priests could only give him the solace of the last rites. Nicolas was barely conscious those days, barely able to see the many tears in the eyes of his love and the sorrow in the eyes of his brother. Hideous boils filled with black pus and dark red burn marks began to dot his face and body after a week, further defiling his body but still he fought a desperate battle. Alone on the top of the battlements of his mind he struggled with no reinforcements arriving against the curse that had been bestowed upon him. His will fighting for that last shining parcel of hope which kept him struggling to face the disease: to survive for her and to hold her again. Nicolas clung to that small beacon of hope as the flames burned ever higher. Occasionally the words of familiar but faceless voices would fade in, telling him to fight, to show a sign or to forgive them. Â

One night in that desperate time the shallow breathing of Nicolas had become ever more faint and erratic- Simon visited the castle's chapel all alone. The morning was on its way but the young knight found no bliss in sleep. And thus he had dressed and slipped into the dark night. I might as well do something useful for my brother. The full moon turned the temple into a twilight world with its eerie light. It had ever been cold in the chapel but that night it seemed to be freezing, his breath turning into unreal clouds of steam that as quickly disappeared. Before the altar, he kneeled and casted his eyes down.

Thrice blessed be She, who strengthens the living, comforts the dead and guides the unborn. Blessed is She who with her divine wisdom shapes the lives of men.

In the central part of the keep another tear-struck soul was maintaining a vigil near the disfigured body of her husband and love. Her head rested against her chest, her tears soaking his clothes. His breathing had ever become the more shallow, the beating of his heart more frantically. No matter where they derived their powers from, the counsellors gave him a few days at most.

Lady, who guards over us and oversees us in the glades and forests, hear me tonight in this time of need.

Oh, Nicolas, my love. Where does your mind wander now? She wiped her tears away she tucked her head besides his. Not knowing whether you listen to my pleas at all, strains my uneasy mind. I ache to speak to you once more.

Hear me plead to you in your everworld. Let the winds carry my words to you.

Somewhere deep down there has to be the Nicolas I love and worship, ever struggling against the disease that violates his body. Deep down I know I can reach you. Agnès was now whispering his swollen ear.

The walls of your favourite son's mind are crumbling. The cursed kiss of the corrupt invoking an infernal and unholy disease that batters his failing defences.

“The sickness is a curse, my love.” The sad maiden confided to him. “A curse that’ll tear you asunder.”

We stand powerless before its fearsome might over the one we love. The corrupting forces turning his temple into a blight.

“No-one knows how to aid you in your struggle or how to ease the pain for they don’t understand the nature of the curse.”

The torture has gone on too long, how can you let your favourite son suffer so much?

“You’ve burned for oh so long in this eternal pit of fire because, it’s a curse to punish.”

He has ever been faithful, ever been a devout son to you and the land. Never once betraying your trust you bestowed unto him instead wearing with pride and honour that which is most holy of all.

A curse to punish me for my betrayal.”

Your first and foremost warrior under this sun: true and unwavering in the face of the greatest evils.

“Me betraying all that was beautiful and sacrosanct between us two. I violated the unique bond we only share.

“You’ll be sure to agree he deserves a more rewarding destiny for this years of unceasing loyalty and service then this foul and despicable fate.

“It was a night of my gravest mistake and an insult to you, I shall never forgive myself for it.”

Please, find the love to heal his broken body, to aid his besieged mind and return him to us once more.

“I have to confess to you and pray for your forgiveness before you are torn away from me forever.”

Let him find his way back home.”

One night of passion with the one you love best second. Forgive Simon, Nicolas, forgive us. You both mean so much to me, I could not choose and I ended up hurting you in a way that is more lethal than a dagger’s thrust, more painful than to feel your life slip away day by day and more stinging than a viper’s kiss.”

Look kindly upon your son.

“Forgive us.”

The gates were opened and he embraced the corrupting disease. As his hope turned out to be just as rotten as his flesh would be, his trust befouled as this disease would turn into a high blessing by the powers who had never lied to him and his love perverted into all-pervasive hate against those that call themselves the faithful.

