

# Dernière Lune



COLLECTION OF SHORT  
STORIES

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# Thank you

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Dear readers, friends, family members, and amazing contributors, know that the pages you hold in your hands are the result of countless hours of work, laughter, and arguments... all driven by passion! The passion of a small team from the South of France who, thanks to your support, overcame challenges and sees their universe come to life in this book. This collection of stories marks the beginning of a wonderful adventure, and we invite you to join us for the journey ahead! Welcome to the world of Dernière Lune.

And a very special thank you to our extraordinary contributors Noël Viudes, Michèle, Kirsten Shaulis, Greg the dream breaker, The Aristocrat, Thrownaxe, William Sanchez, Mikaël Guez, Arwyn Cunningham, Marine, and the Rajeux. You are amazing!

THE DL TEAM

So, I would like to acknowledge in order: the dreamers, the curious, the adventurers, Jack Daniel's, and the autistic people who read the acknowledgments! The role players, the metalheads, and all those who know how to take their time and prefer a book over TikTok. I thank my mother for putting up with me, my wife for putting up with my mother, and my daughter for putting up with my wife; my dog as well for his valuable advice during the turmoil. Then it's time for my team of Avengers without whom nothing would be possible, my round table fighting for the endurance of imagination, the line of knights still battling to make this world colorful, with emotion as their banner, curiosity as their sword, and discernment as their shield.

FRANCK L.

Thank you.

Okay, a thank you just thrown out like that is a bit brief. Especially since we don't know who the thank you is for. To the cushioned seat of my office chair that for 20 years has endured the astonishing metamorphosis of my butt, whose overall volume seems to be challenging the width of the seat? Probably not. To world peace...? That's always good, but Miss France has that covered, we won't steal their speech, especially since it's not their specialty and there's not much else to chew on. I'd say to my... well, my bottles of Jack, but since moderation has left and the glasses are empty, it would sound hollow. To my cat? Well, I don't have one, if it can't be eaten, it's useless. To the people I love? No, I don't say thank you to them, I tell them I love them. Not often enough, by the way, but I love you. No, thank you to you. It's true, I don't know you, but you did something unusual. Something rare and precious. You trusted us and allowed Dernière Lune to exist beyond our dreams. You opened the doors of reality to a whole imaginary world that was just waiting for you because, in truth, all our work has always been for you.

So, no, not just thank you but a very, very big thank you and most importantly, see you soon...

FABRICE B.



# Preface

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I believe this project had been in the works for years, years of simmering, enriching, and refining... There are many projects like this, you might say, but when they finally see the light of day through a combination of circumstances and deep determination, they cannot leave one indifferent.

But what is this conviction that allowed this team of madmen to never give up? I remain in awe of this magic that propels forward without ever losing its passion and incredible desire to share beautiful things. Here, stories that make us dream, escape into dreamlike worlds that strangely brush against our reality.

Heroic Fantasy, which in my eyes is one of the poor relatives of literature and cinema, today receives a magnificent gift, worthy of the finest works that have graced its tradition: "Dernière Lune." An evocative title that naturally made me want to know more. Danger, mysteries, adventures, rich and improbable stories and characters, aberrations, madness like never before, and even comedy, everything is here, skillfully balanced so that we are immediately immersed in this dazzling and dark world at the same time.

This is a journey not to be missed, leading deep under our foggy minds that finally soak in a muted pleasure. What more could one desire as a reader, but it doesn't stop there...

With great respect for the visual codes of Heroic Fantasy, the authors have the genius to add a pinch of Steampunk that finds its place here perfectly. I love it, it's like a second wind, a breath of fresh air amidst the conventional swords and dragons, a wrench in the supposedly unchangeable references, and it works wonderfully. It's an exhilarating mix, but one had to think of it... and do it.

"Dernière Lune" is a bit like a honey cake offered by fairies, but don't be mistaken, there can also be an aftertaste of Troll food, and it's good!

PATRICE GARCIA



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OUR STORY DOESN'T  
MATTER, IF NO ONE  
CAN TELL IT...

— Hans Seekher —





Darkness. Darkness and nothing else...

Yet, out of the frozen, soundless night of eternity, life returned. Timid, confused, as if it were stealing its last bit of light from nothingness to feed on it. And to grow.

And this is how this world was born, snatched from eternal darkness. Out of the ashes of what was, empires, kingdoms, and civilisations were built, some ephemeral, others defying time and war. And from conflicts to fragile peace, from alliances to betrayals, the world knew several centuries of prosperity, reaching towards the illusion of a future. Elves and Fairies, Dwarves, Trolls and Goblins, Ondines, Lycants, Verminous, Saurians, Minotaurs, Centaurs, demons called Banished, Orcs and Humans. So many races, so many possibilities.

Then, like a response from the scorned darkness, the Beast emerged. No one knew what it was or where it came from. A hellish abomination, a union of chaos and absolute evil. Hundreds, thousands of Beasts swept across the lands, engulfing the very idea of hope like a tsunami, wiping out the age-old Feudal Baronies in a single breath, ravaging the southern Elf kingdom, pushing the Dwarves and Orcs indiscriminately further east.

In the face of this nightmare, men and women rose up to fight and survive.

So began the war of the first shock, violent, gory and vain.

The Beast remained undefeated and extended its territories across seas and oceans, erasing the memory of bygone days to leave only the bitter taste of defeat and death.







# Canakhante

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-9 YEARS BEFORE UNIFICATION

THE SNOW WAS RED,  
THE SKY GREY,  
THE FUTURE DARK.

# I

The Beast stands right in front of him and advances. In its monstrous jowl, a clutched Orc gesticulates in pain and rage too, all hope not having fled his mind. His sword slips from his grasp and falls to the ground. He recognises her, of course. Kalchagart.

The Beast clenches its jaws. The Orc is cut in two, sheared through and through, his ribcage bursting open like an overripe fruit, spewing guts and guts all over the snowy ground.  
The Beast doesn't slow down.

Amir, the Elf, reaches out to grab the Orc's legendary sword. But he has no hand, no arm, nothing but a bloody stump waving frantically in the cold wind gusts.

\*

## II

Canakhante, timeless city, majestic landmark, masterpiece of the human race on the threshold of the now-defunct kingdom of Arkhanis, towered over the jagged, ocean-ridden shores of the Northern Continent.

It had taken forty years to build.

Forty years of relentless labour, thousands of workers and slaves, so that Humans could have their own Olonesse. And Canakhante had finally risen from the grey earth to stand the test of time, brave the raging elements and survive the war between the Feudal Baronies and the Elf kingdom.

And though today it remains the symbol of an extinct power, for two centuries Canakhante had irradiated the world with its splendour and its grandeur.

For many years the city had swollen, fed by a steady stream of refugees coming from the ancient western Baronies. Many of them were spreading strange rumours about terrifying beasts that were sowing desolation and death over there. Coming from the far west, they were advancing on the ancient lands of Arkhanis, unstoppable, leaving nothing but ruin and desolation in their wake and driving the last inhabitants further and further east.

Such were the rumours, and many believed them as one believes in ghosts when night comes, for no-one in the city would admit that such a thing truly existed.

Canakhante, now home to over half a million souls, had been fortified at the start of the war between Humans and Elves, sacrificing some of its beauty against thick ramparts rising some twenty meters above the ground.



It had withstood countless assaults without damage. Besieged several times, it had never fallen.

So what could such a ferocious and cruel beast, if it really existed, do in the face of such defences? And even if it dared to attack, behind the high impregnable walls, an army was waiting. A powerful army commanded by a man whose reputation was well established and whose name was known even in the remotest villages of the Southern Continent.

Commander Dagonn knew what war was all about, having confronted death face to face on many accounts.

His life had been one long, macabre litany of battles, yet he had never known the bitter taste of defeat. Red was his colour. Blood red. The blood he spilled. The blood of his enemies.

If heroes still had a place in this world, then Dagonn would be it. Perhaps the greatest the Human race has ever known.

But the world had changed.

He, more than anyone else, could not be bothered with a few tales born out of ignorance and superstition.

As far as he was concerned, the only enemies he had to fear were the Elves.

"Really dangerous animals, those ones", as he liked to say.

After peace was signed between the human and elf kingdoms, some of them had wanted to settle in Canakhante to set up businesses and resume a normal life, but he had chased them away.

Never mind the cowardice of the rich barons who had given up fighting to wallow in the golden bliss of a dishonourable peace, the town was human and would remain so.

Out of all the battles he fought, this would be his last victory. It was a morning like any other, a cold, dry winter morning. That morning, the tocsin sounded. Something was afoot, and all were still unaware that it was the announcement of their own death.

In the early hours of the morning, the lookouts had spotted a distant movement to the west. At first there was only a faint, barely audible noise in the damp silence of the morning mist, then a murmur, an indefinable hum. "Like a wave", they said. As if the ocean had overflowed onto the land.

Then the movement stopped, and the noise with it. All that now remained was a dark patch in the fog. Silent and motionless. Deep as an abyss.

Dagonn called out orders. With the aim of avoiding a skirmish, a troop of infantrymen, most of them young recruits, left the town and took up position in front of the western wall, at the foot of the huge gate closing the entrance.

According to the general, Elves had been behind this movement. He was convinced of it. A squadron of rebels who didn't seem to want to respect peace between their two peoples. That was their way of doing things. And that rather pleased him.

If the day was going to start with the rout of an entire elf battalion, then it would be a good start!



This misjudgement was not, strictly speaking, the cause of the abominable carnage that was to follow, but it was nevertheless one of the determining factors.

Only a few minutes after the detachment of infantrymen had taken up their positions, as if by some occult signal, indistinct, swift and powerful forms sprang from the black mass.

Within seconds, they were upon them and they saw the foaming face of their most redoubtable enemy.

Not Elves, but a nightmare of fangs and claws.

The troops moved, closing ranks, brandishing their spears. Nothing seemed to work.

The young lieutenant commanding the unfortunate battalion, fully aware of the danger, ordered the doors that had remained open to be closed. Up against the wall, the soldiers, novice in the art of war, had to face the enemy head-on, probably hoping for a quick death. On the battlements, high up on the walls, wide eyes were watching in a terrified silence. The watchmen were still there, overlooking the massacre. They could see heads still in helmets flying through the air, bouncing and rolling on the ground, blood smearing the muddy snow, they could hear bones breaking and vile screams coming up to them and lashing their faces like so much reproach. They felt helpless. Powerless but safe, and this guilty certainty cost them their lives.

The beasts - for it was indeed beasts that were involved, although no-one had ever seen anything like them before - climbed the sheer wall with the same ease with which they had swooped down on the soldiers and slaughtered every last one of them.

They toppled over the battlements, decimated everyone in sight and then poured down on the city like a furious, deadly rain, turning the streets and squares of the merchant quarter into a vast hunting ground, swooping down on the panicking populace, tearing flesh and crushing bones. Sowing desolation and death as the rumours claimed.

Throughout the city, panic turned to hysteria.

The few armed patrols that were there, more used to drunken brawls than battlefields, taken by surprise by the speed of the assault, overwhelmed by the blind savagery pouring down on them, manoeuvring in disorder and panic, failed to stop the attack, or even slow it down.

The beasts burst through house doors, wreaking havoc, exterminating their occupants, decimating entire families and emptying cots. The streets became streams of blood, then rivers and torrents. Squares became open-air mass graves. Homes became tombs.

Upon being alerted of the situation to the west of the city, within these inviolable walls, Dagonn hastily assembled the garrisons of the northern gates, made up of professional soldiers, and left the engines of war behind him, too cumbersome in the maze of narrow streets.

A deadly chase ensued, in which it was impossible to say who was the hunter and who was the hunted.

For hours, by dint of strategic moves, desperate attacks and sacrificed lives, Dagonn managed to contain the beasts in the merchant quarter.

The fight had to continue in close combat, and it was a massacre. Many civilians, caught in the trap, were torn apart by sharp fangs, butchered, scattered, begging for death, trampled underfoot by hundreds of charging and retreating soldiers, each time fewer in number.

As the first rays of moonlight fell and night came to cover the abomination in a black shroud, the last beast fell.

The survivors, dazed and incredulous at the scale of the massacre, with over four thousand victims, estimated the number of beasts that had broken through the city walls to be two hundred. Once the figures had been tallied, reality took on the grim face of insanity.

Twenty beasts.

There were only twenty beasts, lying on their bony flanks, oozing black blood where no light reflected.

While the countless wounded were transported to the treatment rooms, others, too badly injured to be moved, received first aid on the ground, bathed in the blood and viscera of their neighbours, their comrades, their brothers, or in their own.

Dagonn was watching in silence as the healers worked, his head filled with the screaming pain and lamentations of those who were dying. He stomped away, climbed the ramparts and scanned the darkness, obsessed by a number that was both hideous and derisory: twenty.

Four thousand dead for twenty beasts.

And there, hidden in the darkness, how many were there waiting, watching? Exactly how many?

He had never shied away from any adversary, never shirked his duty. He was a soldier. He was a warrior. He was a man of battle and death. He had served the barons of Arkhanis to the very end, even when the war had become a rout.

But how many?

A wave, they said, as if the ocean had overflowed over the land.

\*





### III

Amir was sitting at the foot of a tree, his gaze fixed towards a shadow on the horizon, his body vibrating with irrepressible hatred.

Amir, the fallen Baron, the bastard of Olonesse, Human among Elves, Elf among Humans, an outsider everywhere. Amir, who had once learned wisdom but had become the embodiment of anger.

Amir was sitting at the foot of a tree, his gaze fixed on the horizon, on Canakhante, so far away that it was no more than a shadow at the end of the world, beyond the reach of his resentment.

When they were cast out of Canakhante, Amir and the elven warriors who had remained devoted to him found refuge in the heart of a small forest on the border of the Dwarven lands to the north. The cursed lands of the Rafengarth, as they were called.

At the end of the war, the Elven kingdom had also fallen, along with the Feudal Baronies, ravaged by this new scourge that was sometimes called the Beast and that none of them had ever seen. So Amir and his men stayed, here rather than elsewhere, between a human city whose inhabitants hated them and a dwarf nation that despised them.

For eleven years, these soldiers from a forever lost Elf kingdom, whose memory was already fading, had been here, a day's ride from a city from which they had been expelled like the worst ever criminals.

And every day for the last eleven years, Amir would climb the little hill and sit under his tree, staring at the horizon, his thoughts full of revenge, haunted by images of death.

During these long years, other races joined the Elves, each one having its own reason, its own history, its own tragedy.

Orcs for the most part, a dozen or so tribes that the Banished had forced out of Nancherow and who had set off on a desperate quest, in pursuit of a chimera, united around an imposing leader, Nhemorok, holder of a legendary sword they called Kalchagart. They hoped to gather and reunite the divine relics of their people so that the sword could regain its power. They intended to kill their god and then replace him. That god who had abandoned them in the Nancherow war.

Such were the Orcs, brave and full of hope.

Some Centaurs too, former nomads decimated by the Beast who wished to raise an army to challenge it on its lands, had come to drink the black blood of vengeance, obsessed to the point of suicidal madness by this enemy who had robbed them of happy memories to turn them into the most atrocious torture. Such were the Centaurs, proud and mad.

Finally, a few Humans joined Amir and his companions of misfortune. Horsemen and mercenaries with a tarnished reputation, wearing a strange necklace symbolising the Circle of the Claw.

Their leader, a man with a gentle gaze and tanned skin, with a handsome, discreet and often silent face, was called Peleragon. Anyone who laid eyes on this man felt deference before his presence, and an almost blind trust.

Peleragon was one of those charismatic men who commanded deep respect. And yet, in his heart, there was nothing but the coldness of nothingness.

None of them had a grievance against the inhabitants of Canakhante, or against Humans in general, but Amir thought he could find a way to persuade them, when the time eventually came, to ally themselves with him and make this shadow on the horizon disappear forever. He would have to lie, betray, manipulate, damn himself, it didn't matter. They would be precious allies who would have to be used intelligently.

Amir, who had once learned loyalty, was now inspired only by lies and the desire for revenge. He remembered his lost lands, his mother, his suffering, the affront they had suffered, and his dark desire became uncontrollable, violent, verging on madness.

When the Centaur scout came to tell them that Canakhante was under siege by the Beast, Amir shed a tear of joy.

\*

## IV

When the second day dawned, a young sergeant, still beardless, came to find Dagonn. The wave had shifted.

During the night, the Beasts had moved, like a well-disciplined army. They now surrounded the town from the west, north and east. In the south, the steep cliffs plunged into the ocean. There was no escape. The Beast was tightening its grip like a murderer tightening his fingers around his victim's neck.

Dagonn called for orders.

The confrontation had become inevitable. All Canakhante's inhabitants of fighting age were enlisted. The prisoners were released from the jails. Murderers, thieves, traitors.

They wouldn't be fighting to save the city, or for honour, certainly not, but they would be fighting for their survival, and today it would be enough.

Weapons were handed out while archers and spearmen were ordered onto the battlements. Small braziers were lit and nurtured at regular intervals in bronze basins, so that arrows and projectiles could be ignited quickly.

If the Beast was an animal, and Dagonn was convinced that it was, then it had to be fought as such, and like all animals, the Beast had to fear fire. He was convinced that it would not dare face the flames and this idea somewhat comforted him.

Meanwhile, behind the city gates, thousands of soldiers lined up in close ranks, waiting for an order, a signal from their commander.

Dagonn knew they couldn't wait for the Beast to storm the city. The previous day's gory attack had taught them a great deal. And in the streets, the engines of war were useless. Depriving themselves of such firepower was absurd and criminal.

There was no choice but to go out into the open and fight their way out of the city, to strike to their utmost strength and unleash all the destructive power they could muster on these repulsive things.

Vanquish or perish. His whole life came down to this grotesque choice. He looked at his men and saw a deep, gripping terror in their eyes. Those who had fought the day before in the merchant quarter's alleys knew what awaited them on the other side of the gate. The others had been given an accurate description.

At this point, Dagonn grabbed the banner of the ancient Baronies, climbed the stony steps to the top of the city's highest tower and brandished his sword.

There, facing the immense plain that stretched as far as the eye could see, he spread his arms and, under the hundreds of incandescent gazes of the Beasts waiting beneath the ramparts, like a challenge; he roared out a battle yell that had not sounded for a very long time. And his men, as one, responded with the same yell, galvanised by the silhouette of their leader, the one who had never known defeat, raising their weapons towards a darkening sky.

But to this yell, another answered, imposing a terrified silence on the men. The yell of the Beast. A yell of unspeakable savagery, final and implacable. The voice of evil from the depths of time.

Then the face-off began.

\*

## V

Amir brought his army to a halt. A bastard army commanded by a bastard. Canakhante was no longer a vague silhouette in the distance, but a gigantic city standing in front of him.

Meanwhile, at the foot of the ramparts, under a deluge of fire, a titanic battle was shaking the ground. In the north, part of the city was in flames, ravaged by an immense fire that leapt from rooftop to rooftop, while an icy breeze was carrying the stench of charred bodies. The east gate, as imposing as it was, threatened to shatter under the relentless onslaught of enormous beasts. Aklains, as the Elves called them. The walls themselves seemed to be shaking under the violence of the repeated charges from the massive creatures. Some Amrok, which were smaller but also more agile creatures, managed to clumsily climb the ramparts, and were pushed back by the spearmen, screaming both in rage and powerlessness.

Amir was seeing the Beast for the very first time, and it was no superstition. Monsters of colossal power, made of flesh and steel, foaming with dull rage, spawned to sow desolation, to reap death. Living machines of war born out of the nightmares of a few murderous or mad gods.

Amir's men, standing next to him, remained silent, as if petrified. Only the Centaurs seemed to be willing to plunge into the heart of the fray, eager to spill the Beast's blood, their hooves trampling the ground in a suicidal maniacal frenzy.

Amir had his doubts.

He wasn't sure of his own hatred, nor his own desire for vengeance anymore. Faced with these monstrosities, the Humans, his despised half-brothers who had turned his destiny into a ridiculous masquerade,

were fighting bravely, dying by the hundreds, sacrificing their lives neither to save the city nor hope, only just the symbol of a doomed humanity: Canakhante.

Even though the Humans had robbed him of his future as a wealthy Baron, the Beast was committing the worst crime of all. It was violating innocence.

This was when he made his decision.

In a fraction of a second, he stripped himself of the heavy robes of a fallen nobleman, which had condemned him to a devious bitterness, to become once more the Baron of Arkhanis he always had been, somehow on the fringes of his unconscious.

He aligned his archers calmly in two rows, the first row on one knee, the second standing behind, so that all together, at a signal from him, they could unleash a deadly shower of arrows.

He asked Pelragon, to whom he had promised large shares of the city's plunder, as a reward for his help, to keep his men in reserve. Eight hundred horsemen and their powerful, robust mounts. They would prove a valuable strategic option when the time came. Then he ordered the bewildered Centaurs to head back east. Towards dwarf territory. Towards the cursed lands of the Rafengarth. Alone, they would be of no help, Amir was well aware of that. At most, they would only gain a little time, perhaps enough, he hoped, for the dwarf army to come and lend them a hand. He ordered the furious Centaurs to renounce their vengeance. They needed the support of the Rafengarth army and its powerful Troll slaves.

In the face of the Beast, did old grudges, contempt, and arrogance still matter? In the face of the Beast, as he was seeing it now, who cared about honour?

He, Amir, Baron of Arkhanis, would get down on his knees and implore the help of the Dwarves if he had to, because from now on, the past, the future and all the considerations that give life meaning had disappeared.

The only thing that mattered now was the present moment, and the fleeting glimmer of life it was carrying within.

That had been ruled by the Beast.

\*



## VI

The Dwarf Lands of Rafengarth had been thriving for many years thanks to the extraction of precious ores from the ice mountains by the Trolls. And by forging indestructible weapons from the toughest metal, they had earned a skilled craftsman's reputation.

And yet, while their weapons did indeed prove to be impressively strong, rumours abounded that this had more to do with dark, unspoken secrets than with real craftsmanship.

According to these same rumours, the Rafengarths, who had always been blacksmiths, had, in ancient times, traded occult favours with forgotten gods in order to possess the secrets of steel. It was even said that they had given steam a soul in order to bend it to their will.

What was the reason for this, no one could say, but the very mention of the cursed name of the Rafengarths was enough to cause smiles to freeze, discussions to die down and gazes to droop cautiously.

This name seemed to carry all the sins of the land with it, and the entire Dwarf nation was paying a terrible price for it through the contempt and fear it inspired.

Drogg Rafengarth, final descendant of the damned line, had long presided over the destinies of the Dwarf people. Even though he had been a model of willpower in his youth, he now felt old, burdened by the weight of his sinister lineage.

In the twilight of his life, Drogg Rafengarth was hoping to find some form of redemption for the sins committed by his ancestors and, in a final burst of pride, a way to cleanse his name of dishonour.

On the morning of the fourth day, when the Centaurs entered their land to ask for help, Drogg realised that the time had come for his people to remember the warrior songs of yesteryear and rediscover a pride that whimsical fate had robbed them of.

Of the Beast, they had only a vague idea. Some of them had heard of it a few years back, when caravans laden with weapons were still heading west to trade with the last Humans living there.

In those days, Canakhante was still a pleasant stopover on the way. Drogg Rafengarth found it hard to believe that a city so perfectly fortified could threaten to fall. But the Centaurs were not known for lying, let alone begging for help. If they had come to him, the situation to the west must have been dire. He knew he was going to turn that desperation into a personal victory.

That same evening, the Dwarf army began to march. Twenty-five thousand warriors and more than a thousand Troll slaves set off eastward for a decisive battle that was to become the most appalling and deadly defeat of all. It would take the army three long days of frantic running to reach Canakhante.

To ensure that reinforcements reached the battlefield as quickly as possible, it was decided that each Centaur should carry a Dwarf soldier on his back. This vanguard would enable the Dwarves to hold out long enough for the bulk of the troops to reach the besieged city.

The Centaurs, eager for battle, welcomed this idea with relief. The command of this battalion had been entrusted to a young Dwarf

whose parents had planned for him to become a miner. Unwilling to spend a lifetime underground in the dusty, noisy caverns of the iron mines, he had instead learnt the art of weaponry, and his youth and enthusiasm had given him other dreams. He wanted to fight. He longed for battle. He had always wanted bloodshed. Fate had granted him those dreams. His name was Elgin.

\*

## VII

When he saw the Elven archers spread out in the distance, under the first snows that had begun to fall, Dagonn howled with rage. The Beast was therefore a creature in the service of another animal. For how many years had they been preparing their attack, how long had it taken to domesticate these monsters, and above all, where had these creatures come from?

Surprisingly, something happened that he didn't understand straight away, bogged down in his thoughts. The Elves showered the Beasts with arrows. Each one hitting its mark, piercing the thick, hard-skinned carapaces. And the Beasts screamed. Not in pain, as he first thought, but in anger. Then they turned and charged at the lines of Elven archers. Nobody moved. A second round of projectiles struck the abominable faces and their sharp jaws. Two Beasts fell and were trampled by another hundred that continued to run, only to rise again, bleeding but alive.

Dagonn, as a sound strategist, took advantage of this moment of respite to order the opening of the eastern gate. A tide of humans poured out onto the plain, followed by engines of war that were brought to a halt at the foot of the ramparts. And as the catapults fired and the powerful ballistas tore any Beasts that were hit from the ground, the human tide struck against the monstrous wave from behind. A deafening crash resounded, as if a mountain had just collapsed somewhere nearby.

From the core of the city, thousands of men continued to run out, including children armed with pickaxes, pitchforks, sticks. The soldiers' courage was mingled with the pathetic blind temerity of innocence. The Humans tore through the black wall of flesh, spilling dark, acidic blood with a foul stench.

For their part, the elven archers abandoned their strategy. While their attack had at least allowed the human forces to move and get out of Canakhante, Amir soon realised that the arrows would not cut deep enough into the skin of the Beasts to kill them. A few had been wounded, of course, but only superficially. Then, the Elves drew their swords from their quivers. And they charged. The impact was brutal, though it didn't last long. A wave of barbarity swept over them. Amir, at the center of his army, was shouting orders that no one could hear, trying to cover with his screams the hideous din of hundreds of monstrous Aklain jaws snapping and closing on flesh. All around him, his loyal soldiers in fine crafted armour were being slaughtered. For every Beast that fell, a hundred Elves perished. For every Aklaine who died, another hundred appeared. The Elves retreated.

Amir thought of calling in the mercenaries of the Circle of the Claw who were still waiting on their mounts for the Fallen Baron's order, but he forbade himself. As long as he could hold out without reinforcements, he would keep his reserves. They retreated further, leaving behind other corpses and a few wounded. Just then, Amir saw something dreadful.

The Beasts then approached the wounded and, rather than finishing them off as he had expected, cut off their limbs, arms, and legs with obvious relish, intoxicated by the screams of agony of the elves they were keeping alive on purpose and now seemed to want to protect. Amongst the grunts, he thought he heard laughter as these same Beasts took their harvest of bodies away from the battlefield, for mysterious purposes. Like precious treasure.

\*

## VIII

Elgin was leading the way on his strange mount. The Centaurs were fast, very fast, and the vanguard he commanded had swallowed the distance separating them from Canakhante in less than two days. Elgin rode in the lead and was therefore the first to witness the unspeakable.

The great walls surrounding the town to the east were in ruins. Amroks were pouring through the gaps and penetrating the city. The flames were devouring the wooden and thatched roofs of the houses in the working-class districts. Darkness was also taking its toll on the civilian population. As far as the eye could see, the ground was littered with gutted, crushed corpses.

The snow was red, the sky grey, the future dark.

On a small hill, horsemen were waiting, watching the mind-boggling slaughter. Elgin noticed the man standing in front. Peleragon. Instinctively, he engraved in his memory the impassive face of this Human who was observing the horror of the sight with detachment. Then he ordered the assault, releasing the fury of the Centaurs that had been contained far too long.

Amir heard the dwarf war chants and the pounding of Centaur hooves. A wave of relief washed over him.

Beside him, Nhemorok was urging his fellow Orcs to double their ferocity. And Kalchagart was spilling blood. His huge blade slashing at the hard flesh of the Beasts.

Before the ruins of the eastern walls, the Humans were losing their footing. The Beasts had thrown their weight behind the catapults and ballistas, whose power often proved fatal. The human army tried in vain to resist, but suffered appalling losses.

Since the Orcs were standing their ground in the fray, it was time to help Dagonn, Amir's most intimate enemy. Losing the war engines would mean losing the battle. At this point, Amir ordered his troops to attack. With a gesture, he ordered Peleragon to follow the Elves, who charged with Amir at their head.

Elgin witnessed the elf charge, the order given by Amir to Peleragon and Peleragon commanding his men to retreat.

The eight hundred riders of the Circle of the Claw turned and headed east, away from the dying Canakhante. A cry of hatred escaped his throat whilst his anger was drowned in barbarity.

With the help of the Centaurs, the Dwarf vanguard had managed to divert some of the enemy forces towards them.

While the Centaurs were armed with spears and javelins, the Dwarves favoured axes, the rough feel of short, leather-wrapped handles and the weight of broad, heavy blades.

Whilst the Centaurs managed to escape the Beasts' fangs and claws thanks to their fabulous agility and great speed, the Dwarves confronted the enemy in destructive, barbaric, furious close combat.

For three days, in the freezing snow, Dwarves, Orcs, Centaurs, Elves and Humans fought side by side. For three days, the earth stood witness to a confrontation that would later be known in books as the first great battle, the War of First Shock. Three days was how long they all had to hold out before the Rafengarth army finally reached them.

By then, Dagonn had died, burnt alive in the fire that was ravaging the town, not as a hero but as a victim.

Amir had lost an arm and was dying, Nhemorok was fighting in the mouth of an Aklaine before being cut in two, and Elgin lay among the corpses, his body covered with dozens of deep wounds.

The Dwarf army deployed and threw itself into the battle without restraint, exhilarated by the nightmarish vision of a city in ruins and a field of corpses. The Trolls, oblivious to what was at stake, plunged into the heart of the carnage. Still, even they, by instinct no doubt, tasted the chalice of despair.

The Beast faltered under the sheer weight of numbers, paused for a moment, bent a little, but did not retreat. It took him a further three days to wipe out the Rafengarth army.

After one final, pathetic assault, in which hundreds more Dwarves perished, the Trolls were decimated, the last Humans, Orcs and Centaurs were massacred and the Elves sacrificed themselves in vain, Drogg sounded the retreat.

The wounded, of all races, were hastily collected so that the Beast would not take them. Elgin and Amir were among them. They would survive. Physically at least. Some wounds would heal, others never. They would be haunted until the very end.

They all headed back east. A crushed, vanquished army. An army of ragged survivors. They had left behind them Canakhante, which no longer existed. They had left hundreds of thousands of corpses.

They had left a ravaged land. A lost land.

And the Beast...





REFUSING TO YIELD TO  
THE CRUELTY OF FATE,  
THIS WORLD,  
IN ITS FINAL THROES AND  
WITHOUT NAME OR FUTURE,  
STILL HELD ON TO HOPE.

# The Weight of the Foam

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-11 YEARS BEFORE UNIFICATION



# I

In the depths of the ocean, at the top of the Great Barrier Reef, the ancient capital of the Ondines was standing proudly. A spellbinding underwater sight like no other. The titanic city was thoroughly intertwined with the flora for miles around in a myriad of colours.

On the north side, immense walls were lining steep cliffs plunging into the abyss. Overlooking the void, a wide bridge led to the threshold of the city, guarded by monumental copper gates, engraved with a fresco recounting the saga of the royal family throughout the centuries. Behind its ramparts, the old city, draped in its sapphire monochrome, was awaking peacefully, lulled by the gentle tropical breeze of the season.

The underwater capital was slowly emerging from the night.

In the merchants' streets, schools of fish were lazily wandering amongst the shoppers. The criss-crossing streets resembled a tortuous labyrinth, where the Ondines used to twirl gracefully in a majestic ballet of bubbles.

The empirical construction of this place had given rise to an improbable aquatic composition where the dwellings piled on top of each other all the way up to the surface. In the tangle of alleyways, the populace would set up their stalls on the white sand, while others would string together their floating wares, suspended in the heights of the city. A spherical market of gigantic proportions was slowly unfurling up and outward.

The Ondines had tamed the ocean with wisdom and patience. Their people had won their sovereignty over the surrounding fauna through total symbiosis.

In a delicate harmony, the second circle, bordered by an immense dome of orichalcum, was home to the ancestral nobility. The mother-of-pearl path leading to the sumptuous Royal Palace was lined with colossal statues of aquatic divinities.

Liryianna, impatient, was gazing enthusiastically at the frail rays of dawn that were struggling to break through the foam. From the top of her royal balcony, the dauphine was enjoying the sumptuous panorama of the capital that stretched out beneath her feet.

Lasciviously, she jumped from the balcony with glee, undulating in the current. She played with the fabric of her sparkling dress with the carefree ease of her lineage. She twirled above the hands of the statue of her favourite divinity, slipped between the sculpture's fingers, then slumped nonchalantly atop the monument.

The mischievous-looking dauphine scanned the horizon in search of someone to spy on.

Soon joined by a graceful cohort of servants who efficiently set up a table on the spot for Liryianna's lunch. The day held the promises of a mouth-watering programme of festivities, and regardless of tradition, the stone headdress of the divinity who had protected the capital for a thousand years, could be proud to host her lunch!

The spring jousts would begin in the morning, and the dauphine was determined not to miss even a minute of it all!

\*

## II

In the port of Kerris, Koran Sylde, leaning against the pediment of the quay, was squinting against the threatening sunrise. Thick white smoke, emanating from his pipe, drifted from his gills and he inhaled the ambient air with obvious relish. The moisture on his scales was beginning to recede under the onslaught of the morning breeze, and the wind was slowly drying out his skin.

Koran leaned over the quay, contemplating his reflection on the water's surface, then dipped his webbed hands to refresh himself elegantly. Meanwhile, a three-masted vessel was making its way into Kerris Bay. Koran smiled broadly and waved his lantern in the direction of the ship's captain. The luxurious merchant ship from the north, manoeuvred deftly into the cove, closely followed by her squadron of frigates, all flying the colours of the Baronies of Arkhanis.

A small part of the Ondines population, forcefully deprived and removed from the pleasures of the palace, had turned their gaze towards the surface. Eager to unravel the mysteries of other races, some nomads had set out to travel the rivers whilst some explorers were driven by their thirst for knowledge and wine and their will to share their arts.

Koran Sylde was one of them.

A slim, slender Ondine with a lively, tumultuous spirit. He was an outcast, born on the outskirts of the first circle of the capital, an offspring of the slums that backed onto the ramparts. The ocean was his prison. It was the largest of prisons, of course, but the sea appeared to him to be more austere than rigid steel bars. Koran was yet another victim of the antiquated system of inheritance. Newborn Ondines bore the inextricable burden of their lineage.

Although destined to misery by birth, he had managed to lift himself by his bootstraps. He could trade with humans, banter with elves and had known the value of gold for many moons. His knowledge of ointments and his mastery of the sea virtuous principles had made his merchandise an indispensable commodity. The remedies of the coral reef had tremendous benefits for the land races and their ailments. Over time, trading his knowledge had given him solid allies.

The captain docked the three-masted ship enthusiastically. As soon as he disembarked on the pontoon, the old sea wolf, a gruff human, threw himself into Koran Sylde's arms without concealing his affection. Koran Sylde's remedies had saved his two children from illness. Since then, business had been flourishing between the two companions. Their complicity was known in every single tavern on the coast. The captain traded new merchandise all the way to the northern continent for the barons of Arkhanis. Ocean medicines were highly prized, and gold was constantly filling the vaults.

With a single snap of the fingers, some fifty Ondines poured out of the port under Koran's orders to load the medicines into the ships' holds.

All transactions with the 'river people' were carried out at first light. The dampness of dawn was the ideal time to connect these two worlds. Koran Sylde's love for the people of Earth had often strained the limits of his body.

As a matter of fact, the Ondines' skin withered irreparably under a punishing sun whose rays could decompose their flesh in a matter of hours, lacerating their scales with hideous dark scars. They were the unloved children of Gaia, rejected by the sea, unfit for life on earth.



Mundane escapades involved scrupulous precautions for the Ondines, condemned to a fatal drying up. Koran Sylde had already experienced this, and the elves were running late.

The menacing sun was breaking over the serene sea when the first caravels appeared on the horizon. The intermingling of knowledge between the races brought its own share of torments, namely addictions. The captain of the Baronies supplied everyone with weed for smoking and also distilled an excellent brandy.

The impact on the Elven Navy was staggering. Usually the sailors navigated with great care and reason, but the scene of their arrival in port had now taken on a whole new dimension.

The Olonese caravels struggled to make way for the *Alizé*, a proud six-hundred-foot vessel. Slowly, the fiery, cannon-ridden ship plunged the harbour into shadow. The ship's prow was adorned with a graceful sylph carved out of a large piece of oak, and even if the critics might have faulted the rococo style of the jewel inlays, the seas had nonetheless never borne the likes of this vessel.

Behind the helm, the divine captain's long hair was swaying in the spray. With her attire bordering on indecency, Soriya knew how to negotiate with charm.

With one hand clinging to a line, she stripped off her tricorn and curtsied theatrically, apologising for her tardiness.

The *Alizé* hit the pontoon hard, causing the wide stilts to wobble with a frightful creak.



Impassive, the seductive captain performed an acrobatic maneuver from the main deck to grab the hoist normally used for off-loading. The pulley made the line creak along its entire length and the tempestuous elf landed gracefully on the quay.

Casually, Soriya ran a hand through her lush hair, adjusted her corset, then greeted Koran Sylde and the old captain with a smile:

*"This is the last time I let you push brandy onto me! I'm not running a merchant navy any more, I'm running a nursery! I'm sorry I'm late, Sylde, but we'll make this quick and I promise I'll make it up to you..."*

\*

### III

It had taken Gallian years to tame a great white. Patience had finally paid off, and today, he looked very handsome on his imposing saddle.

Very few Ondines had succeeded in forging a fruitful relationship with a merciless predator of such. The royal cavalry almost unanimously preferred more modest mounts. Training such a beast had already proven costly for many trainers. The shark was definitely not the most docile of steeds. Gallian was well aware of this, but no other creature could match this stylish means of transport. Underneath the pretext of the creature's high hunting efficiency lay Gallian secret desire to arouse plebeians' jealousy.

The saddlery had cost him months of wages but the quality of the stirrups and the solidity of the bits had justified the investment. The finish of the waterproof lanterns left connoisseurs stunned. Gallian was broke. True. He had been eating reef algae for months, but he was ready! Ready to ride a mount fit for a king. His recent rise through the ranks of the royal cavalry had boosted his vanity. Today, he had every intention of shining in the eyes of the people of the capital, during the spring jousts.

Out of all the day's competitions, the title of 'Rider of the Abyss' was the most coveted. Crowds had been filling in the spectator stands to watch the start.

Leaning against the copper gates of the capital, rigorously lined up on the ramparts, the contestants were staring at each other. The frantic race would take the participants in a violent vertical pursuit to the depths of the abyss.

A race where pressure pulverised bodies, where the chromatic circle gave way to the icy cold. Only throwing weapons were banned in this gory discipline.



Gallian's mighty great white took its position. Even if speed was not its best asset, it still had countless qualities.

At the starting line, the competitors around him stood back in a mixture of respect and fright. The shark's livid eye reflected death, while the traditional stingray riders of the Royal Guard looked old and tired, and the fragile jockeys from the west gate struggled to calm their mounts, terrified by the sight of the ominous sea monster.

A new trend seemed to have made its way amongst the riders and a series of impressive sharks were spreading out over the starting line to the frantic delight of the bettors.

The crowd held its breath. Gallian brandished his flashy katana. And the crowd went wild.

The fervour was bubbling in his veins and his steed was clearly sharing his excitement. Today, Gallian had a date with history, and the royal sculptors would immortalise his victory on the city gate's shiny bronze.

## IV

Comfortably settled at the top of the royal boxes, Liryianna was throbbing with impatience. The jousting had begun and her beau, dressed in gleaming armour, took his slot at the starting line. The king's eldest son, regent of the armies, living legend in the public's eye, made a remarkable entrance. He was riding a massive black sperm whale, sitting majestically on a large throne. The invincible captain, guarantor of the kingdom's security, was grinning with the arrogant smile of the ideal son-in-law.

Liryianna's favourite, the winner of the previous three years, had his own stream of admirers. Many females of easy virtue would swoon as he passed, loosening their corsets to display their assets.

But this was of little importance to the young dauphine. Her jealousy was getting triggered by his alpha male's pathetic way of haranguing the plebeian crowds no better than a dog, in the advent of spring.

When the prince eventually turned to face her and blow her a kiss as a token of his love, Liryianna pretended to be deeply immersed in conversation with her father. For many moons now, she had loved messing with his head. Court etiquette was pushing this arranged marriage onto him. Ever since, the impatient dauphine had shown immense constituency in trying to consummate their union.

The harsh reality was that the campaigns led by the Army Regent had left him with a multitude of ailments. In intimate settings, the "tempestuous, triple champion abyss-riding captain" could barely align two words. As a prisoner of convention, Liryianna was sadistically abusing her verve to twist Mister Muscles around her little finger. She straightened up in her seat with a majestic flourish, and time froze. He responded by flexing his entire musculature and played a bit with his carefully groomed hair.

With nonchalance, the dauphine cast her gaze into the distance, raised her arm and waved it frantically to signal to a lady-friend seated in the opposite gallery.

The crowd was far from being fooled, while she was laughing in between her royal teeth. Prolonging the gag indecently, Liryianna pretended to be desperately looking for her betrothed among the competitors. Frowning and scanning the horizon, she even simulated a telescope by clasping both her hands together, much to the delight of her hilarious subjects.

Mischievously, she finally put an end to the joke. Then with sudden regained nobility, she curtsied to her future husband, blowing him a kiss in a volley of bubbles. Cheered on by the crowd, the young dauphine, Regent of the capital smiled at her fiancé and grandly ordered the start of the race.



## V

Gallian was scanning the blackness of the unfathomable abyss plunging beneath his feet. His rampaging steed was flashing a wide row of razor-sharp teeth. On the ramparts, the tension was palpable as the hundred or so competitors attentively watched for the starting signal. At Liryianna's command, the huge mother-of-pearl horns of the watchtower blared three times.

Like a gust of wind, Gallian raced down the wall and heeled his mount hard, planting his spurs recklessly into the great white's flanks. Even though the shark couldn't go any faster, Gallian's radical assault was meant to arouse the predator's fury some more.

The prince, on his imposing sperm whale, was leading the race by a small margin, using the whale's mass to violently smash into anyone within his reach. All the competitors were racing at full throttle in a breathtaking battle, and they plunged all together into the abyss's black cloak. Gallian was navigating with great skill through the storm of bubbles, jostling his rivals one after the other, clearing his path with the help of his katana. The great white shark crunched the leg of an unfortunate jockey who got in the way. It didn't matter, and Gallian smiled despite the underwater pressure gripping hard on his scales. He was a genuine warrior, intoxicated by this exhilarating chase all the way to this ominous deep darkness.

The chromatic circle was rapidly disappearing, enveloping the riders in a dark shroud. The shark was spurred on by the cold of the depths. The sperm whale's lanterns sank deeper and deeper into the dark silence of the ocean. A manta ray, fully armoured, swam over the great white. At this depth, far from the gaze of the crowd, the precepts of honour and chivalry had soon been put to death. Gallian leapt onto the wing of the stingray, suddenly letting go of his mount.