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Chapter Seven: Vengeance

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True betrayal is a long and winding road into a deep chasm which only mortal minds can reach. Once embraced the fever vanished as they witnessed a true miracle come true. Even so, the malignant forces were still at work in that once pure body, twisting and corrupting it for its higher purpose. Nicolas favoured to wear a cloak to disguise his disfigurements until the time for his vengeance for this rotten world would come. Likewise he turned away any advances made by Agnès, reminding her his body was still weak and in pain. In fact the boils had erupted like small volcanoes, spewing black pus which covered his sweating skin. He quickly began to gain weight until he could not hide his perverse obesity anymore. The outside world suspected it to be a lingering effect of his disease and mourned the loss of its warrior. Visits became increasingly more scarce as the legendary lord became more distant and rarely ventured outside. Travellers started to shun the castle and its moody lord. Simon and Agnès worryingly chalked it up due to the massive trauma his mind and body have sustained in those gruesome weeks. When cornered he’d assure them with fleeting interest that he’d

be fine, fighting to control the starting change in his voice. Weeks passed as his descent became ever more apparent, a chasm between his former world and the realm of corruption that couldn't be bridged anymore. Meanwhile snow threatened to engulf the land once more in the tidal reign of winter. Vengeance was best delivered cold, when least expected, with an icy stab that would harvest sorrow and despair.

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Through the weeks dark clouds had been pulling inwards but for the moment the coast had been spared any assault of the most miserable season of the year. The days however had been a daily struggle against the pervasive cold, the morning laden with little shards of ice on the roofs and ground. True to the season Nicolas had even seen more reclusive, a dark weather likewise conquering his mind. Shall the storm of snow bring misery as well to his mind? Simon found himself wondering on that subject for most of his days, worried about the mental stability of his friend. With each day he seemed to be slipping farther away from him. And Agnès. The poor woman is desperate for his affection but it seems that their bond has mutated in his weeks of sickness. The scarce times I get to see her, weariness radiates from her eyes, her silver pearls lined red from the bitter tears to which seems there isn't no end. Her mood is toppled by doubt and guilt: she doesn't blame me, I know, but it is hard not to blame yourself when she suffers so much.

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Dark clouds, their spectra ranging from light grey to pitch black, passed overhead to wage war on the frozen landscape. The cold touch of the parapet didn't seem to bother Simon as he gazed out to sea. Even the sea seems void of light, a dark torment out pull the living to its cold depths. The wind tried its best to chase the living inside as a strong and freezing sea breeze ruled the shores. I don't mind the cold, it seems to numb my worries at least.

“Sir Gastinois? The voice who had interrupted his chain of thoughts belonged to a master sergeant of the keep.

“Yes, sergeant? The beacon of Fort Niçois is ablaze, sir. It's been burning for near a half an hour now. The surprised the knight as the south border was the safest of all: years could have passed and the warning fire would not have been alit.

“Lit? Are you sure? The short nod of the sergeant send a shiver down his spine.

“Alright, has the lord been warned? Meanwhile he started to make for his quarter to don his armour and prepare his gear followed on his heels by sergeant.

“That's just it, sir: we don't seem to be able to find him anywhere.”

A sudden unfathomable fear materialised in his mind which Simon quickly tried to suppress. “Have the guard been warned?”

“Yes, sir, they are assembling as we speak.”

“Warn the lady of the situation and continue to search our lord. As soon as the guard is gathered, ride on to the castle. I'll be riding ahead, I'll meet you there or in the event of trouble earlier on. Get!”

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Simon rode on with all speed he could spur his horse towards the beacon which burned bright as a star in the night sky. The first specks of snow melted on his cold armour but started to hamper his sight. The gates of the small keep were ajar and silence dominated the surroundings. There was no sign of forced entry nor did there seem to be any trouble which fortified the fear which he had tried to quench with the obvious. Surely Nicolas was down in the city or travelling in the countryside. The threat will be nothing more than a brave band of orcs lost in the plains. Holding his breath he tried to push the wooden doors further open but something was blocking the left one and the right one seemed to still be strongly fastened. Simon put his shoulder against the fortified wood and braced himself. Facing the fierce might of the knight it

gave way but left a stream of blood behind. The knight's heart skipped a beat as he saw the bloody remains of a corpse just inside the gatehouse, its corpse sprawled against the door. The man had been brutally skinned, its gear laying discarded around the poor soul's body. The heraldry on his broken shield suggested it'd be one of the brotherhood, a recent arrival by the name of Jasper. As a token of last respect, the knight pulled his cloak over his head. A fallen in a war which you had nothing to do with.

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All over the fort he found the same grisly scene: men which he had known, had fought with and loved, all had undergone the same bloody fate as Jasper. Their bodies were unrecognisable to the tear-struck eyes of Simon, their last fight one without him. There was no doubt anymore for the young grail guardian just a guilty emptiness which torn his mind asunder. One by one he covered their bloody corpses with the cloaks and stained sheets, every time praying for their soul to find their kingdom of heaven. Every time the guilt reminded him, he wasn't fit nor worthy to be standing here. A betrayer to all they believed in and now I betray them with my presence. He stopped every single time and tears welled unwillingly for the old guard and their undeserved fates. What hurt him even more deep was that he could not even recognise the familiar grooves on the forehead of his old friend Jean de Garlande, the sly smile of Ticham Malfas or the soft and young eyes of Martin de Tinnaire. In their cruel deaths Nicolas had taken their faces literally and physically.