Startled, his opponent let go of the reins, and curled up by reflex. With speed, Gallian grabbed his opponent's hair and severed his throat with a swift, precise movement. Twirling backwards, he threw the trophy head back to his steed. The shark emerged from the darkness and devoured the treat with utter glee, showing off its appreciation to its master. In the nick of time, the outsider grabbed the great white's tail fin without even breaking their merciless progress. Bar after bar, pressure built up, imposing excruciating pain on his skull, blurring his vision. It made no difference. He had a date with history. Then, up against the current and with the strength of just one arm, Gallian pulled himself up into the stirrups and took over command of the shark.

Very few mounts were able to sink so deeply into the abyss. The temperature was dropping vertiginously in a deafening silence. The nebulous abyss was compressing even the strongest of bodies in a silent, agonising and intangible stranglehold.

The last competitors fearfully conceded their position as they tasted the icy fangs of the deep and ferocious silence that devoured every single colour, a sort of ebony jinx, unfit for life. Only the Prince's sperm whale continued its unwavering advance. The faint glow of the lanterns slipping away into the depths in a muted dance with death.

The great white was gradually yielding to the crushing pressure, his muscles freezing unwillingly. Only determination could now enable them to resist the pain. Gallian gasped painfully and spurred the shark on, in an attempt to gain ground. One of his ribs snapped and a trickle of blood sprinkled from his mouth. He was suffocating. His epidermis tightened frantically in an attempt to survive.

A few meters ahead of him, the sperm whale was slowing down; while Liryianna's unconscious betrothed, ultimately let go of his imposing mass of weapons into the abyss. Like a puppet tossed by the waves, strapped to his throne, the previous years' glorious victor was lying unresponsive, shattered by the crushing pressure.

No mount could be rushed to its death by its rider. The shark panicked and zoomed to the surface. Gallian chose his relentless progression over his animal's move and propelled himself off of the shark to carry on. His asphyxiated body was unavoidably freezing in this gloomy silence of an endless night, doubt filled his mind. Unable to savour his victory, a wave of core chronic fright swept across his spine. With a final jolt, his vision blurred by pressure, he reached out into the dark abyssal molasses to grasp his sperm whale's tail as the very last lift to the light terminal.

Suddenly, the entire surrounding gloom came to life. The great depths had a face, a gateway opening directly into the underworld. The water broke open in halves and a pair of massive jaws sprang out and slammed down, engulfing the sperm whale in a shock and the entire ocean faltered.

A colossal creature was living there, buried deep in the bowels of the earth, a god forgotten by the sun, clothed in shimmering black. A beast of immeasurable power was awakening.

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## VI

Koran Sylde was watching in disgust as the elven sailors were busy loading the barrels of brandy into the bilges.

The Olonese merchant navy was dumping cargo and munitions on the quayside in order to grab a few more litres to take on board. Greedy onlookers flocked to the port of Kerris, squabbling over their share of the spoils. Crates laden with sumptuous fabrics and textiles, left behind by the elves, were snapped up by an eager crowd of tramps, in the morning mist.

The caravels, loaded to the brim, were painfully manoeuvring in the shallow draught, their hulls curved under the excessive tonnage. The heavy chain of the three-masted ship was creaking, struggling to pull the anchor up into its bow. Near the mizzenmast, the old captain bowed respectfully to his Ondine friend. The Arkhanis fleet, with its escort of frigates, sailed elegantly out into the open sea.

Soriya, the succulent, ambled along the pontoon to the sound of the wood under her tinkling boots, emphasising her presence by the sway of her hips. Playing on her assets with a touch of mischief, the sultry captain lasciviously wrapped her arms around Koran and drew a languorous kiss from him.

Their relationship certainly didn't go unnoticed and was the subject of daily gossip and jealousy amongst the elven crew.

Two races at odds, an inconceivable, disturbing union. Koran Sylde knew that feelings were never burdened by the weight of reason. The improbable lovers had learned to cultivate the present moment. A wild love devoid of possessiveness, nurtured by mutual respect, laced with eroticism.

The Alizé, the Olonnesse gem, left her mooring, following in the wake of the avant-garde frigates.

Soriya smiled one last time at her lover from behind the helm, a chatty silence full of promise. Two soul mates separated by the invisible barrier of judgement, an ironic romance held captive by reality.

## VII

The audience in the Ondines capital stands were scrutinising the depths of the abyss when the first defeated candidates started to surface from the abyss to thunderous applause. Liryianna enthusiastically stood from her throne, waving the royal family banner in all directions under the amused gaze of her father.

A thud emanated from the seabed followed by a colossal mass emerging from the abyss in a tremendous frothy rush from the depths, rising up to the surface at an alarming speed; a titan appeared, voraciously devouring all the champions in its path. It suddenly revealed its monstrous tentacled abominable face. It was obviously not unaffected by the pressure levels, a beast that had managed to slip through the cracks of nature.

The ocean waters became murky immediately turning the colour a whirlpool of blood, entrails and viscera. Complete chaos ensued!

The horrified crowd flooded out of the stands, incapable on coping with the inconceivability of the sight. A voracious messenger of the apocalypse, ought to be an aberration of nature, surged up against the walls of the capital. The behemoth's tail sent the antique copper gates flying, sweeping away centuries of history in one blow.

Liryianna, terrified, was soon encircled by the royal guard. Professional soldiers in heavy armour hurriedly herded the royalty to the second circle behind the orichalcum dome.

The mother-of-pearl horns began intoning the macabre litany of war.

A low, guttural sound echoed across, throughout the entire ocean. It was the call to arms.

The water beast charged into the old town, pulverising every single cottage and shop in its wake. Its robust tentacles meandering through the cul-de-sacs, shredding women and children indiscriminately. The monster was snatching at life with disconcerting glee.

In the main square, the guards had gathered. Massed behind their mighty shields, the Ondines stood shoulder to shoulder. Lords of the seas since the dawn of time, the coral reef people were ready to fight. A shower of tridents bounced off of the creature, unable to penetrate its thick cuirass. The beast's response was instantaneous. The Ondines were slaughtered.

The monster was elated, intoxicated by the battle. It let out a nightmarish howl that echoed across the vast capital.

A verdict, a damnation, the titan had rendered its judgement and was summoning his kin to the feast.

## VIII

Liryianna heaved a sigh of relief as she passed through the royal circle. Under the ancient statues of the palace, the cavalry was gathering. More than ten thousand soldiers on their mounts, ready for battle. A glittering guard led by the elite of the kingdom.

The beast drew back, belching with pleasure, whirling hungrily above the orichalcum dome, casting its gigantic shadow over the Ondines army. From the depths of the western doorway, three of its kind had answered the call, soon joined by another five from the north. The slaughter was stretching over miles, destroying the coral reef and wiping out the feeble resistance of the peaceful people in a matter of minutes.

In the throne room, Liryianna in tears was looking at the extent of the carnage, witnessing the total annihilation of her kingdom. The royal edifice bowed under the furious strikes of the colossal creatures. The imposing age-old rampart yielded to the brutality of its assailants. The greedy grim reaper's face was demanding its due. The cavalry charged with dignity, much to the delight of the behemoths.

Liryianna's father grabbed her hand. The Verdean-Froth line would not cease to exist today. She could see an unflinching determination in his eyes. He was ready to give up everything, their mother, their people, their world.

A monstrous tentacle pierced the palace wall and hastened their decision. Blindly searching the throne room with its sordid protuberance, the beast devastated the premises. Hundreds of thousands of souls were lost in an unprecedented debacle.



A small group of Ondine "royals" were rapidly evacuated through a secret gallery, fleeing with petty treasures in their arms. Liryianna's father forcefully grabbed the dauphine and just managed to drag her into the narrow corridor.

The ceiling collapsed. The monsters sprang up, swallowing up the horrified, avid councillors behind them.

The dilapidated, antediluvian underground, a long, cold and dark submerged corridor, extended for miles beneath the capital and was the only way out.

The creatures were pounding furiously at the opening where the last survivors were engulfing themselves. The tunnel collapsed. A dense, inextricable mixture of stones and sand started to clog the young heiress's gills. Along with her suffocating father, they managed to make their way through, jostling the elders, hurrying along.

The corridor was breaking up under the bite of the behemoths, when Liryianna saw the exit in the distance. The radiant light took on the appearance of an angel, a glimmer in her despicable nightmare.

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## IX

It was about time Koran Sylde returned to his natural element, and so he gladly plunged into the brackish waters of the port. He moved elegantly among his men as the undisputed charismatic and emblematic leader of the rivermen. The Ondines were swimming reverently around him all the way to the jetty, taking along the enthusiastic small fry in their wake. The water flowed between Koran's scales, invigorating his skin. With a gentle breaststroke, he slowly surfaced to take one last look at the fleets sailing on the horizon.

The three-master vessel of the Baronies escorted by her frigates quietly set sail and slowly made her way upwind, travelling northwards up the coast. The elven caravels and the Alizé, in the near distance, were manoeuvring in favourable winds, putting their halyards to the test as they headed south.

In between the two fleets, an unsettled flock of seagulls caught the attention of the Ondine. The noisy birds often escorted the boats in the hope of gleaning food, but Koran had never seen such a formation. Their figures drew a dark cloud in the skies foreshadowing a dark omen.

All of a sudden, the ocean rippled.

A huge wave swept into the harbour, submerging the seawall. Immense tentacles sprang up from the waters, grabbing the caravels of Soriya's rearguard. Before the horrified elven eyes, the boats, packed with merchandise, rose into the air.

A shower of debris and viscera fell violently back into the ocean. The hulls were shattered like sprigs of straw under the monster's powerful constriction.

In total panic, the watchmen hammered the tocsin to sound the alarm. A tidal wave rocked the rest of the caravels. An incredibly large creature rose from the waves to engulf the aft cabin. The Alizé then pitched dangerously, brutally battering the crew. Hundreds of litres of sea water instantly flooded in through a fatal breach in the stern of the vessel. Soriya turned to port, barking sharp, precise orders to her distraught deckhands.

Dumbfounded, Koran Sylde summoned up the last of his courage and ordered his men to charge. The ocean, raging with battle, sent the sailors in the gangways tumbling over the railings. In the troubled water, Koran caught a glimpse of the monster's face. A beast crying out for death.

The battle raged on. The elven archers were targeting the beast, riddling its thick membranous flesh with their sharp arrows. Soriya ordered the cannons to be charged with grapeshot, hoping that the Alizé would hold its jibe. The monster's tentacles converged to encircle the ship, stopping the maneuver dead in its tracks. The beast climbed onto the stern of the ship to devour as many souls as possible. The imposing vessel began a slow dance towards the bottom.

The helpless Ondines were tossed about like tiny fish in the current. In the chaos, Koran Sylde ordered a retreat, desperately trying to gather his troops. Underwater, a multitude of sailors were sinking towards the abyss, their bodies battered and unconscious.

The beast was crawling over the Alizé, tearing off the masts, when cannons detonated with a thud.

The Baronial frigates had answered the Elves' call. The steel cannonballs penetrated the creature's shell. Under full sail, the old captain's three-masted ship charged into the battle.

The monster turned around. The frigates, skilfully spread out in an arc, had dropped anchor, and the buccaneers were firing accurately.

The beast screamed, a strident, unbearable shriek.

Koran Sylde felt terrified. It wasn't a cry of pain, no, the beast was enjoying itself. It was roaring with pleasure, consumed by the carnage. The brute leapt from the *Alizé* and smashed into the Arkhanis fleet. The captain, with a cold expression in his eyes, was steering at top speed. The frigates' diversion had cost him dearly. Before his eyes, men of value were dying in a terrible massacre. From his frock coat, he took out a small flask, and without letting go of the helm, he toasted the ocean and emptied the contents in one gulp.

At the helm, Soriya was skilfully steering her ship around. In the depths, the Ondines searched among the bodies and debris for anything that could still be salvaged.

The three-master raised the proud Baronies war flag before ramming the abomination head-on, smashing the bow of the ship into the monster. It was a heroic and suicidal attack of unprecedented violence.

With a deafening roar, the titan teetered. In its irrepressible fury, the impaled monster pulverised the rest of the ship into, a nameless dismembered sailors' mass grave.

On the shore, the crowd gathered to watch the carnage, dazed by the cataclysm. In a last-ditch maneuver, Soriya miraculously managed to turn the water-logged Alizé. The imposing vessel then opened fire in a deafening blast. The through and through punctured creature groaned in pain. The captain ordered her overwhelmed crew to reload.

The water rushing into the stern suddenly caused the ship to dip. The weight of the cargo holds lifted the ship's nose up with a sinister creak. Soriya thought ironically that, for the first time, the sylph on the bow was pointing skywards. It was as if the sculpture wanted to join its elemental siblings in the heavens.

The beast, drunk with rage, tore through the waves, rushing at the Alizé before Koran Sylde's helpless eyes.

Soriya was contemplating her last moments with dignity. The elves would not leave the ship, they had made an oath to do so, and most of them would honour their word with great pride. Solemnly, the captain and the Alizé fired one last time. In a relentless advance, the lumbering monster bore the brunt of the impact without slowing down, stripping the ship and dragging its prey to the depths.

Koran howled, imploring the deaf gods of the ocean. He wanted to fly to his sweetheart's aid, but fear was crippling him.

Under the water, a terrible spectacle was unfolding. The enraged beast was tearing apart the wreck of the Alizé with relentless savagery. A thirst for death that nothing could quench. So the distraught Ondine fled. Instinctively, he swam towards the

port. The surface, so hostile to his dermis, offered his sole salvation.

The titan would not stop.

The dismembered creature slid from the depths towards the port. On the docks, the guards were getting organised. The armed soldiers who had evacuated the bay, were now ready for the titan's charge.

Koran rushed out of the water. Behind him, a tsunami unfurled. The furious beast sprang from the ocean, flooding down the town in a downpour of water. Ballistas and cannons fired simultaneously on the orders of the captaincy. The javelin throwers posted on the rooftops defended their city with fervour. Waving its stumps frantically in the air, dislocated, agonizing, the monster collapsed on the riverbank. The whole city pounced on him, guards hacking away at his flesh, crowds charging into the vile mush, harpooning his eyes, butchering his skin.

In a stench of filthy pestilence, the aquatic beast perished.

\*

# X

Twelve years had gone by since the fall of the Ondine capital of the Great Barrier Reef. Already twelve years since the beautiful Liryianna gave away her last smile.

Bitter, she contemplates the surface one last time. A jumble of garbage slowly plunges into the water, breaking the foam. Faeces, food scraps and filth dancing around slowly in the first glimmers of twilight.

Riddled with bitterness, the dauphine of emptiness, princess of nothing, has become an Ondine of the puddles. Unfit for Unification, heiress to that which is no more, Liryianna, in her filthy dress, had in turn become the pariah of the new world.

Beneath the sumptuous Golas, under the feet of the luxurious Unification affluents, in the shadows of the last pond where the beast has no hold, floats the lifeless body of Liryianna.

The dauphine had preferred death over acceptance. The last escape she could afford.

In the kilns, under the city's repugnant sewers, in the depths of the lake, a father is weeping...

\*

## XI

On this fine morning, the opulent and prosperous city of Golas was hosting a prestigious guest. The Consul and his aldermen had to get up at the crack of dawn, for exceptional reasons. Various lords of all breeds had gathered on barges around the island to see the renowned scholar.

The Consul knew how to butter up his guests, regardless of the expense! For the occasion, he had dug deep into the city's funds, for the game was worth the candle.

Musicians, dressed in richly colored attires, performed a jig. Fanions, fanfare, women and wine - a seductive plan of action that had proven itself time and again. The aim was clear: to impress the emissary of the 7.

On the other side of the river, facing the jubilant crowd, a group of troll porters were struggling under a heavy basin filled with water. In the center, Koran Sylde stretched limply as he puffed on his old mother-of-pearl pipe, filling the imposing receptacle with smoke. His recent status as venerable amongst the Veldt Nation conferred upon him as many privileges as responsibilities. The passing years had taught him temperance and Soriya sorrow.

The battle for the ocean was over, the beasts were roaming as undisputed masters on both land and sea, devouring millions of lives in their path.

When all seemed lost, five men, a woman and a lycant organized what was known as the Unification.

Lucas Veldt, Hans Seekher, Nephilim Roovdark, Travis Mädh, Howard Fioul, Liv Syphea and Miles Kaltan names woven into the threads of fate that no one would ever forget.





Like the Beast, no one knew where they had come from or who they were, and some claimed they had passed through the darkness of the world before. In order to fight the scourge, the 7 managed to convince every race to unite. Each of them established a caste that was essential to the continent's survival.

Koran Sylde had become one of their foremost representatives. He was proud to wear the seal of the 7 on his finger, a golden pass symbolizing hope and renewal. The Ondine had joined the Veldts who were scholars and writers, holding the memory of the world and archiving the knowledge of all races.

The rest of the world had to choose their allegiance.

The bravest had joined the respected Seekher, an army of despair that brought together those who still had the courage to take up arms in the face of the Unspeakable.

The Kaltan, born out of the gathering of nomads, were relentlessly roaming the Continent, taking refuge in nature.

Part of the population had placed their faith in steam technology, and the Fiouls would bring civilization into a new era.

Syphea united the bourgeoisie and the peasants, who organized trade and the economy, providing stewardship and comfort for the population.

As for the Roovdark, children so genetically close to the Beast, able to sense its presence and murderous madness, they became feared and dreaded sentinels.

Only the Mädh rejected Unification.

Dividing the Humans by promoting the superiority of their race, fifty thousand of them, orphaned by their guide whom words they distorted, vomited out Unification. Judging it futile and dangerous to their survival, they would become unspeakable criminals, infiltrating the Nations or forming belligerent armies.

Despite this, refusing to yield to the cruelty of fate, this world, in its final throes and without name or future, still held on to hope

The Beast, however terrifying, finally found in Unification an opponent capable of standing against its bloody advance.

7 NATIONS,  
7 SOURCES OF HOPE...



# Nations

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UNIFICATION



There's no room left in my heart for anything but hatred. Nothing good or evil can creep in. I am the hand holding the sword. Beauty is a luxury, wisdom a trick, hope a whore with an angelic smile and a black soul. My life can be summed up in one word: metal. The metal of my heart, the metal of my armour, the metal of my weapon. The battlefield is my home, my hearth, and death, my mistress. I was born out of chaos, guarantor of an ideal, promise of an eternity of light. Others have chosen the symbol for me, but never mind. Let them weep, let them laugh, let them sing and love, let them suffer, let them live for me, I have no remorse, no pity, no compassion. All that matters is the Beast and the blessed time when he'll bite the dust. Then I'll be serene and I'll be able to die, for my life will no longer be useful. A warrior without an enemy is just a man, and I'm not a man, I'm a Seekher.







By the flickering light of a candle, in the dark recesses of your confused memories, I track down, I exhume, and with a crunch of my quill on yellowed parchment, I trace the route of destiny, so that out of a lamenting legend, I can make a myth carved in marble. Truth demands to be revealed. Memory must never be betrayed. This is how my days pass, bent over my study to the point of cracking my back, when in the end, all that remains are a few words, the ones that will stand the test of time. I smile against the setting sun. The iron of prose, the steel of poetry, an arsenal of knowledge, will strike more reliably at the heart than a dagger or a sword. The black ink of my writings is the blood that flows out of the wounds of my soul. This is my offering to the world of which I am the attentive observer. I am its faithful guarantor, a guardian clothed in knowledge as if it were the finest of fabrics. Veldt is my nation.





A man of steel and flesh. Fire and steam for companions. Noise always, and, clinging to my heavy boiler, the hope of a new era. I do not master technology, it possesses me. An elusive demon that whispers strange plans only I understand, I evolve with it. What Gaia couldn't conceive, we created. What nature denies us, we invent. It's a step forward, a glimmer in the darkness, and whatever the sacrifices or superstitions, we are at the same time gods and penitents, venerated or outcast. Cogs, belts, lungs and arteries, the ultimate fusion of what is and what could be, that's what I am. And from the depths of the mines, I extract the infernal substance night and day, stone chiseled with blue, to feed the wood and steel bellies of my conveyors. And then, when the vaporite does its work, the world can hear the heartbeat of the Fioul nation.





Face of meadow, smile of light, tears of rain, Gaia, my mother, on your rounded back I walk in search of a hypothetical future, hidden in your quivering green shadows. Who am I really? A child of the stars, wandering about like dust tormented by the winds? A nameless vagabond with a hesitating destiny, begging for your forgiveness? They build cities, they erect walls, they construct their own tombs, cold and empty, and dig into your mossy skin a scar they call civilization. Deaf, they lose themselves in the noisy madness of their technology. Their eyes no longer see what I see, so they imagine improbable memories, subject to the destiny imposed on them by the Beast. They've abandoned you, well hidden behind their palisades of stone and wood. And while they forget you, forging in their hearts the weapons of arrogance, I, of the Kaltan nation, have found my way, preserving their souls.





A smile in spite of the threat, I come to you and offer my hand. What else can I do? Fight? Fight, sure, but when victory is achieved, what will be left? Ruins when we should have houses, battlefields when we should have fields of wheat, rivers of blood when we should have wine, faint hope when we should be deciding; idle soldiers when we should have men, weapons when we should have tools, shrouds for blankets and corpses for neighbours. Fighting. While they fight, I continue to live, to love life, and to impose its just law. Its fair price. My armour is invisible but stronger than any other, and its name is self-sacrifice. Wherever you are, I'll be there too, building, clearing and feasting. To grow a seed, you need the wind that brings clouds and rain, you need the sun, you need good, rich soil. But without the hand that plants it, nothing will remain. I am that very hand. I am a Syphea.