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A trail of blood led the unwilling knight to the stairs leading to the beacon on top of the tower. Slowly to not lose his footing on the slippery stairs Simon ascended the blood-coated steps. Twirling and twirling it gave Simon's mind to catch up with the tragedy, the inhumanity these loyal knights were struck with, the curse he had brought upon these innocent souls. He did not want to see what awaited them on the top of the flights for it was his fault, his betrayal had heralded their doom. Life seemed to have stopped in that small confined space, the only way to guess time still passed in that choking silence was the occasional dripping resonating through the stone staircase. There was no Nicolas to greet him to the top of the tower, no chance to redeem himself and right the wrongs he had collected over the year. Impaled on two swords embedded strongly in the sturdy oaken door there was another skinless corpse, his blood dripping on the stone floor. There was no familiar face to be recognised, just one other body, grinning wickedly at Simon's sadness and guilt.

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Mentally preparing for the grisly task that had to be done, Simon advanced to the corpse whose lidless eyes seemed to follow his progress with keen interest. At his feet lay a shield, mostly covered in blood by then. Determined to know whose life had ended here, impaled on a door in a castle far away from home, the knight tried to brush off the sticky layers of blood. His heart skipped a beat as he recognised the grail in a rose on a white and black divide: there was no hopeful doubt left in Simon's mind: Nicolas had forsaken his name, land and goddess in favour of the dark powers of the world. Thrice cursing his name and his own part in this fell play, the overwhelmed knight lifted the poor soul's body of its disgracing position and carried it all the way down as the start of his self-induced penance. Blood soaked his tabard first, drinking deep its water of life, bloody streams then trailed their way down on his plate, staining the forged iron, at the base of the stairs the blood had covered the greater part of his armour. As he walked into the yard, he gently laid the body on the stone pavement. The muster of Pinson's Keep had arrived at the scene, horrified by the bloody account. Bravely they had ventured past the gatehouse to gaze upon the full brunt of Nicolas' anger. In trance Simon moved past them until he found their sergeant. "Bury the dead with the honour they deserve, clean the place to get rid of the stain and leave a cohort here until we can empty the keep."

The sergeant merely nodded at the hollow voice of his lord, his blood-drenched tabard unsettling and his sadness irradiating from his dull eyes.

Suddenly tired and drained, the knight nodded in his own reply and sighed. His trait was heavy with sorrow as he walked to the gates of the small fort. He would never enter Fort Niãoise again.

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## Chapter Eight: The Last Duel

Agnès refused to believe him, to understand what Nicolas's new allegiance made him capable of doing. Accepting after all would mean she'd have to accept that she had driven a stake into his heart a few months ago which completed his transformation. Deep down she knew the blame that lay at her feet and suffered all the more for it. She heard the king announce that Nicolas was a traitor of the land and ought to be hunted down without mercy and was appalled by the measure. In his investment as the duke of Couronne, he allotted Simon as temporary warden to the lands of the Pinsson. Agnès now looked distant and cool at the knight, blaming him for scheming for power. Simon could not afford the luxury of bliss and was immersed in the search for his old friend. Winter however made him lose track of him in the Pale Sisters and he returned empty-handed to Entrevilles. The cold and long nights were lonely and filled with guilt-ridden prayers and tears. The lady of the castle meanwhile kept her facade at large while inside she hurt even more than Simon but she was not ready to accept her part in this cruel game.

As winter vanished from the land, it took all trace of Nicolas with it: the most which Simon could determine he had passed into the imperial realm towards an unknown destination. Later that year he received the blessing of the king to become the new lord of the Pinsson fief, an honour which he had dreaded. All sigils and banners bearing the heraldry of Nicolas were burnt in a bonfire as was custom in dealing with a traitor and were replaced by Simon's own coat-of-arms which made him feel the betrayer instead. The former lady of the keep still did not speak to him but Simon was determined to let her slip away from him as well: every day he spent time with her which she dutifully underwent though her hard glance still betrayed her burning heart of stone.

Years passed and the slowly the wound closed but the scar remained. Common belief has it that Nicolas was dead forevermore to never trouble the lands anymore. Though Simon's mind doubted this, in his mind he yearned for it and to receive a sign so he could end that miserable chapter of his life. Every year Simon paid his respect to his companions who were buried near the now desolate and nameless fort but though his tears had dried up, the hurt lingered. Agnès seemed to open up once more thanks to his persistent courtesy calls. Her mind and heart were still wounded but the bleeding had stopped to make way for bruises. She finally accepted her part in the downfall of Bretonnia's greatest but never forgave herself. Which made two of them and slowly they found solace in each other's arms once more. It stopped at solace for she did not long for anything more until Nicolas was unquestionably dead or returned to her. Her love for Simon was gradually restored but would never burn as strong as before.

The higher the star of a man rises on the firmament, the longer and the more crushing its fall, destroying all that surround him and pulling them with him as a sinking ship headed for the deep ends of the sea. The sea bears me towards familiar lands, the sea has betrayed my former land: the sea has brought me to the shores of home. The broken and swollen black lips of the man formerly known as Nicolas parted in a wicked grin to show the rotten and darkened crumbling teeth beneath. His longship struggled underneath his armoured feet against the surf like the hundreds of others now making landfall. Little dots of men fled their coastal villages for the coming storm of men which would scorch the very earth to better suit the lords of destruction. He would end their puny lives and bring the blessing of the four gods to these lands. Deceiving light would be replaced by truthful darkness.

The news of the defeat of the army of the duke of Lyonesse shocked the land and sent a shiver of fear through the hearts of every knight and man. Out of nowhere the corrupted men had arrived on the shores of the dukedom, their crude and primitive ships landing before the ducal fleet could react. A giant of a man in a body riddled by pest and disease led this tempest, parts of his body covered with crumbled Bretonnian armour. The hastily mustered army of the progeny of Thierulf had no chance against the enemies of order and was pushed back to the city where it now was besieged. The king had risen his banner, declaring a war of errantry, against the men of the north. Two armies would be rallied north and south of the forest of Arden to strike the hordes besieging the city from two sides. Simon called out to his loyal knights and serfs to prepare for war so they could meet the northern army led by the duke of L'Anguille at Grasgar Castle. Safe for his duty to lord and land, he had a second reason to muster his army to meet the Norse raiders in the fields of battle: the tales of their warlord had awakened old fears and he wanted to look upon the monstrosity himself. Lady Agnès had the same suspicions and insisted on coming to which Simon didn't have the heart to refuse. So the two of them and the army of Pinsson marched to meet their former master.

Weeks later and Lyonesse still stood defiant on its rock to the forces of oblivion. Meanwhile the two armies had marched all the way to the beleaguered city. The enemies were even vaster a number than first expected, outnumbering the king's forces a hefty ten to one. Their forces had stopped storming the walls when they arrived and now prepared just like them to meet them on the battlefield. The day before the battle Simon mostly prepared for the coming onslaught but every once in a while his gaze wandered over the endless mass of corrupted mortals. It surrounded a little hill which stood as an island in the sea of black. A tent made of rough leathery skins stood erected on the grassy knoll, signifying the presence of their warlord. Near the evening a figure emerged from the tent, too far out for Simon to make out but he seemed to be a giant mass of fat, partially covered by battered and rusted armour which looked Bretonnian in origin. The statuesque being wobbled over to an empty banner pole and hoisted a crude flag. The knight paled as he recognised the dirtied white and black divide and was angered to see the rose replaced by the eight-pointed star which entrapped the grail. In his mind he could see the corrupted mass of a man mocking him.

Mostly they are Norsekin but several units of the warped armoured men have been sighted. For as far as we know their demon spawns aren't on the battlefield which should be to an advantage to us. The duke of L'Anguille so surmised from reports of the scouts at the war council. Simon was perched at the edge of the pavilion, his experience and title allowing him to be present but leaving him no options but to listen to his battle plans. Their longboats are patrolling the coast line, harassing our fleet and occasionally moving men from one part of the island to another. They could be a threat to us if

they move entire units from their besieging troops to the shore: we are outnumbered already and thisâ€™ll be a long stretch as it is.â€™

â€™Canâ€™t we wait for reinforcements of the other races? Surely the Emperorâ€™s army is just a few weeks away?â€™ A name slipped from Simonâ€™s mind interrupted.

â€™That they are but the duke has let us know that his position is strained by the continual assaults and wonâ€™t last much longer. We canâ€™t let a fellow Bretonnian down now that we are here so weâ€™ll hit them hard and fast. Our southern army is encamped over the hills here.â€™ The general pointed at a place on the map. â€™Theyâ€™ll commence the hostilities by charging their left flank, hopefully by surprise. When they have drawn most of the enemyâ€™s attention, weâ€™ll sweep in on their right and mop up what remains. Lady willing, the combined effort will unbalance our enemy and drive them back into the sea. Now unto the specific details.â€™

â€™Milord?â€™ The entire tent looked up from the map to Simon Gastinois with surprised annoyance in their eyes.