Sometimes, when my gaze wanders as I look towards the horizon, just as twilight sets the world ablaze and then condemns it to darkness, I catch a glimpse of hope, something like a whisper, a delicious shiver. I am a wounded tiny bird hidden in the ashes of my humanity, locked away in a cage, safely sheltered. For just a few seconds, I catch a glimpse of freedom, I'll quench my thirst for blood in the sky's scarlet puddles. And the wind in the leaves whispers a secret to me. It sings an old tune to me, a melancholic lament of love and flowers, of smiling faces gathered around a cosy fire. I strain my ears, and I hear the beast calling me so I beseech silence, the precious sesame that unlocks the doors of my cell. There are no bars or guards around me. I myself am my own jailer, I myself am my own sentence. In this world, no one can really choose. Surviving every day. Resisting, with death as the only alternative. I am the sentinel of Unification, the flickering light of a tormented mind, I am a Roovdark.





Cursed be they, all of them, for being nothing but soulless silhouettes, silly soldiers of hope. Their demanding sacrifice is not mine, and neither is their war. In the cold of this world, their pathetic stares towards a meaningless future make me sick to my stomach. I vomit their Unification; I spit on their craving for truth. From one illusion to another, their attempts to move forward are matched by the growing shadow that will take every single one of them to their darkest fate. I am of those who will survive. The Beast is not the enemy. It is merely a tool, a weapon in the hands of the gods who have damned us for forgetting our humanity. Let us leave the animals to simmer in the filth of their origins; I am the son of the night, and the price to be paid. I am of the Mädh nation, and my future is one of triumph.





BUT THE BEAST STANDS  
STILL ON THE BLACK  
RAMPARTS OF ITS HATRED;  
IT GRIMACES A DEADLY  
SMILE INTO THE NIGHT.

THE BEAST IS WATCHING  
THEM.

MAY YOUR WORDS  
KEEP OUR MEMORY ALIVE.  
AS I AWAIT A NEW DAWN,  
I WILL RETURN  
TO THE EARTH.

# Unknown author

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UNIFICATION YEAR 1

# frontières de L'UNIFICATION

DERNIÈRE LUNE  
100 200 300 400 500  
Echelle 1/500





If anyone reads these few lines, then my death will have been worthwhile. Precious is your gaze, dear stranger, as it bears our sacrifice into the light.

I believe myself to be the last survivor of a phalanx amongst two hundred valorous men, hence, my name no longer matters.

We managed to break in, through the gates of Tarkǎn, on the brink of autumn. A breach in the beast's lands allowed a cohort of all races to penetrate enemy lines. We had the audacity to believe that our military knowledge could make us prevail and push the enemy back. In truth, the creatures were only luring us away from our fortifications, drawing us deeper and deeper into the woods, out of reach of the Kaltan archers.

The beast is far from being the stupid, brutish monster portrayed by the fabrications of the privileged. Its intelligence is cunning, sadistic and devious. I saw its mighty power for myself. Hidden in ambush on their own territory, the predators were patiently awaiting in the ruins of a village in the Baronies.

Our pathfinders were the first victims of their insane savagery. Concealed in the surrounding vegetation, death kept coming out of the trees, engulfing the skilled hunters in the blink of an eye. The fiendish Amroks loved to feast on the dismembered corpses of my companions under the watchful gaze of the massive Aklains.

This is when the terrible hunt began.

Our feeble battalion was quickly dispersed as hundreds of creatures swarmed towards our position, blackening the ridges on the horizon.

The beasts were acting in concert with skilful strategy. The trap was closing in on us and the hunt had begun.

The clear-sighted leader of our phalanx ordered the dispersion of the battalion. We had a better chance of surviving alone than together. I ran for my life with a host of monsters at my heels. The fall of my comrades-in-arms gave me the grim opportunity to witness the inconceivable. I found a providential hiding place for the first two days by climbing into a broad-leaved tree.

The rumour was confirmed: the foul critters were stealing the bodies of the living and carefully selecting their prey.

My people howled at the moon in this obscure hide-and-seek with death. With utter relish, the monsters would flush us out one by one, despite our experience. They were the ultimate trackers, exalted by our tenacity, dislodging us from our deft hiding places. Nyctalope predators with acute senses, capable of outwitting the children of the forest on their own turf.

I can safely say that beyond the gates of Tarkån, nothing remains. Life has died out in the west, desolation spans as far as the eye can see.

The rest of my story is of the utmost importance, and I urge you, stranger, to place these writings into the hands of Veldt scholars. Let them draw from our sacrifices the conclusions that will forge the victories of tomorrow.

The beasts seem to have an acute knowledge of anatomy. Distinguishing between breeds, carefully severing muscle tendons, and skilfully averting haemorrhage. Precise mutilations, tailored to immobilise their prey while keeping them alive.

The creatures amputate meticulously, demolishing the spirit of the bravest among us. They mercilessly tear apart the most frail of races and have a morbid interest in the most robust species. Many of my brothers have been taken west, beyond the ruins of Arkhanis, where, presumably, a fate worse than death awaits the vanquished.

For three long nights, I have endured the screams of my people. My gourd is empty, and I have no illusions about my doom. At dawn, I'll gather my remaining strength and make for the coast. I can smell salt in the air, and all around me nature seems silent.

If you're reading these lines, it means that my plan has succeeded and that my bottle has finally been carried across the sea by the current.

Drink and feast for us, strangers,  
May your words keep our memory alive.  
As I await a new dawn, I will return to the earth.  
May my body give Gaia the strength to survive tomorrow.  
May birdsong ring out from the wastelands once more.



# Boukka



UNIFICATION YEAR 5



Medelia, a small town nestling in the heights of the unforgiving Narok mountains, was not a favourite destination for tourists. Instead, it was a proper village of peons, isolated in the snow, on the fringes of wild inbreeding.

The night was already well under way, as were the few remaining onlookers, while the last stalls were drawing their curtains. Yet, one charming herbalist's shop, was advertising «open 24 hours» in flashy candy-pink lettering. The shop front was equipped with a noisy oil lighting system that would give epilepsy to a newborn baby.

Two filthy trolls, chained to the facade, were there to ensure a comfortable shopping experience, devoid of any foxing. A theft-deterrent system that had proved its worth many times over!

Inside the shop, a multitude of shelves were crammed with bottles and colourful potions. Balms, ointments and a wealth of neatly arranged ingredients that should have exuded the exquisite flavours of local herbs.

Surprisingly, this mix of fragrances was muffled by the overpowering smell of old-fashioned stew.

One customer, bogged down in the owner's inextricable monologue, was politely trying to escape. He was hoping to make his way discreetly to the exit, gaining a few centimetres any chance he got.

The establishment's owner was a fairy of disproportionate dimensions, answering to the name of Boukka. The Fairy, who was plump overall, had made her fortune in the Syphea trade. It had taken her little time to get used to the comfortable surroundings of success.

Slumped on a silk cushion, the fat of her belly joined her double chin, concealing her undergarments, which were probably buried under some unforgiving bulges.

Or so everyone hoped!

The Plump Fairy loved syrups, but never added water for the sake of taste. Her love of gastronomy had prompted her to equip her back shop with a flashy kitchen to match her shop front. Since then, she had never been seen moving more than a metre without suffocating, let alone flying.

The customer, who had been cornered for several hours, considered feigning faintness or, perhaps better still, making a run for it.

Meanwhile, Boukka kept his wooden spoon twirling, engulfing large portions with each mouthful:

*"Relax sweetie pie, we're still going to have a snack on the go between two purchases? we're not going to eat dandelions by the roots, and to be honest I've tasted it, it's disgusting, even in sauce!"*

*Come on sit down, we'll make you a little plate!*

*Don't you like to add chocolate to your stew? Well, it's tone on tone, and it's helps it slide right down! Fine, everybody can make their own choices, but you're missing out...*

*In my shop you'll find everything! pustules, diarrhoea, panaritis or decayed teeth? Auntie's here! If you've got runny shite rotting the bottom of your trousers, I've got something better than washing powder! A dab of dwarf bison fat through the back door and you're good to go! No paper needed!*



*If your willy won't stand up when the tide comes in, I've got some ginseng to knock it hard and preserve your dignity! If your gob stinks like a gutter on Troll Day, I've got some frost mint!*

*If your anus won't shut up and say hello to everyone before the spring festivities, I've got a filter! No need to look further my lovebird in gravy, Boukka's always got whatever it is you need in store!"*

The customer gave a forced smile, trying to keep his eyes open despite the spray of tiny spittles coming from the Fairy's hypnotic mouth. His retina fogged up and his shirt stained, he delicately wiped his face with a handkerchief. He was hoping for a break in the conversation to slip in a word, but the talkative Boukka could talk and chew at the same time.

She grabbed her glass. She couldn't drink while she talked; he was sure of that! Seizing this opportunity with elegance, he took a step back towards the exit.

The Fairy emptied her glass of syrup in one gulp and swallowed loudly. She straightened up, released a small fart which smell scented the counter, and resumed her palaver in a bafflingly natural way:

*"You know, there aren't many Fairies as prestigious as me on the Continent! I'm the only one in the family who knows how to whip up custard, if you know what I mean... I know how to butter stuff up, unlike my sisters!*

*Yep, I've got four sisters!*

*The second one is a typical example of an old fashioned fairy. Madame's into eye surgery! Just outside Tarkän, if you please... A patriarchal circle of dirty old misogynistic men! Trust me, the poor girl never sees a penny.*

*The youngest, get out your handkerchiefs, burst in an oil engine! She got crushed by a valve while a boiler was being serviced. It was a real blow, but I don't want anyone taking advantage of my fragility to drive prices down!*

*Worse still, my last sister earns bread by the sweat of her arse in a brothel in Kerris. She's like a Fairy freed from the old dogma... With her girlfriends, she makes micro bites on the sailors' masts when they return to port! Apparently it works and it's kind of "exotic"!*

*I know for a fact that in the family, we arouse male desire inevitably. They all want to dip their biscuit, but I for one, have a destiny, I lead a life of sacrifice! I'm a role model for my race, a modern muse who sets the Fairy on a new course! I could have ruled instead of the 7, had I wanted to! I know Syphaea personally! but I've got other creams to whip up...*

*By the way, did I ever tell you about the time we wanted to make a pool of lard? They say it's incredibly good for your complexion!"*

The creak of a heavy metal curtain behind the customer caught his attention. The providential escape route was now closed. The two trolls blocking the only entrance were adding to the weight of the steel shop front. The uncomfortable customer, with a strained smile, pointed to the exit with his thumb, masking his concern as best he could.

*"Oh yeah! Don't worry about it, my sweeti honey pie! We're in the clear now, a bit of privacy is a treat, so don't go making a big deal out of it! I suggest we have a coffee with entremets and then you let me get back to work, ok? I know you're fascinated by me but I've got work to do, I'm essential to Unification you see! I may seem a little sentimental at first, but I know when it's time to grease the pie, and I can tell you that I don't go into it with a ladle handle!"*

*Sometimes, I even think I should have made a career for myself with the eldest in the family, at least I'd have smashed some faces. Sometimes I hold back but...*

*Hang on a second, my sugar coated cinnamon bite, let's change the subject... I hear you know where to find stolen relics? You know what I'm talking about, don't you? a month ago, a convoy was stolen in the rift by a group of Mädh? I know it for a fact, don't give me no fucking bullshit, I hate that, it's an elf thing! So let's calm down and resume... The stolen relics, you'd better start to talk, I kinda start loosing it now..."*

With a snap of Boukka's fingers, the Trolls stepped forward to seize the customer firmly by the shoulders. The Fairy let out a long, thunderous burp that echoed throughout Medelia's silent night.

*"My eldest is with the Seekher and your description fits perfectly. I'm as sure of that as pastrami suits my complexion! You're a fucking Mädh bastard! Guys, knock him out, that's him! And tell my sister I want the reward money before spring! What the fuck are they doing in the kitchen? Is there anything to eat here or what?"*

SO HE MARCHED ON.  
AT THE SPEED OF A FALL  
FROM A BRIDGE.  
HOPE WAS HIS WHIP  
AND HIS FATHER'S DUTY,  
HIS STEED.

# The nightingale

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P A R T I

UNIFICATION - YEAR ZERO



# I

Coralie had elegantly plaited her pale hair with matching silk ribbons. She was gliding along the soft grass at a jaunty pace, humming a popular nursery rhyme. She was dressed in a white linen dress with golden hems, made by her mother.

The resemblance to her doll was striking. The rag toy, skilfully sewn together, was made out of an ashen twig and fitted with an improvised bundle.

*"We're ready, Father! It took Annette a while to get her things together, but now she's all set for the big trip!"*

Her father smiled, then stared into Coralie's eyes quietly. She was already six, soon to be seven... She had her mother's intoxicating eyes and the freshness of spring. The recent rumour of the 7's first victory over the Beast in Mount Akai's passage had gained momentum and was now spreading across the continent.

Hope had been given a new name. Unification.

Fighting against extinction was now everyone's prerogative. The 7 had spoken, and choice had been made. We had to leave our lives, our homes and choose a caste. An allegiance to a new master.

Would they bless us with guidance through the turmoil? He had serious doubts.

The city of Arane, which had given him so many delicious years of love and wine, was now falling into ruin. He had chosen to spend many months defending the mutilated against pillagers. Food was scarce, and the most powerful species were ruthlessly wreaking havoc on our stocks, as they migrated north.

The crippled were crowding in mass into the once glorious, now ruined citadel. It was a despicable sight, a conglomeration of cripples of all races, pouring in from the four corners of the continent.

The 7 had chosen. Unification would not be burdened with the infirm or the weak. The order, yet simple, had become the greatest concern of us all. The valid would be forced to pledge allegiance to a caste; the others, invalidated, our forefathers, our veterans, no longer formed part of their ideals. In the infamy of this situation, these new gods had delivered their verdict: the suffering and the old would be forced to leave their homelands, abandoned to their lonesome, sad, sordid fate.

He had forged his own destiny, bearing tears in his eyes and the responsibilities of a father. The Banished had snatched his wife from him at the dawn of winter, out of mere hunt drunkenness. He had cursed them. He had vowed to kill every last one of them with his bare hands. He had sunk into an immeasurable rage, murky and thick.

The dark lament of anger.



## II

A few months earlier, as Coralie was engulfed in silence, angels' patience seeds were eventually sown, leading her gently towards Pardon. The nights rolled by. Under the care of her sightless nurse, she had forgiven her mother's absence and her father's silence.

The city of Arane became an open sewer. Lulled by the moans and groans of the dying, the nights were short, and hunger persistent. The migration of the infirm was a breeding ground for the most sinister nightmares.

It was Viktor, the young green-eyed human, who gave her the will to laugh again. Neighbors since forever, the children had grown up side by side. Accomplices in recklessness, the two cherubs were busy, gleaning carefree moments from life, together. Their repugnant surroundings welcomed their innocence with fervor.

Pure childish candour, a force able to save them from the horrors of their daily lives, was spraying an exhilarating sense of hope amongst all. The laughter of two children contrasting with the ambient death cries in what appeared like the grimmest of paintings, one depicting the first precepts of this new Unification business.

### III

The situation was getting worse by the day. Coralie's father understood this. The 7 had decided, and so it was. Arane had no future planned for his daughter. In the spring she would be seven. She would become a part of Unification.

It was time to change the story. The past was a sordid dead end that could only be swept away by the present.

So he marched on. At the speed of a fall from a bridge. Hope was his whip and his father's duty, his steed. He lacked all knowledge of literary secrets and mysterious technologies such as steam. His life had been one without the duty of study. He was wondering who, from the Kaltans' frantic march on, or the Seekher madness, would kill his offspring first. She was so frail, so innocent!

The Law of the 7 left us with little choice. A faint, derisory illusion that death was our one and only possession. We could only choose which caste we wanted to die in.

Out of spite, he would become a Syphea. He would live by honor, would become a peasant. An earthworm in a world that had become absurd. He would build them a future in the dirt of the Fertilis orchards, swapping his noble uniform for a pair of braids, his presence for humility, his downfall for his daughter's future.

The past often looks like an unfinished dream. A romanticised scenario combining intense memories and foolish plans, filled up with regrets, buried deep in an amnesia-filled memory. He knew it. Rage lurking in the recesses of his soul was humming its sly lament. Unable to come to terms with his wife's absence, he was consumed by emptiness.

Life, playful as always, had given him a second child to add to his burdens. Young Viktor's last parent had been struck down by illness. The city's insalubrious environment was becoming worse by the day, galvanised by a river of dying people. No medical resources would be provided to them. So he consented and gave his word with great reluctance.

What can you refuse a dying neighbour? a lifelong neighbour? He would adopt the orphan, he would find the strength, what else could he do?

To his already unbearable burden was added the responsibility of two innocent souls. By instinct, he gathered their meagre belongings, his courage and the crumbs of hope that remained in him. Together, they would take the next ferry to the east. He would put his trust in time to unravel his hatred.

Time can undo anything built by man.

With his gaze fixed on the horizon, he watched the arrival of the Fioul conveyors in a monstrous machine that belched acrid smoke in its wake and dug deep tracks into the soil. The mirror of the Beast. A grotesque lump of cast iron staggering and hiccupping.

He looks up, puffs on his cigarette and stares at the convoy.

The breeze is singing to him, that it is less absurd to regret the past than to try to anticipate the future.

## IV

Coralie and Viktor's enthusiasm is rare. The sight of the metal behemoths is breathtaking. Nature itself seems to stand aside as the Fioul soldiers and their gleaming bronze and steel caravan arrive. The children, hand in hand, are dancing and twirling in a frenzied circle with the little doll. Gullible glee, a glimmer in the darkness.

The sound of laughter was quickly overshadowed by the din of the dark, charcoal-coloured head conveyor. A Saurian dressed in an armor of tools sounded the tocsin to keep the crowd at bay. The Fioul had not come to Arane out of indulgence. They had come to unload their foul merchandise.

Unification had a price tag on it.

With a dreadful creak, the conveyor unfurled its main gangway, revealing a nightmarish tableau. Crammed into its belly, piled high, lay the first victims of Unification. An edifying spectacle of guts and tripe. Legless and one-armed people of all ethnicities, bathing in their own entrails.

None of these passengers will be serving the 7 in their ideals anymore.

Conceited Goblins joke about the wounded, unloading their wares with typical greenskin finesse. In the menacing shadow of the conveyor, bathed in the smell of the mass grave, Viktor and Coralie grow a little taller.

## V

The old sightless nurse was silently watching the departure with her livid eyes. She seemed to have passed through time, her skinny body bent by the weight of the world. Turning towards the children, her hands waved slowly in the air, beckoning the cherubs to come and be hugged. She wanted to hold the two angels close to her heart one last time.

*"Are you sure you're not coming, maminett? My doll is going to be very disappointed!*

*No, my sweet Coralie.*

*I've got so much to do, and who's going to look after our hen?*

*We're going to miss you, maminette, both me and Annette!*

*Terribly, in fact.*

*Be good to Viktor and take good care of your dad, darling.*

*Hey now, dry those ugly tears, come on...*

*You remember the song, don't you?*

*'Like the branches of a fruit tree in the snow, who'd think they'd turn green again?*

*That the dreary wood, beaten by the winds will blossom in the spring?' "*

With the help of the Saurian, Viktor loaded the last of the luggage onto the roof of the conveyer. The caravan set off again with a deafening roar.

The old nanny watched the horizon for a long time. It was as if she could see the dark wisps of smoke rising from the gigantic steam boilers.

Patience is sustained by hope, letting go of any kind of despair. The old nanny had played her part, and it was time for her to take her leave. The new world described by the 7 would not be hers.

Death inevitably wins all its battles against existence with ease.  
Few people know how to maintain their dignity in the final act.

With tears streaming down her face, she walked straight ahead into  
the setting sun, its last rays of light bathing her in a purifying glow.  
It was time for her to help life lose with panache.

\*

## VI

The little doll had found a prime spot in the darkness of the conveyor belly. Tucked neatly between the luggage, Annette sat enthroned on a lantern, her ragged head bobbing at every rut.

The two children, accomplices in the half-light, squealed with excitement. The storage cabin of the metal conveyor provided an incongruous playroom, a challenge to balance. Standing up, the two children kept tumbling over and over in the bags of merchandise with each braking action. The exhilaration of change.

The father had taken his place on the roof of the lead conveyor with the Saurian in the control room. A tiny trapdoor under his feet allowed him to keep an eye on the children below. The snake man smiled and handed him his mother-of-pearl pipe with its pungent smell. The father took a deep puff and coughed. In turn, he reached under his tabar and pulled out a silver flask. He quickly unscrewed the cork and handed the liquor to the Saurian.

Sitting on Viktor's frail shoulders, Coralie was trying to watch the scene through the trapdoor. The improvised totem pole was staggering and struggling to keep its balance. The two sticks that served as Viktor's calves were put to the test, wobbling on the unstable ground.

*"I swear, Viktor! I think he's smiling! He's talking to that snake guy!"*

The conveyor braked suddenly, skidding in the soft earth beneath its tracks. Playing the levers with velocity, the pilot initiated an emergency U-turn with his imposing vehicle. The entire body creaked dangerously, straining from the abrupt maneuver.

A detonation ripped through the atmosphere. The dreadful sound of the steam ballista. The merchandise was tossed about, shaken in all directions, throwing the children back against the walls. A guttural howl rang out. A chilling, inhuman roar.

The conveyor's thick body buckled under the insanely violent impacts. The vehicle was launched at full speed through the dense forest, while the passenger compartment was subjected to a plethora of intensely brutal assaults. The steel was peeling away like paper under the savagery of its assailant, revealing streaks of light, pale glimmers of the moon.

Terrified, Coralie instinctively huddled behind Viktor. The two cornered children, their backs to the cockpit, were facing the unspeakable. The rear door suddenly swung open. A massive dark silhouette, gleaming in the dark, entered the belly of the conveyor belt at full speed. The Beast advanced silently, scrutinising its victims with relish. Slowly scraping its large claws against the walls, the Aklaine feasted on fear.