â€™Castellan Gastinois, I tolerate your presence here but donâ€™t interrupt again or Iâ€™ll have you removed.â€™

â€™But milord, I humbly beg your attention for I may have information vital to our success.â€™

â€™Donâ€™t try my patience.â€™ The voice of the duke grumbled.

â€™Please, sir, heed me. Heâ€™ll expect exactly such a plan.â€™

â€™He?â€™

â€™Iâ€™ve identified whose heraldry their warlord is carrying, milord. He used to be my friend, Lady fend, he used to be our friend. Their warlord is nothing less but Nicolas Pinsson.â€™

â€™Pinsson? The traitor?â€™

â€™And an esteemed sword master and tactician. Heâ€™ll know weâ€™ll focus on his flank for he knows our way of thinking better than we do. Heâ€™ll probably suspect as well that another army is beyond the hill line. Seeing the few numbers of our army and the absence of several dukedoms: he isnâ€™t that stupid. If weâ€™ll ride tomorrow as ordered, weâ€™ll be feeding the crocodiles at noon.â€™

The general hesitated but beckoned him closer. â€™What would you have us do, young knight?â€™

â€™Let the southern army do exactly what he expects on the morrow for itâ€™ll give us a bigger chance. Iâ€™ll wager that his army will be the weakest. We ought to charge there and make our way to their warlord. Defeat him and the serpent will lose its head. Weâ€™ve seen before whatâ€™ll happen then. Theyâ€™ll scatter like roaches in the sun and return to their bitter land to fight with each other once again. Itâ€™ll be our only chance to emerge victorious tomorrow.â€™ Simon chose not to mention that he was planning to challenge the warlord himself. I have to undo that what Iâ€™ve made.

â€™Itâ€™s a big gamble, sir, to leave our entire flank of our army open to their counterattack. We could risk certain defeat.â€™

â€™True, milord, but weâ€™ll have a better chance of victory also.â€™ Simonâ€™s heart was made up: whatever his orders, he would lead his army into the centre of the bestial army and fight his way to Nicolas. Let it be my hand, oh revered Lady, to correct what my treacherous heart has made.

A silence ensued which no-one present seemed willing to interrupt: the general seemed to be in thoughts. Finally the duke of Artois spoke up. â€™Alderic? Whatâ€™ll have us do?â€™

â€™Warn Guyonne that weâ€™ll follow his plan, Hivern. Maybe he can keep a reserve force to back up our flank. I want our levies to follow up in pyramid formation to buy us as much time as needed, archers and stakes at the far most of the right flank, knights on the left. Gentlemen, pray to the lady our lances strike true and our swords can cleanse this land of this foul taint.â€™

Simon had taken up position alongside the other knights to overview the battle. The southern army had charged by early dawn to quickly become stuck in a quagmire of men. The bowmen had already taken up position and their volleys landed into the sea. Every once in a while some foul arcane emerged from their ranks to wreak havoc in the archersâ€™ midst. A knight rode up to Simon Gastinois who was surprised as he recognised the heraldry: Jorge de Baille-Mal. Astounded he could not speak before Jorge did but his voice was not his: the soft, pleading voice of AgnÃ©s emerged from his helmet. â€™Simon, donâ€™t say anything. I borrowed this armour from the storehouse so I can help you.â€™

â€™Help me? This is no adventure, AgnÃ©s!â€™ The knight hissed at the armour of his friend of old. â€™People die here and I lose you here as well. Please donâ€™t do this.â€™

“I have to. For the same reason you have to. You know I’m a fair blade and my heart is made up: I shall see Nicolas again even in his current state. I beg you: let me stay at your side. I need to know whether I’ve done everything I could before this day is over. I need to know, Simon, whether there is redemption for my love.” Her helmet dropped a few inches, betraying the tears she was silently shedding.

“Whatever happens, Agnès: stay close. If I fall, I want your promise to retreat immediately. Promise me!”

“I do, Simon Gastinois, I do.”

Finally a cacophony of horns announced to coming charge. With one last look at Agnès in the armour of Jorge, Simon joined the big lance that followed the king’s banner to the centre, closely followed by the aspiring warrior maiden. The scores of knights passed their levies who were already marching towards the enemy and aimed for the centre of the enemy. The yards between the two was now quickly closing as the destriers plunged into full gallop. Every once in a while their foul instruments of war and their dweomercraft burned holes in the formation which were quickly filled up with other knights. The thunder of hooves blocked out any other sounds. Looking out of the corner of his helmet Simon could still see Agnès riding next to him. Before they knew it they were trampling the living and corpses who were pushed around by the first ranks. Their quick advance inevitably started to slacken and came to a standstill. Throwing away his unwieldy lance, he drew his sword, signalling Agnès to do the same. For a second he removed his helmet to get his bearings. The hammock was just a few yards away to their right but divided by hundreds of corrupted men. Pushing his trusty warhorse into a trot, Simon pushed his way past his own ranks until he passed their first line. He did not stop, ignoring the warning cries of other knights, but forced his warhorse on, all the while clearing a path with his deadly blade. In his trail she followed dutiful, nearly frozen in fear but determined to see this through to the end. Agnès bit her lip and gathered her resolve, thrusting her shortsword into a charging horse man.

Reaching the hammock seemed to Simon as the perfect dream of a battle as he looked back on that day: every sword blow was true, shattering steel, leather and flesh, and the enemy never even managed to penetrate his armour. The Lady’s light shone on his enterprise with an approving smile and none of the barbarians could stand before his divine wrath. To the knight it seemed as they were slowed down, trying clumsily to mow down his horse, but he maintained his blessed speed. It wasn’t long before their bloodlust was twisted into fear for these otherworldly warriors. Not even their greatest and strongest were able to stand in their path of the faceless horsemen, light emanating from every groove of their strong and smooth armours. A war chief roared a deafening challenge and attacked but the horsemen deftly shifted his charger out of the way, the great waraxe cleaving nought but air. A backhanded swipe bursted the flesh of his back, blood welling up from the deep wound as he plunged headfirst in the trampled mud. The warrior behind him seemed smaller and less strong but her aim was lethal and her sword even faster than the first one. Not even the armoured anointed of their gods could prevent their march, their unholy plates crushed under fierce blows while their cursed blood trickled on the blood-soaked earth. None dared to defy them any longer and a wedge opened a path for the blessed warriors.

Seeing it so close was to lose every last hope for redemption for Nicolas. Agnès and he removed their helmets to gaze upon the barbaric monstrosity. The leather skins used as a canvas were humans, their limbs clear to see and faces hollow. The structure was humungous, hundreds of men and women having been slain to be stitched in a pavilion the size of a small house. For minutes the two stared horror-struck at the gruesome tent in the eye of the storm while all around the fighting intensified. The armies of the king had linked up and were pushing for the sea, battling a desperate and zealous enemy. The levies were now being crushed underneath the full brunt of the enemy’s left flank, their positions untenable but still they held their ground for their lords and king.

A voice as broken as his body greeted Simon as he walked into the sickening tent. “Brother, how nice for you to visit. And look, there is my love too. I wonder if she’ll love me more now.” The great hulking mass of fat and puss turned towards them. A stranger had addressed them, there was nothing familiar about the corrupted body of bile, sweat and puss-ridden boils. Unhealthy fat had doubled his size, black puss from even more revolting and stinking masses of boils covering most of it as a layer of clothes. Scars and festering wounds adorned his body as token of great pride in their unhallowed nature. His face was the most disfigured: one eye had been overgrown by a layer of green ooze, the other looked at him with great hatred, its bloodshot and speckled pupil holding no resemblance to those clear eyes of yore, his hair had grown faint and long, hanging as last remnants of his failing humanity from foul patches of scabbed flesh, his lips were now bursted black and swollen which were still unable to hide its rotten and brown teeth underneath. It seemed to grin at the moment, every last detail a mockery of a human smile.

“Nicolas?” Through her tears she tried to plead to him once more. “Oh Nicolas. Please return to us. Don’t be lost to me.” All will and attempt to persuade him in her voice was gone as she had understood there was no return for him, not in this lifetime, anymore.

“Nicolas?” The memory seemed to anger it. “Nicolas died on that bed years ago. A coup de grace of whispered betrayal lady.”

“Focus on me, fiend. She is not to blame.”

“Oh, but she is, little Simon, she is. But she was not alone in that bed, was she? All those years you’d been my only pupil my only confidant. As the madness devoured me, it made me see how you played my naive nature all this time with your

lies and false loyalty. Chivalry is nothing more but a game for you, a challenge to win, a farce to hide the ugly inside of you, one who doesn't refrain from driving daggers in the back of those who would call him friend. At least I wear my true nature on the outside now, thanks to the gods of truth and wisdom who opened my eyes to the world and who showed what a horrible place mortals have made it to be with their petty wishes and desire. My beauty lies deep down where no foul, lying mortal can find and hurt it. The powers have told me more truths than a lifetime of serving a false idol. Their goals are simple but earnest. Never have they deceived me. They whispered these things to me, just like they foresaw your foolish attempt to come here. As they heralded this moment, I could revel in the fact that my revenge would be complete. It's what brought me here, to this shore. I shall kill your love right before eyes, just like you did mine, and you'll be helpless to resist, just like I was. Her last breath will be the last thing you see as darkness takes you to serve me as my witless slave. Without that corrupt mind, you might be for once be a loyal servant to me. Together we shall bring truth to this land.