The children screamed.  
The Beast feigned, salivating with pleasure, revealing the foul stench of death. It slowly made its way forward.

Fueled by the will to live, Viktor threw an adjoining lantern into the creature's mouth with all his might. The glass globe shattered and the wick miraculously ignited the remaining oil.  
The Beast's flaming face lit up the night. The Aklaine, gratified by the tenacity of its prey, revealed a wide row of fangs. Nothing could halt its terrifying advance.



## VII

He was a father, and it was hope that had guided him to this point.

On the roof of the speeding vehicle, the battle was raging.

An Amrok was clinging to the hull, digging its claws into the steel and playing with its sharp tail. In its jaws, the goblin in charge of the ballista was howling in pain. The Beast tightened its powerful jaws, cracking the Goblin's ribs one by one with relish.

A disgusting mush of entrails poured from the creature's mouth.

So the old man advanced once more, his heart fuelled by unflinching bravery. His rage commenced a macabre dance with madness. Resolute, he tore the steel bar from the railing. As the last remnant of a broken family, he stood fearlessly in the night mist on the roof facing the Amrok.

At full speed on a bumpy track through the forest, the pilot was roughing up the conveyor's suspension. The front bull-bar crushed branches and rocks, tearing a passage the width of the giant out of the path. The vigilant Saurian had already managed to outrun most of the horde of Beasts with his incongruous trajectory.

The scream of Coralie in the cabin triggered a spark in her father.

Every fate, however long and complex, has only one moment: the moment when a man knows once and for all who he truly is. He was a father. The last parent.

So he charged.

## VIII

Viktor wanted to scream. The creature, its face bathed in flames, was advancing slowly. He wanted to scream, but he was unable to. His entire nervous system was frozen by a devouring terror. A deep tetany had petrified time. Fright surged down his spine, raising every hair on his body. His trembling hand slipped over the handle of his olive-wood penknife.

The beasts' eyes are unlike those of any other species. A strange violet glow emanates from the hypnotic retina, as if the creature had crossed the ages in order to extinguish life.

Looking down at Viktor, the Beast swiftly unfurled its long tail. Its blade brushing against his face as it grabbed Coralie, who was hiding right behind him, lifting the little girl into the air like a vulgar puppet. The white linen dress with its golden hems slowly turned scarlet red with blood. The Aklaine was slowly taking the life out of the girl, gradually penetrating deeper into her skin. A drizzle of blood sprayed over the boy's face. Paralysed and weighed down by his knife's heaviness, Viktor was struck down. The weapon that had once nurtured his dreams of chivalry suddenly had the weight of a mountain. Struggling, he managed to hold the knife up to his face. It was an instinct, more than a show of arms, a jolt of courage. The Beast grabbed him viciously by the throat. Breathless, Viktor's feet left the ground. The eyes of the two children met, bound together in helplessness. Only death can snuff out the flame of hope.

A deep ditch in the path tore a caterpillar from its suspension. The conveyor collided violently with a sturdy oak tree. A loud clang ripped through the air. The fuel vehicle disintegrated. Night was absolute.



## IX

When Viktor regained consciousness, he felt as if he had just woken from one of those bad dreams. The first light of dawn was breaking through the thick evergreens. It was hard for his heavy eyelids to stay open. His blurred vision revealed a path of stones and roots speeding by.

He was loaded like a sad sack of potatoes on a shoulder whilst the hunt for the Beast was in full swing. Coralie's father had set off in a frantic pursuit burdened by two unconscious children.

The Saurian, seriously injured, was trailing hard a few meters behind. Coralie's father carefully placed the two children at the foot of a tree with large roots. He looked exhausted. Part of his face was torn off. The socket that once housed his eye was now bleeding open.

Behind him, nature was crumbling under the predatory fury. In a ballet of branches and foliage, the Aklaine was cutting a path towards its exhausted victims. His thick armor was now punctured by countless lumps of steel from the brutal crash. The dreadful creature was continuing its relentless hunt with relish.

Coralie was unconscious and breathing heavily. Her father handed Viktor a brooch in the shape of a nightingale, the last remains of his wife. His rage had completed its song. For the first time in far too long, he smiled.

He straightened up and took one last look at the children's faces. He was going to buy some time, this would be the last thing he could offer them.

# X

When Coralie finally opened her eyes, it was to see her father close his. The Saurian had cowardly prioritised his life, running belly-first through the woods, taking advantage of the sinister diversion provided by a father blinded by love.

Viktor grabbed Coralie by the waist and ran. He ran with his strongest stride, crossing fords and ravines without ever slowing his pace, oblivious to the brambles and branches that blocked his path. In the ultimate gleam of hope, success often appears to revive one's faith in it. So he quickened his pace.  
Lost, distraught, exhausted.

In the heat of the morning sun, with his feet bleeding, he collapsed near a Kaltan camp. He had used up every last ounce of his energy. He had run with death as his unfailing motivation. They had survived the relentless predator. Two bodies of unconscious children lying in the tall grass. There lied the two children whom life had pushed to grow up too fast. Two children brought up by a merciless destiny, with luck as their mother and damnation as their tax collector.

The past teaches us bluntly, without embellishment. From the wounds of our souls spring our deepest convictions. An armor of hope, a bulwark of paper.

Two children, two laments born out of one act, lying in the grass as a laughing wind sweeps away the plain and the pain.  
Only the future has the audacity to promise rewards.

\*

YOU WERE RIGHT,  
MY DARLING,  
I COULDN'T GET OUT  
OF HERE ALIVE...

# The Guild

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UNIFICATION YEAR 4





# I

The crunch of bones was echoing up the stairs to the higher levels. In the depths of a gaol, under the dancing shadows of a handful of torches, a young Seekher was ruthlessly beating a Mädh prisoner. The prisoner's sarcastic tone had aroused the militiaman's wrath and the floor had finally turned the colour of blood.

*"Yeah... I'll give birth to the rest... But, stop hitting and relax... I'll take it from the top... Put the whip down, mate, just take it easy..."*

*It all began in the port of Kerris. The Fioul boats were unloading their junk in a devil's ass kind of heat! The sisters had assured me that the informer would turn up, that they'd paid a high price and that the job was worth its weight in gold.*

*'Enough to feed a herd of trolls for months!' Lynn guaranteed.*

*So we waited... For a long time...*

*It was dark when our informant finally arrived.*

*The plan was simple. A gang of Lycants from the plains of Nomarande had managed to find some scrolls dating back to the Aventiss. They were to sell them the next day at a good price in a boozier to a bunch of bald heads of the Ark of Knowledge. No Seekher, no trickery... almost too easy...*

*You'd think they'd just come down from the citadel just so we could pick them up. La Poisse had a plan for this, and, as usual, I didn't feel it.*

*Often in his plans, I'm the one who gets the shaft... And, as a tightrope walker in the shadows as he is, La Poisse has built the guild's reputation on daring tricks. But if he didn't have the two sisters with him, I wouldn't put much stock in him...*

*Dame Miche had only given birth to two daughters, to the disappointment of her late lover, but damn did she do a good job of it! Real babes she made!*

*Super hot, unlike Golas' ugly looking ducklins!  
Nah, classy they were, with a pair of sweet little arses who..."*

The back wall of the jail was stained with blood. The spatter had sprayed all the way to the ceiling. The sound of slaps followed the crack of the whip. The sound of meat being whipped echoed throughout the corridor.

A graceful figure walked slowly into the doorway of the interrogation room. With the ease and delicacy of a cat, Dælia slipped into the shadows, then smiled. Entertained by the situation, the tightrope walker watched in silence.

The young Seekher was officiating with fervour. The adrenalin pumping through his veins was giving him new sensations. Fear and discovery had given way to pleasure. The reddened flesh was bursting under the impact of his whip with a hypnotic effect.

The captive's voice finally roused the executioner from his lethargy. The prisoner's bloody mouth tried to utter words between the regurgitation of two pieces of flesh...

*"No...Don't knock any more... I'll tell you the rest of it in one long line...  
La Poisse is the kind of guy you can get fat with in one go... so I did as he told me.  
I turned up at dusk in front of the joint in question, with my pants full of vaporite  
stones ready to explode... Just enough to ensure a quick exit if the plan didn't go as  
expected... Preventive measures, as La Poisse used to say.  
But trapping the Lycants wasn't going to be easy...  
The girls had managed to get hold of some Venerable togas... Dælia, she always  
has plans up her sleeve. You know, I wouldn't put my nose where that one sticks  
her thighs..."*

*What? Cyric?... Pff... This old rascal had been hired as a waiter in the bar where the transaction was taking place. His job was to serve the Lycants the girls' homemade decoction... Yeah, some nasty stuff even the Orcs can't handle, first it'll give you diarrhea, mate, so thick it'll make a worm gag! Then the dope kicks in, and it's lights out...*

*Time to snooze for half a moon, drooling and sniffing in the wind.*

*Lambs, the girls said, yeah right... Lambs... Well, as long as they didn't realise anything, and that was the boss's job.*

*Dælia and La Poisse, in their Venerable robes, were waiting in the alcove reserved for the Veldts, smoking that... Er... You know.... That delicious herb that grows in Olonese... Quite a lot! Just enough to smoke the alcove and a good part of the tavern! They've got a sharp nose, those little beasts...*

*A Lycant can smell your arse from a mile away, mate!*

*OK, I'll cut this short... Let's get to the part that interests you...*

*So, Delia insisted on taking care of the clippings from the Ark. She's got this thing about men of letters, you know? A bit naughty... anyway...*

*She was supposed to intercept them in an alleyway her sister had spotted and I can guarantee you that..."*

The Seekher collapsed on the floor of the gaol, with a dart lodged deep in his neck. The prisoner flashed a defiant smile as he watched his tormentor die.

In a final effort, fighting against the poison, the gaoler, consumed with rage, reached for the precious Aventiss documents. His prisoner was merely stalling for time, something he realised far too late...

Silence was reigning supreme when the character dressed in leather entered the room, blowpipe in hand. A sumptuous Syphea pendant sat on his chest and a coat overflowing with stills completed a rough but effective disguise.

Dælia took a look at the tied-up man, his face swollen and purplish from the beating, his eyebrows cracked, but still, he was laughing. She loosened his bonds and gently wiped the blood from his cheek with her thin leather gloves. With a mischievous, compassionate smile, she said softly into his ear:

*"You live up to your name, La Poisse. What a talker! I could have spent all night watching you. I can't help it, I'm weak in front of men in uniform...  
Mmm, those strings are tight. I almost envy you, that's real craftsmanship! A real work of art! He really didn't want you to run off..  
You're free now, handsome! So far, everything's gone according to plan...  
Except for one detail. You'll see for yourself..."*

## II

Once they had hidden the guard's body out of sight, Dælia and La Poisse cautiously made their way through the long maze of prison walls.

She had spent months within the insalubrious walls of the third basement, surrounded by Mādth prisoners mutilated by a war that had lost all meaning. Months watching her people die, months keeping her anger in check. She had witnessed the violence of the outcasts and the release that a bound prisoner could provide. But this was La Poisse's plan.

Dælia had to give credibility to her cover, gain the trust of the guards so that she could walk the maze freely. She had contained her rage in anticipation of this day. Meticulously, she had mapped out the building, visited every room, every trapdoor, every underground passage.

*"Now listen, La Poisse, it's impossible to escape from here alive. The second and third basements are lined with soldiers, and despite your expectations, there's no way out. No trapdoors or secret passages! The pipes and the entire sewage system lead directly to the ovens in Kerris Bay. It's a one way trip through the huge Fioul machinery, and a butcher's style finish. As for your prodigious larder plan, it's impossible to find a raccoon to..."*

A heavy door slammed in the distance, followed by the sound of hurried footsteps.

With a complicit smile, the two lovers slipped into the surrounding darkness, with the ease characteristic of Mādth tightrope walkers. An Orc guard was strolling down the corridor, oblivious to the pleas and insults of the inmates. With confident steps, while whistling a bawdy tune in the half-light of the candelabras, twirling his bunch of keys in the air. In front of him, the shadows shifted.

In graceful harmony, the two tightrope walkers took his life in a split second, without the slightest sound. The guard was horrified to discover that the shadows concealed a door leading directly into limbo. He also swore that the reaper had the face of a human woman, beautiful and delicate, but that her strength was similar to the power of one of her brothers from Nancherow.

The tightrope walkers had to use both their hands. Rarely was so much attention given to a green skin, but discretion was paramount. They had to disregard their traditions. In extremis, Dælia used her foot to break the fall of the bunch of keys just before it hit the ground.

*"I saw you... you're getting old! You need two hands to break a sub breed now!  
My sister was right; I think you're a goner!  
Me, the only reason I use both is for the sake of eroticism!  
Right, focus! Here's the plan!  
You're going to go through the big door at the end of this corridor. Behind it, there are usually two or three guards, worn out by the drugs they're extorting from the surface. Run like the wind, they won't hold your stride.  
From left to right, all the cells are occupied by dying old men. Their arms won't get in the way of your escape.  
At the end of this alley, turn left and reach the far wall.  
This is a dark cul de sac where prisoners' excrement has been piled up for months. Look for an air duct, a hole the width of a man's shoulders that will allow you to climb up to the patrol yard. There you can hide until nightfall. I'll come and get you."*

Dælia opened her pouch and carefully placed the Aventiss plans in the double bottom provided for this purpose.

She gazed at La Poisse for a few moments in the most compassionate way. He was exhausted. The guard had beaten him up badly, but he wasn't giving anything away. He still hadn't uttered a single word, just staring at her. One by one, he cracked the bones in his knuckles, then those at the back of his neck, without losing the complicit smile on the corner of his mouth. Dælia smiled back, blushing, and tucked one of her locks back behind her ear. He was handsome and crazy, and her heart was beating wildly. The beautiful tightrope walker took out of her purse a bottle with slimy purple contents.

Her sister Lynn had often claimed to have mastered the occult art of concoctions. And given the abominable smell emanating from the bottle, fate would soon reveal the extent of her skills.

La Poisse swallowed the concoction in one gulp without asking a single question. He grimaced in disgust and his whole body twitched. After swallowing, he fought back the urge to vomit, and the first word finally burst from his mouth...

*"Your fucking sister?"*

*That's not the point. Concentrate; we haven't got much time.*

*At the end of the corridor, behind the big door.*

*You run between the cells, you turn left, you run to the back wall, remember?*

*In this cul de sac, you look for the crack in the wall, the air duct*

*You climb it, I've left you everything you need inside.*

*You climb up to the watchtower but you wait for me in the air duct, OK?*

*Your fucking sister? "*

She hugged him tenderly and kissed him goodbye. Leather cried out, hugged by the hands that embraced his waist. La Pousse ran his fingers along the satin knot of her corset, then quickly palmed her buttock. Dælia swatted his hand away. His index finger lifted to his mouth, his teeth gently biting her lower lip in a gesture of shared desire. He smiled tenderly at her, then raised his hands to shoulder height peacefully, as he took a step away.

*"The door, on the left, the trapdoor, I climb up, I wait..."*

*"Remember, handsome: you won't get out of here alive! That'll give us a second life to love each other, and I'll be waiting for you beyond the grave..."*

They both took a few steps back without taking their eyes off each other. The shadow slid slowly across Dælia's skin, washing over her shoulder without the slightest modesty. The sun's rays piercing through a doorway made her skin glow like gold. In a swirling ballet, the dust danced around her face in the soft light. Then her feline curves disappeared entirely, as if caught up in the darkness, with the inertia of a dream.

Only the groan of rusty door hinges in the distance betrayed the ghostly silence of her movement.

Now he was alone...



### III

Pull yourself together, my lad; you're going to have to get your head together. This is no time to be rotting here. I've had a hell of a time. I'm short of breath and losing a lot of blood.

I'm staggering along the corridor, surrounded by the complete silence of the Mädh prisoners. They're clinging to the bars of their cells, and I start to see them blurred. They stare at me without making a sound. Even the older ones sit up straight in the hope of getting out of this hellhole.

Painfully, I approach the door and put my ear to the wood to listen. The door is cold and gives off a sweet smell of wax. I close my eyes and spread my weight. Damn, I'd let myself slide, but now's not the time. If I'm going to get my share of the plan, I've got to get back in the game, and I've got to get the fuck out of here.

Step one, open my bloody peepers again, then get the hell out!  
A voice emanates from behind the door and wakes me from my torpor. It hits me like a shot of pure adrenaline.  
Eddy, that verminous bum! I'd recognize his nasally voice anywhere. He's been on my trail for months, you'd think I had cheese up my arse. Fucking worm. I hate them, especially the hairy ones.

This Seekher doesn't work under anyone's orders. He's a freelancer, stickier than a drunken troll, an absolute boil in my balls.

I listen to him prattle on. He goes on and on about my identity, my sadism, my Machiavellianism - it's almost flattering!  
The guys opposite are skeptical. Eddy's speech reeks of old fables used to scare kids.

A testimonial here, a description there, but what you get, my lad, is nothing. Not a portrait, just caricatures to feed tavern gossip. All you've got is jack shit, as many clues as there are hairs on a Saurian's dick, mate.

I can hear him behind the door, babbling along with his fragile recommendations in his asthmatic grandmother's voice, but the guys seem to listen to him... Shit, I could do with some slippers for winter out of his ass, I bet it's exactly my size!

Besides, he's the only guy who can identify me for sure! And me I reckon it's bad for business.

Eddy insists that the security guard should see me now. The security guard obediently gives in, without asking too many questions. The worm says that the priceless parchments in my possession had been stolen from the Veldt.

I need to get off my ass, but I've got this mixture in the back of my stomach that's crippling my system! What the hell has she been feeding me?

Without thinking, I switch it on and tell myself that this is it! I simultaneously turn the handles of the double door, aiming to knock out the dirty little rat behind it. I've got the upper hand and I can feel it. I'm going to cut his investigation short, he won't let go of me otherwise...

The door starts to open and I try to convince myself I've made the right choice. I tell myself that the guard's voice was an indication of drunkenness and that everything's going to run smoothly.

The creak of the hinges hastens my decision. I take a deep breath.

I put my hand on the dagger my sweetheart had given me and kick open the door. I hit it hard, there's no turning back. The inmates behind me let out a wave of encouragement that burst through the air like a cavalry charge.

The effect is almost successful, the guard on my left is startled and falls from the chair he was swinging on. Eddy's eyes go wide. The rat is scared to death. I can see in his eyes the mixture of terror and fascination he feels for me.

Our previous encounter in Hysteria had already cost him his left ear, and since then he had acquired two strong assets, all hair and teeth. The two Lycants from whom the plans had been stolen had the worm in their clutches.

The mongrels didn't look particularly jolly. I'm disappointed now. I've got a feeling it's going to be tight, very tight... Tighter than the sheath of a velvet-encased hoare, so I bitterly part with my dagger. I throw it at Eddy's face. I watch its edge rip through the air with delight.

The defeated look on that hairy bastard's face as he lets out a pitiful yelp will be my only success. A rapier slams into my blade, breaking its trajectory and spoiling my pleasure at seeing his face shatter - now that's not nice! The Lycant kicks my dagger under a cupboard, the bastard's a player!

Eddy, you can pay your respects to your new friends. They're fast and now I'm unarmed. I've only got my fists left. So I'm charging the Verminous.

The two Lycants open their guards to protect the rat. Too bad for them, they're wrong about my target.

I take two steps forward and throw myself, propping myself on Eddy's head. I throw all my weight into the face of the Lycant on the right. His coast's gonna get dirty. Both my hands clasp the back of his neck and my knee destroys his nasal septum. I savour the crack of his bones under my kneecap. What a wonderful sound! Then, before I pass over him, I take the time to grab hold of both his ears. He capsizes backwards and I slam his neck on the floor. The sound is dreadful. May as well be sure.

In front of me, the aisle is clear. From left to right, convicts crammed into the dungeons cheer this providential bloodbath. Dælia, what the hell have you got me into?

The sound of a Fioul firecracker behind my back makes me want to run straight ahead. I don't need another scar.

I feel sick; I'm going in slow motion. I'm not gonna turn round to see the other Lycant's face, I'm sure he didn't appreciate my close contact with his mate.

So I'm running as fast as I can through the outstretched arms of the convicts, hoping to gain ground on the fleabag sticking to my butt. The collective hysteria has spread to the cells, it's good to have the support of pals!

Fuck me, Lynn; I can't see straight, and your shit's got me pinned down. I can hardly breathe.

The Lycant's fangs slam a few centimetres away from my spine. I tell myself it's no time for daydreams. Then, right in front of me, a mass of muscles with a huge axe blocks the whole width of the gut. The light from a torch reveals the horns of a black minotaur.

I can see my face in the reflection of his weapon, I'm a sight for sore eyes! oh well, I'm determined, I hate Minotaurs.

I look behind me. The Lycant is moving at full speed as planned. So I swivelled and slid onto his back to catapult him with all my might. I grab his wrists as I go, staring into his eyes. I take the time to wink at him, what a treat. I hate Lycants. The impact is brutal.

I straighten up and resume running, but I'm a heavy man and I'm really struggling. My throw has the desired effect. The minotaur lurched backwards, barely unbalanced by my two hundred kilo ball of fur. But that leaves me a window of opportunity, a surprise, enough to slip in a treat. I run straight at him. I hope I've still got some juice left, so I give it my all! I take a massive leap and fly through the air. I turn my body so that it slams. My fist smashes against his arch with unprecedented violence. My bones shatter, his skull is as hard as a brick wall. My wrist gave way under the impact, making my right arm as powerful as an Ondine in the Nancherow desert.

Still, the son of a bitch is down...

The pain tears through me, yet, I've sent the animal back into its paddock.

I'm screaming, but nobody's going to give me a break. I know I've got to get out of here. I want to cry, the bruises make me scrunch up my face. It brings out the sissy in me but I don't want to look like a softie, so I run. I run towards the shadows with every intention to disappear.