"You'll have to beat me first."

"Oh, I was so hoping you would say that."

It drew a jagged and dark sword the size of a double-hander with one hand and mockingly saluted the knight as before a duel between knights. It laughed, a deep and rasping rumble, as it easily parried the angered blow of Simon. For a creature that size and weight it was surprisingly nimble on its grotesque feet. "See, my friend? The true gods never betray their chosen. They show who we truly are: flawed and ugly. But I wield that strength, bearing that knowledge. Corruption is not more but nature's strength: mutation to better oneself."

The knight merely saved his breath, knowing that words might exhaust him. A counterattack hammered his sword towards Simon which sent him several feet back as he blocked it with his shield. It wields that blade with the speed of a longsword and the strength of a bull. Simon stepped just in time to his right to evade a sharp jab of the sword, feeling the air being cleaved in his face. He lunged for the sword and knocked it out of balance. Using this to his advantage he took several steps forwards and landed a blow in his side. The cut wasn't deep but dark purple blood still welled up. Good: what bleeds can also die.

The hulk merely laughed at the pathetic wound. "Wounds are new ways for the grandfather to bless his champion." His sword he slung back and hit Simon square in the back. His plate held the blade from shattering it but the force made him tumble forward and roll painfully over the floor. Even before he could react the giant had slashed once again, luckily misjudging the distance, but still shattering his shield as his sword drilled through the wood and steel plate into the ground. Simon unleashed his straps and let the useless thing lying on the floor. Agnès meanwhile looked at the two men fighting, her knees weak from fear and her eyes wet from sadness. Now that she had seen what he had become, she had no will nor force anymore to face the thing and help Simon in his struggle. Paralysed she stood as the two lives fought for their lives. It doesn't matter who wins: today I die.

The subsequent powerful sweeps of the greatsword had forced Simon with his back to the wall, facing the thing with its wicked evil smile. "End of the ride, my friend, I hope you're ready to embrace your new life." It took the knight all his power to ward off the finishing blow but it glanced off his blade into the structure of the tent. The sword ripped through the horrific canvas and broke several supports. As a part of the pavilion collapsed on top of the monstrosity, Simon ran to its back and ran his sword with all his might through the fat. It soon became stuck into the sickening mass but it did not seem to hurt the corrupted creature. The knight lost his grip on his sword as it twirled and freed himself from the leathered skins. Unarmed he watched the behemoth threateningly step closer. There was no other option but to move back.

Agnès saw Simon driving his sword into the unguarded back of the beast and prayed to the Lady to end this battle. Spare him some grace and let him pass from this world. Save your wayward son and guide his soul to your open arms. To no avail: it mildly irritated the being and it began to drive the unarmed knight back. For a split second the paralysis was lifted and she threw her shortsword in the direction of her love. It landed next to him and he managed to pick it up before the following blow. Even more at an disadvantage, Simon knew he could not win this battle this way. Sure he drew blood but the creature seemed to endure those flesh wounds easily. He needed to find a way to expose its weak spots: its heart -Lady knows where that is hidden that carcass-, its mind or its windpipe. His mind was racing while he tried to keep evading its unceasing and unyielding blows. His eyes caught his saviour of before and a plan -desperate but his only hope- formed in his mind. Timing the subsequent blows.

Suddenly he sprang forward thrusting his small sword forward with both hands. As a reflex the greatsword swept to unbalance the blow. Simon expected this parry as he had learnt it from the same man whose corrupt shell he was fighting now. Now to surprise him with something he never taught me. The knight sliced his sword by the edge of the longer sword upwards with a devastating speed. Its sharp edge drove itself deep in the wrist of the creature, severing muscle and bone. It roared as he lost all feeling in its gnarled fist and dropped the hilt. Using the momentum he had bought, he drove himself forward, using all his weight of his body and armour to drive his elbow deep in the foul gut of the creature. It reeled backwards, tripping over a crudely made table, unto the ground. Safe for the distant sounds of battle outside and the heavy breathing of the combatants, silence dominated the tent. The small sword was now pressed against the bulging mass of its neck, its tip already drawn blood. Simon found he could not finish it.

“Go ahead, finish it! End my wretched existence of pain and misery!” His grating and deep voice boomed through the sickening tent of bloody human hides.