All around me the cells are deserted and the atmosphere is becoming stenchy. The prisoners' racket must have alerted the whole level. It's bound to attract all the fat bastards from the watching party.

I don't want to die here.

Get a grip on yourself; don't let them have that pleasure.

The first mouth on the left, well... I rush in. The light has fled and I'm crawling through shit. My hands hit a pediment. Despite the panic, my heart rate slows down all at once. My heart feels like it's going to fail any moment. I can't hear anything. My fingers run across the mud and the entire wall surface. "A hole the width of a man's shoulders", she said. I'm not sure, but what if I'd just missed the opening, did she say on the left?

I can hardly breathe. I feel like throwing up. My whole chest is contracting, I'm suffocating and nothing's coming. I feel like I'm drowning. My fingernails are scratching the stone from side to side, and there's no way through. I feel myself slipping and sinking.

Behind me, the outline of the Minotaur emerges from the darkness. He raises his fist studded with thick metal rings and brings it down towards my face. Instinctively, I cross my arms to guard myself. It's no use... My forearms dislocate and the impact propels me against the wall. It doesn't matter, he won't let me touch the floor again. He grabs my skull and his fist comes back with the intensity of a battering ram, shattering my ribcage. It's all going to stop.

Fucking cow! I spit at him. I can't see anything but I can feel my head crumpling against the wall...

My heart's stopped beating at last... The blood pounding in my temples has finally stopped its never-ending racket. Silence. The cold stone paving has the comfort of tall grass in spring.

You were right, my darling, I couldn't get out of here alive...

## IV

In the air, an ominous wind carries the salty aroma of the nearby ocean. Yet the Kerris cemetery was nestled a long way from the town and its friendly trading port.

It was built in the heart of the ruins of a city whose name even the Veldts had forgotten. Some remnants of the ramparts bore the crests of half-dismantled belfries, casting ominous shadows over the site in the moonlight. Robust vaults had survived erosion as a tribute to the erudition of their craftsmen. Visitors to the sanctuary were scarce.

The beast provided few remains of decent quality for burial. Worrying about the living had taken precedence over the proper customs devoted to the dead.

Survival left little room for mourning.

The landscape was slowly being eaten away by the ravages of time and ivy. The vegetation was gradually covering the traces of the battles of yesteryear. The grass had reached mid-thigh throughout the necropolis. Only a furrow dug by the tracks of a Fioul tank allowed a semblance of a path to emerge.

The patrol that usually unloaded the corpses of the Mädh from the prison never came across any pilgrims. In the midst of the shreds of wall, over the tumult of tombs, were crows.

Dusk was late to come, and hundreds of birds were roaming the skies of this deserted place.

Or should we say 'almost deserted', as the cemetery's corvids were about to witness an unprecedented exhumation.





Two hooded figures were quibbling copiously on a small marble bench facing a vault.

*"Ugh, look at that face... You'll never be able to teach her anything, Cyric. Don't you see how stupid mice are?! Seriously? tell me: I'm going to raise a gob. A goblin's less stupid. Or a fucking mutt, maybe. But of course, you'll never teach your filthy rodent to open a purse. You're wasting your time, love. And I don't like mice! They're ridden with diseases and they're always catching shit up. Don't let her come anywhere near me! Cyric! Stop fucking around!"*

*Shut up Lynn! You're actually a bloody pain in my neck! By the end of the sprouting month, my girl will be so well trained that I'll send her to check out the freshness down your underwear while you're sleeping! Believe it or not, a lot of tightrope walkers have pets just as notorious as themselves. And I've got a good feeling about this mouse, so don't piss me off. It's only a matter of time before she starts to show her magic tricks.*

*Take a look! It's going to be insane:*

*Come on, Loule! Open the lil' purse, you can do this..."*

The white rodent with its little pink paws trotted around the huge leather pouch. She raised her little snout suddenly, panicking at the smell of cheese emanating from the pouch. The mouse made a spectacular ascent to the top of the mound. The snout would fit, but not the bum. The rodent's buttocks twitched in all directions as it tried to force its way through.

In an unbearable suspense, the creature pitched, contracted all its muscles, played with its kidneys...

But nothing could be done. Despite the encouragement of his enthusiastic master, the realization of failure was unspeakable.

Her hind legs waved piteously in the air, her backside wiggled a little more, then nothing more.

Loule was definitely stuck!

*"You see! Your thing's a piece of shit. So, as you were saying, and I quote: 'pets just as notorious as themselves'. You've had something like that happen to you on a convoy flight, haven't you? The mimicry between master and apprentice is striking! No, what she really needs is top quality stuff, to pump her up with some good old rage. Watch and learn. I'll take a hit and let her have the rest of the powder. I'll just give her a little, don't worry. She'll smash any purse after that! So greedy! Look... the mouse seems to like it! Robbing up tourists is going to be costly. Start saving up Cyric! Your 'Loule' hasn't left a single crumb, she's so like my mother!"*

Cyric jumped to his feet and took the rodent in his hands. The little beast was convulsing. A frothy white mucus had gathered at the edge of its mouth. The little fuzzball stiffened with every breath and seemed on the verge of bursting when it suddenly froze. The creature's livid retina no longer showed the slightest glimmer of life. Cyric brandished the body of the inert mouse towards Lynn's face, which showed a defeated expression. He spat on the ground and hurled the body violently against the entrance to a crypt in front of them. The shattered corpse fell back onto the grass a few feet away.

On a stone slab above the crypt, the epitaph read:

'The remains of the named La Puisse and those of his accomplices lie here in a testament to our obedience'.

*"I've had enough of you, Lynn! Just like your fucking sister... I'm going to smash one or the other to pieces, you and all your shitty plans..."*

*Wow! look at you, losing your mouse has really done you in. Are you really that sentimental?! Seriously, I didn't think dope would have such an effect on her. Chill out, dude!*

*I've been doing it for ages, so what? I shoot a few lumps out of my nose in the morning, that's all!*

*Hold on, shut up! I can hear something!*

*I think the boss is waking up, we've got to get moving!"*

A groan of agony emerged from the air vent next to the tomb. The modest trapdoor that normally evacuated the air needed to decompose corpses was letting out moans...

Cyric walked towards the tomb entrance, staring at the remains of his mouse in the damp grass. He glanced disdainfully at his companion, sighed, then pulled out a lock-picking kit from a double seam hidden in the lapel of his hood.

The lock was a delicate work of silversmithing, but few latches could withstand his dexterity. The lock yielded quickly. Opening the double door allowed the pestilence of the remains to waft through into the cool mist outside.

The chamber was made up of nine coffins, more or less recent. The freshly decomposed corpses provided the earthworms with a first-class residence.

Lynn lodged two balls of camphor in her nostrils, then raised her collar to cover her nose. She pulled down her hood and strode into the vault.

*"Sweetheart, I just don't get it! The Seekher are building this fucking secret mausoleum in the middle of nowhere, pretty well hidden away, but you! not only do you know where it is! But you've got the key! Admit it, it's fucked up! How long have you been sucking dicks to get tips like that?"*

*Shut the fuck up! You're talking shit every time you open your mouth. Why don't you focus on looking after my friend, there's a lot of blood dripping from the coffin. I'm going to get the dead guy and make the swap. Don't just hang there. Get him back on his feet pronto. We're leaving in ten minutes.*

*This crypt scares the shit out of me as it is, so don't add to it! I'm a sensitive chick! Have you seen Cyric? It's so creepy! the boss is banging on the wood! I'd be freaking out if I was buried alive!*

*Don't worry, boss, we're here! We'll get you out of your box, breathe easy!"*

With the effortlessness of an old diesel engine, Lynn blew the seals off in no time. La Pousse at the bottom of the coffin was in a bad way. She plunged her hand into her pouch and pull out a small glass jar containing star algae soaked in the brackish water of the Azary marshes.

The preparation was delicate, but it was undoubtedly the strongest counter-poison used on the southern continent. Once ingested, the seaweed absorbed all the toxins harmful to the body in a very short space of time.

La Pousse swallowed the slimy thing with difficulty.

*"Why the long face, chief? The plan's gone rather wrong, hasn't it? My two ointments aren't going to put you back on your feet, but welcome back to the world of the living!"*

*They've smashed your mouth to bits! Turns out the feasted on you all right, you've even lost your ear! Or has it fallen into the coffin? No, I don't see it! Damn it, Cyric! Come on!*

*Shush! Can't you shut the hell up? Do you want a voice holder?! Can you explain to the onlookers what the hell we're doing in the necropolis in the middle of the night carrying a 400 pound corpse in a sack?*

*Your dead guy does look fat! Wait a minute, but... he's got nothing to do with the chief! Everyone's going to realise that the body's been found. I don't believe it, he's a ginger bastard! And he's as fat as a Golas accountant! But tell me, Cyric, you're a real genius at subterfuge! Nobody can tell the difference between the two bodies! No... A fucking obese ginger!*

*Don't you have a cousin who...*

*Hush!"*

Cyric put his arm around La Pousse to help him walk. La Pousse's body was in shreds; in one of the Guild's many plans, this one had cost him several teeth and half his bones.

In the cold mist of the necropolis, the crows that had witnessed this unusual visit croaked mockingly.

*"Tell me, sweetheart, I don't suppose you've got your mouse back?"*

*Shut up, Lynn!*

*But... when are you going to tell him that my sister screwed us over again?"*

EVERY DESTINY,  
HOWEVER LONG AND  
COMPLEX,  
HAS BUT A SINGLE MOMENT:  
THE MOMENT WHEN MAN  
KNOWS ONCE AND FOR ALL  
WHO HE TRULY IS.

# The nightingale

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PART II

UNIFICATION YEAR 5

# I

Coralie skilfully and elegantly hoisted herself onto the roof of the tavern. She rose to her full height and gazed out over the horizon. The city, asleep in the mist of the first spring nights, revealed a peaceful panorama.

The innocent little girl with her blonde curls was all grown up. Four winters had passed by without a single smile from her. Four long winters with no news of Viktor. What had become of her only friend? She didn't know, but the question nagged at her. The flickering flame in her heart had given way to an overtaking darkness. Sometimes, she imagined hearing her friend's laughter drifting on the wind, a figment of her imagination born of the remnants of his candour. She needed to believe that Viktor was okay, that he was happy somewhere and that somewhere there was a way out of this turmoil.

Coralie had endured hunger, cold and the cruelty of other races. The somber lament that had once gnawed at her father's soul was still beating fervently in her heart. A tumultuous refrain born of hatred. The innocent little girl with the blonde curls had gradually given in to the obscure melody. Fate was striving to submit her to unbearable ordeals, but tonight they would come to an end.

The first nights of the ginger moon were cool, and much of the city was fast asleep. Yet, in a rustic tavern set against the outer ramparts, the party was in full swing. Four huge conveyors from the south had been parked out front for two days.

The Fioul had had to stop off to pick up a few coins, and the tavern was boasting its best sales figures of the season. The pilots and convoy soldiers were tough men who often led short, dangerous lives.

They knew when and how to let off some steam.



The sight of debauchery in the main room was appalling. The counter was littered with a multitude of tumblers, and the sweating tavern keeper was struggling to keep up with the thirsty crowd. A miller's staircase led to the upper floor. In the privacy of the comfortable single rooms on the second floor, the master conveyors were enjoying a well-deserved rest.

Coralie slipped silently through the skylight onto the slate roof. Perched among the roof beams, she gazed longingly at her target, serenely slumbering. A haunting melody was pulsing through her soul. She had stalked her prey for four moons. A long, tedious and painful quest that had turned her into a different person.

The melody born in her father's heart perpetuated his sinister legacy. Her senseless hunt was nearing its epilogue.

She slid noiselessly between the beams, overlooking her victim's bed. She had waited patiently for this moment. She was savoring every morsel, hoping to exhaust her fury. The Saurian, dressed in a fine silk shirt, was fast asleep. Coralie moved imperceptibly in the soft moonlight. A shadow among shadows. The dreadful song of blind vengeance began its deep litany. Softly, she climbed down from her perch with feline grace.

The mournful chant was pulsing in her temples. The Outcasts had taken her mother, her father had died to save the serpent man. But today, she was going to balance the scales. To soothe the melody of her irrepressible anger somehow.

Coralie watched him for a long time.

She bound the Saurian's wrist to the bedpost with a leather tie. With precision and patience, she tied up her prey.

The sleeping pill she'd slipped into his food was having the desired effect. The master conveyor was fast asleep. In disgust, she tied the reptile's feet together, staring at his jugular vein with anticipation.

Coralie was relishing the moment, imploring fate to satiate her hatred, to end the song. She took a deep breath, then slipped her slender fingers into a steel weapon which was too large and heavy for her small hand. A few cracks in the decrepit oak floor were letting in a trickle of light whilst revealing the smells and clatter of the feast in the room below. She clenched her fist around the thick metal rings covered in dried blood, then deftly climbed on top of the Saurian. Coralie slowly closed her eyelids to revel in the moment.

Then she struck the Saurian's nose with all her might. Exhilarated, she did it again instantly, staining the white sheet with thick red liquids. The Saurian struggled to open his eyes, gesticulating pitifully in the worst awakening of his life. The fateful melody surged through Coralie's veins, feeding her the power of rage. She raised both fists and lashed out at the terrified reptile's face. She gripped its neck and unleashed all her fury.

The purple face of the suffocating Saurian showed a mixture of fear and incomprehension. Life was slipping away, and little by little, everything became darker for the snake man. She suddenly loosened her grip, then with velocity, she seized the Saurian's forked tongue with her full hand and said:

*"What's up? You're not running today, you son of a bitch?"*

\*

## II

Viktor was proudly walking at the front of the small Seekher patrol, his hand caressing the olive-wood pommel of his sword. His armor, shiny and new, gleamed in the reflections of his lantern.

He had sworn an oath to Dragoria. He had signed his name in blood. He had walked the avenue of graves of his brothers who had fallen to the Beast. He was a Seekher now, the armed force of the continent.

The three Banished in charge of his training had no regard for him. Viktor knew this and didn't care. He kept smiling in the face of their constant mockery, determined to prove himself. The calluses on his hands could have been a warning to the trained eye.

The hard-working young Seekher was practising his sword skills day and night with admirable determination, but the night patrol gave him little opportunity to prove his worth. A few drunken onlookers had already tried to raise their fists at him without much success. But in the eyes of his dastardly trainers, he had achieved nothing of note. He knew that it would be difficult to get credit within this squad. The three other Banished, veterans of the war against the Orcs, were well over one hundred and fifty kilos heavier than he was. They were a bunch of sadistic and violent roughnecks, with a long tradition of killing. Viktor saw this as a chance, an opportunity to become stronger. Although his superiors had appalling faces, combining amputation and poor hygiene, and scared the life out of most of the locals, they looked after their young recruit in their own way.

Despite his young age, he never lowered his gaze in front of them. No matter how much they bullied him, Viktor never lost his wry smile, and the Banished loved that about him. He had seen the Beast up close, and the determination in his eyes knew no bounds.

A few paces from the patrol, a bang suddenly echoed through the night. A Fioul boiler had just exploded while two mechanics were laughing their heads off and were rolling on the floor. Two drunken Dwarves, their beards on fire, were staggering around, giggling and screaming for help. A cohort of convoy soldiers rushed up the steps of the nearby tavern, clinging to the railings in an attempt to rescue their comrades. Miraculously, with a hint of drunkenness, one of the Dwarves on fire managed to dive into a horse trough. The other mechanic, less fortunate, had stumbled to the pavement after a few steps. Viktor was about to help him when the clawed hand of his superior grabbed his shoulder.

*"Let go of him, kid... We're going to have some fun..."*

The Dwarf on fire squeaked piteously, giving off a pungent smell of roasted flesh. By the time his colleagues came to his aid, his entire body hair had gone up in smoke in the midst of the surrounding hilarity. He too was thrown into the horse trough.

The picturesque scene instantly triggered a good laugh from Viktor.

\*

### III

Coralie tightened her embrace and swung her arm to wrap the Saurian's tongue around her wrist. With her other hand, she lashed out a series of blows to the face with her ceste, denting the reptile's skull.

Although the snake man had already been dead for a few minutes, nothing seemed to soothe Coralie's fury. She pulled back with all her might and the tongue snapped out. She continued to strike relentlessly at the mess that had once been the reptile's face. It was a veritable bloodbath, an unspeakable carnage designed to silence the ominous melody. The blood puddle eventually made its way to the floor, seeping through the worn wooden floorboards all the way to the room below. In the distance, Coralie heard an explosion, but nothing could extricate her from this grim revenge.

The melody kept modulating, insatiable and voracious. She plunged her hands into the rest of the reptile's face to squash its bulging eyes.

In the depths of her insanity, she could have sworn she heard Viktor's giggle. This time, she could hear her friend's laughter clearly, convinced that madness had put an end to her torment. The young girl closed her eyes and then exhaled as the melody died away. The room fell silent again.

The realization was appalling. Forgotten by hatred, all that remained was a lost little girl. For four moons, she had lived only to avenge her father's death. She had never imagined that there would be an 'after'. Distraught, filled with a dizzying emptiness, Coralie burst into tears.

On the miller's narrow staircase, she can hear the footsteps of men in heavy armor rushing upstairs. The tavern-keeper raises his voice to alert the guards. Yet Coralie stands there paralysed; life seems to have lost all meaning. People with weapons keep pouring onto her doorstep. She stares in horror at the door handle, which jiggles in all directions. The thick oak door wobbles on its hinges under the powerful shoulder blows of its assailants. Unable to move in the slightest, the little girl waits desperately for the dark melody to return. Without hatred, what was she?

The first hinge of the door gave way, revealing a pack of rampaging conveyor soldiers. Covered in the blood of her victim, Coralie scanned the bloody mass in the hope of gathering a hint of hatred. A spark, a reason to go on living. Something inside her has died, and she watches helplessly as she watches her punishment. The door swings violently off its hinges, tearing away part of the wall from which it was bolted.

Coralie sees her reflection in the eyes of her assailants, charged with disgust. The man is nothing but his own beast, a never-ending escalation of hatred, the source of the darkest forces. Her tormented mind searches through all her memories in search of meaning. Scanning his devastated spirit for a reason.

Annette, what had become of her little doll?  
Her mother's blurry face, her father's silence, her nanny's tenderness,  
Viktor's laughter, a song echoing in the distance:

*'Like the branches of a fruit tree in the snow, who'd think they'd turn green again?  
That the dreary, wind beaten wood will blossom in spring?'*

The whole place was eager to indulge their morbid curiosity. An Orc entered the room first, followed by two Goblins and a Troll. Coralie stared in disdain at this conglomeration of filthy races. She felt dizzy and it was hard to breathe. She stood up on the bed to match the Orc in height. He grabbed her by the neck with one hand and brought her close to his face. Breathless, she scanned her assailant with contempt. The Orc looked into the girl's eyes in disappointment. How could such a small, frail thing have committed such a butchery? Coralie slipped her hand into her back pocket, grabbed her crayon and pushed it deep into the Orc's eye.

Every destiny, however long and complex, has but a single moment: the moment when a man knows once and for all who he truly is.

## IV

The tavern-keeper, on the steps of his establishment, pushed his way through his drunken customers, imploring the guard. The distraught Syphea was claiming that blood was dripping from the ceiling! The captain of the Banished nodded in agreement.

A simple whistle was enough to deploy the two thugs accompanying him. A brutal intervention force, intoxicated with power, started to reveal its savagery. Hunters born in war, eager to perform their art. The two Banished leapt up, hanging from the chandeliers, climbing over tables and counters to reach the floor above the crowded room, overexcited by this nocturnal hunt.

The captain kept his clawed hand on Viktor's shoulder firmly enough to prevent him from following his companions through the front door. With the absolute calm that characterizes predators, he drew a complete circle in the air with his index finger to instruct the young Seekher to go around the back of the building. A complicit wink and a smile ended the brief but effective strategy meeting. Quickly, Viktor flew to take up a strategic position and block anyone from retreat. He extinguished his lantern and his sight for a few seconds to adjust to the surrounding darkness. His eyes scanned the scene for clues or accomplices lurking in the shadows. The street was empty apart from one grappling hook which was dangling over the void, hung from the inn's slate roof.

The sound of a door being kicked in drew his attention to the second-floor window. Viktor's acute vision picked out silhouettes in the half-light. A cry of pain erupted from the darkness and a massive Orc-like figure collapsed into the room, releasing its prey. Then a shadowy figure took a few steps forward and flew out through the window, arms first.



Under the red moon's gaze, the puny figure went down in a shower of broken glass and wood.

Viktor, who was looking up, couldn't believe his eyes. He raised his hands to shield himself from the plethora of debris tumbling from the sky. He watched as the figure crossed the staggering distance to the window of the building opposite. A desperate gesture in a surreal distance.

The two Seekher officers, in their frantic pursuit, leapt from one building to the next. The first Banished made a powerful leap and hit the lintel of the window before landing with a clatter in the furniture. The second, who was heavier, pulled off the improbable stunt, but came crashing down through the floor on landing.

In his most prestigious stride, Viktor, packed with adrenaline, rounded the building. The target was running across the city's dilapidated rooftops at breakneck speed. A hundred meters behind her, the captain's two dogs were trailing in her wake. fired up by their carnivorous instinct and seemingly oblivious to the damage caused by their falls, they were gaining ground with every stride.

The echo of hoofbeats on the forecourt could be heard in the distance. Opting for a more civilized method than running, the captain was covering the left flank. combining his uniform's standing with his laziness. The steed, despite its imposing rider, sped through the old town's narrow streets.

Viktor knew what he had to do. The maneuver, however savage, was well executed and the target didn't stand a chance. He quickened his pace, the trap closing unflinchingly. He cut through the gardens and headed for the rendezvous point. Panting and sprinting, he thought perhaps this evening he would have the chance to prove his worth.