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## Chapter Nine: The Dead Are The True Heroes

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Eyes vexed into the distance as the sun began to set, open to its beauty but not registering his surroundings, as a sleepwalker in a nightmare world, the young knight stumbled towards the horizon, his body shaking by overwhelming sadness. Sorrow which dominated his mind, torturing him with memories of the times they had. He felt guilt but there was gratitude there as well: his death was an end. Finally this chapter of his life filled with his most precious and most desperate moments was at an end. Following closely in his wake an equally saddened woman whose main worry was over him: she already had the time to say goodbye to her first live. Once devoted to him, now his. Looking into oblivion, a great mirror for a man’s soul, it can tell a lot about the sanity of the said person. Simon had just ended the life of his greatest inspiration, his best friend and only brother. Whatever part of the knight had enjoyed life to its fullest to this moment, had died at the same moment his sword had pierced the vein of life of that shell that had imprisoned his friend. No matter whether he’d be in the entertaining act of hunt, the righteous smiting of the enemies of the land, in the arms of his love or looking at the blissful games of his progeny, there would be a beast of darkness looking there as well, hidden right there beneath his sockets. A black despair, procreated by his own guilty mind, that consumed the perfection of happiness. An endless pit of sorrow which would suck true pleasure from such acts as marrow from a bone, consuming his sanity from within. A voiceless whisper accusing him a murderer, a soulless taker of lives, or even worse: a vile and hated slayer of his own brother. His hand would ever be stained with his blood, no matter whether he’d wash it with water, confession or life. Within that pool of grief lay the seed of corruption. If pushed too far, it could sprout its thorny bush, numbing the mind and undermining a man’s compassion. Thus the circle would be complete, a new horror born from the last breath of the previous one. Can a man find true redemption for his greatest sins? How can one fight the alluring riches of despair, the releasing touch of insanity when guilt is ever condemning him? Who can sentence a man to peace from pain that he doesn’t deserve but does inflict upon himself? The answer is simple but ever so difficult and painful: fight it every time that ugly head showed itself. Shield your heart for the eternal and lasting blame. Live a life with passion and to its fullest. Make amends by not shaming the sacrifice. Only when one can be content with his efforts, one can suppress guilt. Suppress but never conquer.

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Simon Gastinois, chosen of the Lady, kin to the ducal family of Gisoreux, lord of the Pinsson lands, former companion of Nicolas the Scourge, liberator of the land and paragon of chivalry finds himself standing before a single tombstone in a sea of leaves and grass. A light sea breeze brushed his face as he could smell the salt close by. Decades have passed since that fateful day. Time that has been bound to the chains of measurement passed day after day as a dutiful servant but it ever felt shorter as the memory remains. Time is a bandage that soothes but it will never heal the scar and still he could replay those final moments. Even though his hair had grown grey and scarce, his joints weak and brittle with fatigue and his voice weak by years of use, he had dragged himself here to fulfil the last duty he owed this world. A bit further but close by, the mass grave of heroes was now covered by a tapestry of flowers and grass. A single stone marker was all that remembers the site of that legendary battle between the forces of good and evil. The ballad had conquered every hall over the years: the epic tale of struggle of Simon the Pure versus Nicolas the Tainted. The names of other pawns of that epic chessboard of war forgotten by all save one.

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“It might be the last time I can visit you, my friend. The tiredness of the world is finally gaining on me, the kiss of the Lady weakening with every passing moment. Even standing here I can feel I’ll be seeing you again soon in the otherworld. I know Agnès wants me to say hi for her. Can you give her a kiss for me?” A lone tear trailed from his wind struck cheek, a sole survivor in an empty well. “Tell her that her grandson Leon has joined the righteous in search of her ultimate blessing, tell her that her children are all fine and that they miss her as much as I do. Tell her, no, don’t let her forget I love her as much as I am sure you are by her side looking over her for me. I never had the chance, my brother, to thank you for all you have done for me and her. Even now after a lifetime spent in this world, the memories of us three are the ones I’m most fond of. The new king has finally granted the request of this tired advisor to built memorials at the sites of large battles, soon your grave will be part of a greater mausoleum to remember of this victory but also what we lost. I hope to see it finished one day but I fear it’ll be the fruit of some-one else’s labour. I’m going home now. I can’t

the order once more, to exchange wisdom with Jean, to hold AgnÃ©s in my arms and to look upon you once more.  
Farewell, my friend, my brother.

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A lone poppy saw the knight with the hanging shoulders walk away. A beam of the sun broke through the clouded sky and shone on the mound. Somewhere the sea breeze howled as if it was crying.