## V

Coralie was hurtling across the slate roofs at the speed of light. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder to see that the couple of Banished were still on her heels, with legs twice as long as hers, she had no escape. She was losing a great deal of blood, the many shards of glass having cut into her delicate pale skin, leaving a reddish trail in her wake. Her lungs on fire, she was looking for a way to get out. An unstoppable creature driven by a tremendous instinct. The Banished were only a few paces away, panting like dogs, and she could smell their foul breath. She was not going to sacrifice anything to them.

When she reached the edge of the roof, she turned around. She faced her assailants with disgust in her gaze. What kind of race could be so lacking in dignity? A poor representation of Unification once more.

She was cornered and had only one thing left. Her last possession. So she slowly toppled backwards, plunging into the void to preserve the integrity of her death. As she fell, she slowly closed her eyelids as she always did. Loneliness is always ours, only a few of us manage to escape it.

The wind whirled around her dancing long blonde curls, whispering her nanny's sweet melody to her.

What was the chorus?

It didn't matter, she was going to join her parents at last.

Maybe Annette would be there too...



## VI

Viktor arrived just in time to see the angel fall from the sky. The frail body of the little girl with the long golden curls was tumbling down from the top of one of the tallest buildings in the city, through clotheslines and blinds, ending her dizzying fall in a pile of wooden crates.

Paralysed by the violence of the scene, The breathless young Seekher, with his sword tightly clutched in his hand, scanned the thick cloud of dust. A tiny figure in agony was clawing its way up from the rubble, screaming in pain, its bones shattered by the unimaginable fall. The dust settled slowly.

Viktor thought he could make out the outline of a child's face. The disjointed body of the dying girl was an unbearable sight. The protruding bone in her forearm revealed a dislocated hand dangling by her hip. She staggered back a few steps, letting out appalling cries of pain, then laboriously made her way into the half-light of an alleyway. Like a ghost clinging desperately to life. Viktor sighed and stepped forward cautiously. The trail of blood left no doubt as to where he must go. The young Seekher was consumed with so many questions.

It was the sound of a horse galloping behind him that snapped him out of his stupor. The imposing captain leapt from his mount, over Viktor, and landed his jump with the poise of a predator. Without slowing his pace, he straightened up and unfurled his favourite meat chopper. The colossal Banished figure disappeared swiftly as if snatched by the darkness of the small alleyway. Viktor then hurried on to cover his superior, walking up the bloody trail.

Twenty meters further on, collapsed on the ground, lay the body of the little girl with the golden curls. In the ginger moon's light, the striking fairness of her skin suggested the cool freshness of spring.

It was at this moment that Viktor recognised Coralie. An explosive mix of opposing feelings sent a wave of shock and the young Seekher wobbled on his feet. His sword slipped from his hand, his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, his fear mingling with his joy in a nauseating cocktail.

He was no longer a man, he had sworn an oath to Dragoria. He was a Seekher now, he had made a promise. He was nothing without it. He wanted to cry, he tried to scream, but nothing came.

The powerful Banished captain let his chopper slide down onto the pavement. A trail of hypnotic sparks split the darkness. Coralie, in tears, tried to sit up, holding out her disjointed hand to her friend, begging for help. Viktor, devastated, fell to his knees.

He was Seekher now, and that was all that defined him. He closed his eyes, unable to face the infamy of this trial of fate. He curled up on the pavement, covering his ears to silence the torments of his heartbreaking guilt. His eyes misty with tears, suffocating, he straightened up and ran his hand through his hair to grasp the metal brooch in the shape of a nightingale that had held it elegantly for four years. A promise older than the one he had made to Dragoria. A promise made to the man who had welcomed him like a father. A profound debt that had to be honoured.

So he moved forward, like someone falling off a bridge, in the grip of an irrepressible melody of fury.

Every destiny, however long and complex, has but a single moment: the moment when man knows once and for all who he truly is.



With determination, he charged at the Banished, cowardly, from behind. He unleashed his full conviction in a leap to stab the metallic brooch vehemently into his superior's neck.

A gusher of blood splattered his face. He stood between Coralie and the man who had trained and fed him for four years. Face to face, the Banished smiled with something that Viktor interpreted as some sort of compassion. He clenched his fists and stood on guard. The captain clutched his chopper with both hands and did the same.

*"You're not learning anything, kid. If you want to betray, be quick. You're too slow, my brothers are already here."*

Muffled laughter erupted from the shadows. The other two Banished were extraordinary bloodhounds, but how long had they been there? Viktor didn't know.

They were sleazy creatures who revelled in the most despicable feelings, and the exhilaration of night-time stalking revealed their moral turpitude.

The trio surrounded the two unarmed children and began their macabre dance, exalted by the resilience of their prey. Coralie, her teeth clenched by the intolerable pain, leaned on Viktor and managed to pull herself up to face him.

She put her arms around him and kissed him tenderly.

## VII

Like dazzling stars shooting from the rooftops, a cohort of flaming arrows illuminated this rather improbable kiss. Dark tightrope walkers swooped down on the Banished, taking their lives in the blink of an eye. Merciless Mädh professionals, as quick as the wind and much quieter than it. Four hooded figures, dressed in dark robes, surrounded the pair of children.

Revealing a grinning face, Lynn walked slowly towards them in a confident stride and held out a leather-gloved hand:

*"Golly... if that doesn't prove we're the superior race!*

*I don't mind having a mouse shoved up my arse! Maybe even three or four...*

*I mean, this youngsters are badass!*

*I think it's time to stop wasting your talents, kids!*

*Come on, guys, pick up the kids and let's get out of here. This bitch of a night is taking far too long and La Puisse isn't going to hang around until breakfast!*

*Let's get moving! Let's go!"*

AT THAT MOMENT,  
THE SURVIVAL OF THE  
WORLD IS ALL CONDENSED  
IN THE HEART OF A MAN  
WHOSE HEART HAS STOPPED  
BEATING.



# The battle of Olonesse

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UNIFICATION YEAR 6



# I

That year's winter had been harsh. And long. Longer than usual. Spring was in its early days but the snow kept on falling, relentlessly. Most of the crops had been lost because of a short summer and a cold autumn, and provisions were running low. Fewer convoys loaded with provisions from Fertilis had crossed the Southern Continent, and Olonesse was suffering a food shortage.

In addition to the harsh weather, the Mädh legions, made reckless by hunger, had been pillaging the area. The situation had been worsening for several weeks now, and there were fears of widespread famine.

While the Northern Continent was the first to suffer from a lack of food, Kerris and Tanarisse had been without supplies for a month. Young children and the elderly were the first to bear the brunt of the malnutrition, and many families were left mourning the loss of their loved ones. Yet another event was about to leave its mark on people's minds and shake up Unification.

Normally, he would have worried about the people who seemed to accept their condition fatalistically. But today he was thinking of his friends. He was going to see them again, all of them. All except one. An icy chill gripped his heart. A shiver which had nothing to do with the north wind blowing in violent gusts. He was in pain. A pain he couldn't control. A pain that no ointment, no potion from the healing priests could soothe. The wound was deep and invisible. It was his soul that was bleeding.

He heard the muffled footsteps of the old Elf approaching. How old was he? Two hundred years perhaps. Despite the wrinkles that lacerated his face, the wounds left by the claws of time had failed to alter his beauty.

His voice remained warm, with the intonation so characteristic of his race when using the language of Humans. The old Elf placed a hand with long, slender fingers on his shoulder.

*"In all these years you have learned many things, my young friend, but you have not yet fully mastered patience."*

Lucas smiled and turned to face the Elf whose eyes were such a light green they were translucent.

*"They'll be here before evening. The 7 together at last...  
Six."*

The old Elf raised his head a little more. He had once been tall, but now, with age, young Lucas Veldt towered over him by a few centimetres and the old sage had to stretch his neck to look into the troubled eyes of the young man to whom he had pledged his allegiance.

*"There will always be one Vallegias missing. Mädh won't be coming."*

Vallegias found nothing to reply. Nothing comforting anyway.

\*

## II

Six thousand men in armor were riding towards Olonesse. From every corner of the continent, they had answered their leader's call. The Seekher army was on the march.

The Dernière Lune Knights and the Tooth Hunters were escorting twelve Convoyers from Fertilis. Four of them had already provided supplies to Technikon, which was trapped in the ice. Hans Seekher himself commanded the troop. Beside him was a fair-skinned young woman with long blonde hair riding a steed harnessed for war.

Liv was happy and smiling. Soon she would see Lucas again.

A long year had passed since they last met and she felt a lack, a disturbing emptiness for which she had a mixture of contempt and curiosity. She had been looking forward to seeing Hans again, and Howard too, who was due to arrive in Kerris with news from the Northern Continent, Miles of course and even Nephilim; but that strange feeling in her lower stomach when she evoked the memory of Lucas was a complex and frightening one. The events that had precipitated their reunion were dramatic, and her mind should have been filled only with those events, yet it was Lucas' face she saw everywhere. The events that had precipitated their reunion were dramatic, and only those events should have filled her mind, yet it was Lucas' face she saw everywhere.

*"Do you think he'll be here by then?" she asked Hans, struggling to hide the emotion in her voice.*

*He comes from Tanarisse. It's not that far. And I've sent an escort of protectors.*

*He will be there. I'm sure he's at the top of the ramparts awaiting our arrival."*

He let out a loud, short laugh as he imagined Lucas freezing to death, scanning the white horizon.

Liv let her round, surprised gaze slide over the face carved out of marble. A face marked by so much suffering, so much remorse. The times she'd heard him joke and laugh were few and far between. He was happy to see Lucas and the others again, even though he tried hard not to show it. Did he think that now was not the time for happiness?

She opened her mouth to tell him how much she loved that laughter, that she simply loved him. Not as a friend, but as a father. Lucas loved her that way too, of course.

Wasn't he a father to both of them when they were still children emerging from a sleep of eternities? Wasn't he their father when the world they knew collapsed and a long journey into nothingness awaited them? Yes, he was, but no sound came out of his mouth.

The Legions of Mād̄h were coming at them.

\*

### III

The Beasts were surrounded. A couple of them were already dead, the last three were belching with rage, their muffled growls shaking the ground. The Orcs and Centaurs were moving slowly forward, closing the circle. Behind them, Lycants were waiting for an order, their snarls echoing those of the monsters.

A few hours earlier, Kanyha, the young Roovdark accompanying their group and leading the way with the Surveyors, had sensed their presence. They were still a long way from Olonesse, and when the Beasts had attacked them, Miles Kaltan, the wolf man, was thinking about the city of the Elves and the danger that threatened it. Not five isolated Beasts, but a whole army massing north of the plains of Nomarande.

Now he was standing alone in the centre of the circle formed by his men, facing the Beasts who were staring at him. In his hand, he held a heavy axe stained with black blood. His bright yellow eyes plunged into those of the nearest Beast.

For a few seconds, nothing happened, then, in a wobble, he took a step towards it as if he was falling into a void. The nomadic army shuddered. The grunts of the Lycants grew louder.

The Beast did not move, his dark gaze riveted to Kaltan's, in an ignoble, horrible intimacy. An accomplice.

The Beast opened its mouth, revealing a sharp jaw with massive fangs, and Miles could see his cursed reflection, his damned soul in it. In the savagery of the creature standing in front of him, he recognised his own anger. When it screamed, he thought it was talking to him, and maybe it was; he thought it was calling his name, and maybe it was.





Suddenly his axe seemed too heavy for him, overwhelmed as he was by a mixture of hatred and empathy, torn by these two feelings that seem to be entwined like unlikely and repulsive lovers whose child he would be. He remained motionless, stunned by the horror of his fate and the terrifying truth written in his blood, in his whole being. That's when the Amrok pounced on him.

The Lycants charged at the same time as the Orcs and the Centaurs. Miles was still standing when the Beast collapsed at his feet, dead without even touching him. Then the Kaltan attacked the two Beasts who had been waiting. They stood there motionless, their dark eyes fixed on him, as if waiting for an answer. They died without ever ceasing to stare at him.

Perhaps they had recognised him.  
Perhaps they had guessed his secret.

\*

## IV

The Mädh had attacked the last conveyor with astonishing speed. Among them, a dozen of shadowy tightrope walkers, were already scaling the wooden and metal walls of the mastodon with the help of ropes and grappling hooks, moving towards the Banni who was piloting it.

The convoying soldiers were outnumbered and the Seekher clashed with the Legion cavalrymen protecting their own.

Thick wisps of smoke, billowing from the huge engines and portable boilers of the Fioul, swirled in the icy air, sculpted by the wind. A kind of artificial fog enveloped the Seekher and Mädh fighters, reducing them to mere dark silhouettes.

With reduced visibility, the steam weapons were firing imprecisely. Incandescent steel projectiles were striking at random. Those that hit perforated the Mädh's armor, seeping into their flesh and forcing their way through their bones. But this was not enough to discourage the raiders, who were hungry.

Liv tried to take part in the fight, but Hans had stopped her.

*"Take command of the convoy and continue towards Olonesse. You must get there before nightfall, before the Counters surround the town. We'll deal with those bastards!"*

The word Hans had used to describe the Beasts struck Liv like a dagger.

Counters.

That's what he kept calling them.

Despite the time that had passed, despite the differences too, despite this world, he hadn't forgotten what they really were.

He glanced at her, worried by the look she was giving him.

*"Liv, now, damn it! he shouted."*

Hans turned away from her to face the four Mādhs who were approaching.

\*

## V

He had arrived in Golas the day before. His room was spacious, his bed comfortable, and the embroidered hangings on the walls magnificent. He had spent a most pleasant night in the company of banished and human prostitutes, and a few mugs of Gromula.

A night to forget, despite the risks.  
To forget this world. Forget what he was.

He still had a long way to go, and had risen at the first light of dawn. He wanted to leave early, to plunge quickly back into reality.

Sometimes, more and more often in fact, he found it hard to come back from his mental wanderings. A night of drinking and copulating could be enough to send him over the edge. He had to be careful. Last time, he'd been trapped too long by his carnal desires, his need for self-destruction. For several days, he didn't know how long, he had sunk into an unfathomable abyss. But today he was in control of his impulses.

He was about to set off again when three mercenaries entered the inn. They didn't recognize him — few people did — but they knew what he was and approached him cautiously.

*"Are you the Roovdark?"*

He merely replied with a wry, contemptuous smile. These three Humans must, like most of the mercenaries here in Golas, have served as a close guard to an Arkhanis Baron. They paid well.

*"Roovdark aren't supposed to stay in Golas. Not without permission."*

He sniffed the air. Only he could smell the fear exuding from these mercenaries. A dull fear that intoxicated him, and his smile grew a little wider.

Everyone was afraid of a Roovdark, and that was the only feeling he could hope for.

As he slowly made his way towards them, the mercenaries were stunned to see the pendant around his neck.

The Aria, the symbol of the 7.

And that was the last thing they saw.

\*

## VI

The sea was raging, with several meters-deep troughs, and on the crescent-moon cliffs of Kerris harbor, gigantic foam rollers came to die in a deafening din.

Caught up in the storm, the steam tanker was struggling to stay afloat, violently buffeted despite its weight and the hundred or so crewmen trying to stabilize her. Her huge chimneys spewed dark clouds that swirled in the wind, and the two huge paddlewheels clung hopelessly to the water.

For almost four hours, the ship failed to get close enough to the quay to dock. While hundreds of Fioul soldiers waited in the holds to disembark, a man, on deck, his face lashed by the waves, was standing upright, screaming over the din of the raging ocean. Howard Fioul, his jaw clenched in anger at the raging elements, dressed in his heavy steam armor, was challenging the lightning and wind to a titanic challenge.

Anyone who saw him that day could have sworn they'd spotted a god.

\*



## VII

The great walls of Olonesse appeared as if in a dream, bursting out of the earth against the white horizon. The outline of a lost, almost forgotten past.

Beyond the walls, the tall marble towers gave off the bright red glow of braziers, guiding refugees from the surrounding villages through the snowstorm to the shelter of the high ramparts. Olonesse, like a gigantic lake, filled with rivers of people flowing through the great gaping gates of the Elven city.

But Liv saw neither the fortifications, nor the columns of ragged men and women, nor the pain in their bodies, nor the fear in their eyes.

The silhouette of the man on the walls.  
She saw only Lucas smiling at her.

\*



## VIII

Nephilim Roovdark was running. Something in him had awakened, with fury. The call of blood. The Beast was haunting him again, stronger than ever. He could feel its strength, its cruelty, and his own ascent to nothingness. Nephilim was running to avoid death.

What he was prevented him from existing; he was only the shadow of evil, its human incarnation, but he wanted to survive. To survive just a little longer and give meaning to his existence. So he ran. Each stride brought him a little closer to Olonesse, where something was brewing. Something terrifying and beautiful. Something he didn't want to miss.

It was then that a flash of cold lucidity crossed his mind. He felt death, but not for himself. He felt hatred, but not his own.

He saw the monstrous army assembling to the north, ready to swoop down on the Elven city. He saw it not as a mere witness, but as one of its soldiers, from the inside.

The Beast was calling, ordering him to return, to fight by his side, to plunge his hands into the entrails of these so-called brothers who looked upon him as a monster. The Beast was calling, yes, but not to him.

Deep in his subconscious, something else was obsessing Nephilim. A different disturbance that had persisted through several places and he didn't want to interpret. And when he understood what his intuition was trying to tell him, he wept.

He wept tears of black blood.

\*

## IX

At last, the gangway unfurled and hit the ground. The Fioul crumbled out to moor the tanker while they still could, before the ocean took hold of them. Then, with a dull roar, ripping through the thick smoke spewing from the boilers, the Fioul army emerged from the ship's belly, bellowing mysterious songs to the glory of steam. The white flashes of lightning were reflected on the tool armor.

The whole dock shook, and the earth beneath Kerris shuddered. In the streets, at the windows, in front of the doors, people gathered to catch a glimpse of what no eye had ever seen before. The Steam Damned and their fairies, fluttering around serious or grave faces, were landing on the Southern Continent.

The rumors that had been circulating for several moons about the gathering of the 7 were well-founded. Howard Fioul was there, a heavy-stepping metal man among his noisy children. But if this rumor was true, then so was the one about the hundreds of Beasts massing to the north. Joy turned to anguish in every heart.

In what gigantic battle and for what victory were these men going to have to sacrifice themselves? For what future, if that word still had any meaning? The question remained unanswered.

After the Fioul soldiers had left, the people of Kerris watched in panic as huge steam-powered golems appeared. Their intricate gears powered by vaporite energy, their metal joints creaking and squeaking like moans.

Then followed war machines of fantastic proportions; ballistas, bombards, troop conveyors...

The onlookers, mostly fishermen or shopkeepers, frightened by this nightmarish vision, locked themselves in or fled. Still others fainted, convinced that the gates of Hell, where the Rafengarths were rotting, had just opened.

And on the machines, drivers bellowed orders to engine drivers buried somewhere in the steel bellies, trying to drown out the sound of thunder.

In the turrets, Verminous rattled on the tocsins, warning the curious of the danger these behemoths represented when in motion.

Nothing could stop them.  
Not even the Beast, one hoped.

\*



# X

The Seekher arrived in Olonesse at dusk, slightly less numerous than when they left Fertilis. They were greeted by the jubilation and cheers of the refugees, who cleared a path through the compact crowd. On high steeds, the people's army entered the city, illuminated by thousands of torches.

Hans dismounted, and a respectful silence set in.

At the end of the green marble alley, a woman and a man, Lucas Veldt and Liv Syphea, were standing smiling.

He walked towards them, while the Dernière Lune Knights pounded their steel armor with their fists, punctuating their leader's every step. His gaze embraced the men and women staring at him, as if he wanted to remember every face, then he passed his hand over Liv's cheek and took Lucas in his arms. An explosion of howls went up from the crowd, as if the fatherly embrace was for them. Everyone felt the weight of Hans Seekher's armor against his chest. With a nod, Valegias ordered two Elves to open the doors of the manor where the 7 would be staying.

The six would have said Lucas.

One would always be missing.

\*

## XI

*"I want you to go north. Find the Beast and come back with an estimate of his numbers."*

Centaurs set off at once for the plains of Nomarande. Miles Kaltan watched them go, then pressed on. Olonesse was not far away now, and night had just fallen.

At the edge of the Boissambre forest, on a mound of red stones, Kanyha held out her finger. Two Orcs, alerted by her feverishness, made the rallying sign. The nomads formed a combat circle. Miles approached the Orcs, who showed him the spasming Roovdark sentry. But rather than worry, he smiled, revealing a row of long, tapering teeth.

*"I thought you were drunk and in the arms of a too young Elf, somewhere in Golas!"*

From the surrounding thickets, from the darkness itself, a strange laugh, bordering on insanity, was heard. A shiver ran through the ranks. Then a deep voice rang out.

*"You nomads are so slow that I had time to sober up before catching up with you. Get out of here before the night catches up with you, come give your son a hug and say hello to your friend."*

When Nephilim emerged from his lair, Miles froze. A dark gleam passed through his friend's eyes. Nephilim Roovdark had not come to them as a courtesy. The Lycant gripped the handle of his axe.

The nomads saw their guide's muscles twitch and the hairs on his back bristle, but they didn't move.

Nor did Miles. He merely watched as Nephilim approached his son, who was spasming and rushing down the small stone mound to embrace his father. Nephilim hugged him, gazing into his eyes, smiled one last time and with a sudden gesture snapped his neck. He didn't let the body fall to the ground, holding his child in his arms. The Lycants stooped to their knees, heads bowed to their chests, arms crossed towards the starless sky, and began to howl the cry of the dead, as they would have done for one of their own killed in battle. Then silence returned. Miles approached Nephilim, who was still holding his son's body in his arms.

*"I could have done it! He reached out to put his hand on his shoulder, and Nephilim bared his teeth.*

*It was up to me to do it. By my blood he was cursed. By my hand he had be delivered.*

*He could have left for the Grouilloirs.*

*It was already too late. The Beast had taken him. Your children took mine."*

Miles stared at Nephilim, watched him walk away. For so long, despite all they'd been through, he'd hoped for a hypothetical forgiveness, but Nephilim Roovdark would grant him none.

And for the rest of his life, Miles would remember the look in his friend's eyes.

Pure hatred.

A hatred that would never fade.

\*

## XII

Despite the crackling fire in the fireplace, Liv was cold. Lucas came over and laid a sweater on her shoulders, embroidered with the coat of arms of a well-known verminous craftsman. The smile they exchanged made Hans, sitting at the other end of the table, raise an amused eyebrow.

*"Have you heard from Howard?"*

*"Not a bit, no. But I suppose, with this storm, the crossing must be difficult."*

Hans nodded and emptied his tankard. A heavy silence settled over them. Each of them wanted to ask the question that haunted them all. As always, it was Lucas who dared. He was the one who'd seen him last, the one who missed him most.

*"Did you see him again? Liv shook her head. According to Lee, we saw him on the Tarkān side,» insisted Lucas.*

*"Everyone thinks they see him Lucas, that doesn't prove much."*

Lucas turned to Hans, who shrugged, his face tight.

*"He's on his own quest. I only hope it's no less important than ours."*

Lucas tried a smile. He failed. Everything had been said. There was a knock on the door. Hans shouted for it to be opened. Why did he yell? Why did he get angry every time Lucas talked about Travis Mādh? Why... He knew the answer, but it horrified him. The door opened wide. A snow-covered Minotaur of the Protector Caste appeared in the frame. He was smiling.

*"The Kaltan are coming."*





## XIII

Usually, the arrival of the Kaltans in Olonesse was a pretext for seven days of festivities. But not today. The taverns remained open, handing out food to the refugees. The troubadours were still present, but their musical instruments remained mute. The inalterable beauty of the elven city seemed derisory, almost insulting in these troubled times.

Beside Miles stood Nephilim, even more somber than usual. His mere presence made everyone nervous, and the tension in the air was palpable.

Liv suspected that the old grudges were back. Since their awakening, Miles and Hans had been on a desperate quest for redemption, and Nephilim was conscientiously making sure they never got it, so that their remorse would be as boundless as the genes in the Beast's blood. So that together they would share the weight of his curse.

This situation was hurting him. A physical, intolerable ache. She had once spoken to Lucas about it. He had remained silent and she hadn't insisted, as if to go any further risked destroying the precious but fragile bond that united them all.

The world had changed and they were the last ones who could bear the burden.

\*

## XIV

The steam-powered quads led the way, leaping from path to embankment, tearing chunks of earth and rock from the ground in their frenzied acceleration.

On their way, animals fled with panicked cries. Behind them, the steam-powered armada roared along, mingling the roar of the engines with the screams of the master conveyors and the metal riders.

Mechanisms were pushed to the limit to make up for the lost time the raging ocean had robbed them of. And in the privacy of his heart, Howard Fioul prayed they wouldn't be too late.

The storm was followed by a snowstorm.

The world kept sinking.

\*

## XV

The Centaurs swallowed up the miles of track with the secret hope of having to engage in combat. Nomarande wasn't all that far away, and with a bit of luck the Beast would attack them.

It had taken everything from the proud Centaurs long ago, and vengeance had become part of their genes, like an untreatable disease, as if they'd been born only for it, since the dawn of time.

If they had chosen to be Kaltan, it was to be able to get as close as possible to the scourge, to track it down and destroy it. Some of their brothers had preferred the Seekher ranks, but the uncertainties of assignments didn't suit them. They wanted to fight where and when they chose to do so.

Foaming with rage, they reached the vast plains of Nomarande. But there was no Beast.

And the night grew even darker.

\*

## XVI

Liv had just gone to bed when she heard the sound of the horn. The streets were still full of people.

Despite its size, Olonesse didn't have enough accommodations for all the refugees, and makeshift camps were springing up here and there, in meadows, parks and squares. Cowsheds and stables were all overcrowded. The inns had no vacancies and it was in the tavern halls that people came to keep warm.

Liv leapt to her feet, put on a tunic and pants, and hurriedly put on her boots. A second blast of the horn. Then a third...

She ran to her bedroom door, down the stairs to the manor's common room, where she met Hans and Miles, their faces impassive and their gazes sombre. They were ready. They'd always been ready for this confrontation.

Hans had put on his armor, on which the number 34 was still engraved in steel. It was the first time she'd seen him like this since their awakening. Howard had managed to power it with the energy of the vaporite stones. Its firepower was less than before, of course, but still sufficient for the man who had become a soldier in spite of himself to go into battle. Miles, too, had changed into his war clothes.

She looked at each of them in turn. Not a word. Nothing but the cold in their hearts, sweeping everything away.

What if their fates had been written since the dawn of time?  
Mere puppets of fate...

They walked out together. On the stoop stood Lucas, scanning the black horizon behind the high walls, and Nephilim, crouching, head bowed, fighting the growing madness that was trying to seize his consciousness. He held a horn in his hand.

Without turning, he addressed them in a sullen voice.

*"It's here."*

## XVII

A dull roar. A titanic trampling. Nightmarish breathing. The Beast. Approaching in wave after wave. Hundreds of Aklains preceded by their monstrous Amrok guards. The rumbling, the trampling, the breathing. Unification.

The walls of Olonesse shake on their foundations. The Dernière Lune Knights and the Kaltan crowd the gates, awaiting the ultimate order. Rumbling, trampling, breathing. Two armies on either side of the walls. And death in the middle, taking its toll.

Hans cuts through the horror-stricken rabble. Miles joins his people. The Shamans have entered into a communion with Gaia, so that she can send them her soldiers. Lucas and Liv immerse themselves in the crowd, organizing the rescue workers who will have to act quickly. In each hand, Nephilim brandishes a sword with a handle carved from the Beast's teeth. His eyes have turned blood-red.

Miles stands before the eastern gates of Olonesse.

Behind him, the earth shudders under the weight of the hundreds of Beasts gathering. He holds his axe. He holds his atonement.

*"Open the gates."*

Dozens of Night-Eye Elves climb the walkways in their sumptuous armor and get ready to shoot. Their eyes see what no Human can discern in the darkness. The face of evil. In the first Kaltan lines, the War Trolls shake, shoulder to shoulder, nervous, brandishing meter-long stakes.

The gates open.

The confrontation begins.

Olonesse goes to war.

## XVIII

The first assault is for Unification. The Trolls hit the Amrok scouts, who pounced on them. An unprecedented, destructive shock. Supported by Night-Eye archers and Orcs on the flanks, the four hundred Trolls penetrate the first line of Beasts, closely followed by hundreds of Dwarf warriors.

Miles Kaltan himself leads the charge, hacking the reflection of his face from the monsters' sinister eyes. Nephilim Roovdark joins the battle, anticipating attacks thanks to the link that binds him to his enemies, and giving death while singing old forgotten songs.

Then, from the northern and southern gates, a cadenced pulse rises, the pounding of hooves mingling with the sound of war.

The Dernière Lune Knights enter the deadly dance. They gallop after Hans Seekher. They pour out before the beleaguered city, all their hatred concentrated in the iron of their weapons, cleaving through the opposing lines, striking beyond the living rampart of advancing Amroks.

Black blood on the snow, red blood too, blood that flows and drenches Gaia.

Battalions of dismounted Seekher, infantrymen from the Protector Caste, come out in tight columns and surround the dozens of lone Beasts trying to catch the Kaltan from behind.

The fury of the men confronts the barbarity of the Beast. The Amroks are overwhelmed by their numbers, reacting on instinct, biting, disemboweling and retreating, dragging the soldiers with them to get them far enough away from the ramparts.



A shower of viscera splashes the ground as the first Aklains begin their macabre ballet.

A hurricane of bestiality hits the Seekher. Entire battalions are dislocated, exterminated in a matter of seconds, like chaff blown up by the great monsoon.

The Beast exults, cackles, when suddenly the night lights up like day. Hundreds of flaming arrows rain down on the beasts, caught off guard. A moment of hesitation can be fatal.

The Seekher launch a new, swift, and precise offensive. Steel blades, forged by Dragoria's greatest armorers, cut into flesh, penetrating the colossus' bodies to the bone, fulfilling their mission of death. Beasts fall, snarling, struggling under the hooves of the knights' war steeds as they spread out.

The snow turns to mud with the agitation of wounded bodies, claws scraping the ground, men crawling, arms torn off, heads rolling under the white flakes, faces still frozen in an expression of surprise and horror, moans, cries, with darkness and chaos as lovers, so that the night gives birth to a bloody anathema in the shadow of the slumbering gods.

Here, today, there is no escape.  
There will be no turning back.

## XIX

Howard Fioul saw the Centaurs coming. They were coming from the north. From the plains of Nomarande. They were exhausted, but like vaporite for Fioul's machines, it was rage that kept them on their feet.

The Beast had taken advantage of the storm to make a move. By now, it must have reached Olonesse.

Too soon. Much too soon.

Although the engines were already running at full throttle, Howard sped up the convoy.

\*

## XX

Sitting cross-legged on the ground, muscles rigid, faces hollowed out by effort and the outpouring of energy, dripping with sweat despite the cold, the Shamans continue to chant strange words to Gaia, begging her to hear them. They are seated near the fairy mound, as close as possible to the Mother.

Sometimes the incantations last for hours, sometimes days... One of them collapses, dead, drooling, cheeks hollow, eyes glassy, drained of all substance. Without a sound, the healing priests take him away. Of this group of men and women, how many will still be alive before Gaia answers them?

While in front of the ramparts warriors confront Beasts, the Shamans' battle is elsewhere, far from this world, in a dark, tormented corner that no one but they can ever visit. Such is their gift, such is their curse.

\*

## XXI

The Beasts seemed less numerous. Small groups continued to ram the Kaltan soldiers at the gateway to Olonesse, but for the moment, the nomads were coping rather well. Miles refused to let his people back down, and the front lines fought fiercely.

Lycants and Saurians had joined the Trolls and Orcs. Nephilim was fighting alongside the nomads. He was one of the few sentinels able to stand such close proximity to the Beasts. Most of them were chained up inside the city, howling out of pain and pleasure.

Further away, the Seekher knights were making the most of the speed of their steeds to hit the Beasts on the flanks and disengage before they could strike back efficiently, perfectly supported by the companies of foot infantrymen who prevented them from scattering, tightening their grip at the cost of a huge human sacrifice.

But something was wrong. The Beasts were fewer in number...  
The Beasts were fewer in number, and for good reason.

Hundreds of Amroks had taken advantage of the savagery of the first assault to infiltrate the city's drainage channels. Now, a deadly tide was pouring south of the Olonesse quarters, where most of the latest refugees had settled.

The Elves of the Night's Eye, alerted by the hysterical howls of the Roovdark, turned around, leaving the battlefield to strike at the enemy from within.

Someone in the panic-stricken crowd shouted that the ducts had been sealed.

Another said it was impossible for them to get in that way. No one could understand how anyone could have forgotten to block access.

Lucas glanced sadly at Valegias, who was running in. His friend had tears in his eyes. He, the wise man, reduced to a panting silhouette in the snow, slipping on the icy white layer that covered the ground. Today he was just an Elf, distraught by the scale of the carnage, a powerless witness to the apocalypse.

*"Lucas, they're being slaughtered over there! They got in, they got in!"*

Lucas turned to Liv, who was advancing with a sword in her hand. Her forehead was red and her mouth contorted in a rictus of hatred. The avenging daughter of a world taken hostage.

She wasn't a warrior, or even a healer, just a young woman, a billion years old, caught up in the turmoil of a war that was beyond her. Anger made her lose all common sense, galvanized as she was by the madness of that spring night.

Behind her, a company of Seekher and a few Fioul dwarves stationed at Olonesse. Three hundred men at most. They were ready to die at Liv Syphea's side. To follow her to the depths of the underworld. She was from the Clan of 7, and that was a sufficient reason.

Lucas made no attempt to dissuade her; it was pointless. He just prayed in silence to the heavens, which were weeping white flakes.

Valegias stopped in front of Lucas, dazed, waving his arms frantically.

*"How?*

*The Mädh. They're the ones who opened the shafts.*

*But why? Why? he screamed. Out of anger. Out of disgust.*

*When the Beast is done with us, he'll go after them.*

*They're just as doomed as we are.*

*They're blinded by their hatred. Olonesse is a symbol that must be erased.*

*The entire Unification can be destroyed right here and now. All they have to do is watch."*

A short silence.

Lucas laid a hand on his old friend's shoulder.

*"Let's get the southern districts evacuated as quickly as possible."*

\*

## XXII

In the southern quarters, the walls were smeared with fresh blood, the ground littered with steaming tripe and the streets populated by Beasts roaring with pleasure as they finished off the wounded. The vile gurgle of agony rises from the bodies sprawled on the ground. The Aklains, excited by the taste of death and the acrid smell of fear, are already beginning to attack the magnificent elven mansions, their carved wooden doors unable to resist for long.

When Liv Syphea and her squad arrive, some thirty Amroks throw themselves forward to stem their advance, all mouths open. Shreds of flesh still hanging from dirty fangs.

Within seconds, the Fioul deploy in line and fire, halting the attack for an instant. Amroks roll to the ground, disemboweled by the glowing projectiles.

The Seekher, led by Liv, pounce on the survivors, widening the wounds already open and disgorging black blood.

Other Amroks emerge, scaling the walls of the houses, skirting the roofs to spring up beyond the Fioul line and take them on. Slowed down by their heavy gear, the Fioul soldiers are unable to make a stand. Half of them are decapitated within seconds.

Faced with reality, Liv suddenly feels fear creeping up on her, with a rare violence. The adrenaline has worn off, and the horror of the battle makes her nauseous. A cloud of panicked fairies rises to the sky, chirping like a plume of smoke. Overhead, three boilers burst, taking with them a dozen Amroks who had been picking at the corpses of the Dwarves still harnessed to them. Amalgamated bones and flesh splattered onto the Seekher, who returned at full speed.

The swarm of fairies, like a single entity driven solely by survival instinct, veers off course, too close to an Amrok who snatches them all up in a single bound.

Liv strikes at random, panicked. The muscles in her arms ache, but she keeps on striking, and striking again. Her face is covered in the Beast's blood, her hair sticky with entrails, her eyes full of tears. She sees the Amroks climbing the ramparts towards the battlements, where they diverge into the adjacent streets, spilling into every corner of the city.

She screams in anger and helplessness.

Two Seekher die to save her from having her head torn off, turning their bodies into human shields. All around her, men fall.

What has she done? She's responsible for the carnage. They all followed her and now they're dying. They're all dying in front of her eyes. She'd like to give the order to fall back, but her throat is knotted with fear, and the men continue to fight and die.

Trembling, she drops her sword and, just as she thinks her last hour has come, when she falls to her knees amidst the corpses, she sees Amroks retreating in haste, trying to hold their position but failing.

The Kaltan Shamans have done their duty. Gaia has sent her soldiers. The Mother's Children arrive.

\*



## XXIII

The Dernière Lune Knights tried to regroup the retreating Beasts, encircling them and tightening their grip. But it was all in vain.

The Beasts were insidiously dragging them further and further away from the ramparts. Horses, powerful as they were, were no match for the monsters' claws and fangs.

Most of the Seekher had no mounts and were fighting on foot, while much further back, the Kaltan were no longer able to repel the Beasts arriving in successive groups. Without the cover of the Night's Eye elves, they could barely contain the onslaught, and losses were mounting. They were so overwhelmed that they could no longer guarantee the safety of the healing priests who came to the center of the maelstrom to evacuate the wounded, and the latter were slashed before they could flee.

Mounds of corpses lined the plain, and its snowy mantle melted under the flood of blood.

As he was galloping towards a group of Seekher caught off guard by two huge Aklains, Hans saw the Night's Eye archers bursting into flesh over the ramparts. Elves were being slaughtered in insurmountable hand-to-hand combat.

Amroks had managed to enter the city and were rapidly approaching the Olonesse gates protected by the nomads.

He searched for Miles and found him in the shapeless crowd at the foot of the gates. He was fully focused on his battle and hadn't noticed the growing danger above him.

He was fighting fiercely, closely pressed by dozens of bloodthirsty Lycants who were lashing out with their fangs at the remains of the Beasts, swallowing the dead and bloody flesh, when an Aklaine swooped down on him.

In one leap, Miles managed to avoid the monstrous jaw that tried to rip his arm off, but the Beast's claws slashed his face from top to bottom. He rolled to the ground, grabbed his axe with both hands, and stood up to face the Aklaine. Facing the ramparts too.

And in that instant, he saw what Hans had seen.  
The Beasts were in the city...

\*

## XXIV

The ground rose up, tearing away the cobblestones that covered it, and in a whirlwind of dirty snow, the earth began to ripple towards the Beasts, hurling them violently against the walls of the houses they had just moments before attempted to invade. With a muffled rustle, the surrounding trees bent until they brushed against the faces of the Mother's Children, and the thick roots began to wrap themselves around their legs like trained snakes. A wall of dense vegetation, rock and mud rose up to cut off the Beasts' retreat as Gaia's soldiers attacked.

Nature was assisting her sons and daughters by allowing them to use the magic that had disappeared, buried deep in the abyss, sacrificing her vital resources. The might of the Beast was matched by the unshakeable will of the Mother's Children, whose very existence was bound up with the scourge.

The few surviving soldiers who had accompanied Liv Syphea rushed forward, hollering for one last assault, one last offering for the survival of their people. They resisted for a short while, reduced to nothing before Liv's tetanized eyes. Two Amroks, sensing the terror in her eyes, turned towards her, leaving their sisters to fight the Mother's Children. Liv recovered her senses as the first Beast's fetid, clammy breath enveloped her face. This atrocious scent, she'd had it all her life. She'd smelled that awful perfume before. An unmistakable scent. The Beast exhaled the scent of death. Liv backed away slowly. She pulled back far enough to stand up and run away. She glanced quickly behind her. The Beasts watched her go without moving. For a brief moment, she thought the monsters would let her go. But before she could look away, the Beasts were back on the hunt.

\*

## XXV

On the ramparts, Banished men had quickly stepped in to repel the Amroks, who were vomiting up the viscera of Elven archers, spreading a reddish mush on the ground. The Mighty, better able than the Elves to fight the Beasts hand-to-hand, fought with the same barbarity as their adversaries.

Demons versus Beasts.

The violence of their attacks was beyond compare. Blades and fangs gleaming with the same savagery.

In front of the blood-drenched fortifications, Miles had the lines reformed to counter the Aklains' advance towards the gates. But the Kaltans were beginning to be overwhelmed, and the Seekher had been drawn so far from the walls that they were being slaughtered before they could retrace their steps.

The Beast was advancing.

Unification was retreating.

Cornered by the walls of Olonesse, the Kaltan gathered around their leader, awaiting the final assault.

Nephilim was close to them, but something else was troubling him. He could see beyond the walls, beyond the houses and mansions, beyond the night.

He saw Liv as he had never seen her, with a violent desire, an irrepressible urge to slit her throat, then possess her still-warm corpse.

And Nephilim let out a howl so terrifying that even the Beasts paused.

## XXVI

Just as defeat seemed inevitable, a murmur rose in the distance, soon to become a dull roar. Ripping through the night and fog, a shower of molten projectiles strikes the Beast in an extraordinary explosion, ripping off heads, piercing bodies, returning its bastard children to the darkness.

Miles looks up to see Howard standing there, wrapped in wisps of steam that make him look like an evanescent garment. The Kaltan centaurs with him burst out from behind his massive silhouette, skimming over his armor, past the charred carcasses lying on the ground, and charge the Aklains, who make a rapid about-face.

As the steam-powered weapons of war perform their deadly duty, scattering the still-disorganized Beasts, the Fioul soldiers take their turn in the battle and deploy. The army of monsters, harassed from all sides, splits into small groups under the virulence of the attack and the striking power of the steam weapons.

The Kaltan unleash their full force on one of the groups of Beasts trying to gather near the guard towers to the west, where the Banished continue to push back the isolated Amroks. A second group of Beasts clashes with steam golems and Fioul pilots hurtling along in their armored conveyors, using them as huge battering rams.

The impact is brutal.

Entire conveyor belts break apart under the impact of the Aklains facing them head-on. Like a herd of panicked karnaks, columns of Beasts try to counterattack in confusion.

\*

## XXVII

The Beasts are closing in.

Liv runs as fast as she can, but the Amroks are getting closer and closer. She changes direction abruptly, turns into a narrow alley, and plunges down the stairs into the large deserted square. She slips, holds on as best she can, stumbles down the steps, slamming her jaw against the hard flagstones. A searing pain twists her temples and blurs her vision. She rolls to the center of the square, clumsily tries to get up, in vain, and falls to her knees.

She calls out. No one answers.

The square is deserted.

Lucas has had the parts of town that are too exposed evacuated, obviously. She crawls forward, exhausted. The Beasts circle around her, leading her to believe that she'll finally make it. She stretches out her arm, trying to strike at those who brush against her like abject lovers. She wants to push them away, feels the heat radiating from the Beasts. Her hand touches the filth. She's never been so close to the scourge.

Long teeth drip streams of slime mixed with blood. The monsters' eyes stare hungrily at her, as if they've recognized her as one of the Clan of 7. As if they know...

Night fades, giving way to morning.

Liv feels as if she is seeing daylight for the last time, but the Beasts raise their heads and retreat.

She looks around and sees the gangly figure of Nephilim approaching. His gaze and that of the Beasts are identical.



He walks fearlessly towards the hesitant Amroks. They perceive him as one of their own, yet he looks so different.

Nephilim brandishes his swords, slides one of the blades across Liv's bare neck, slashes her flesh, draws her blood, and brings the steel to his mouth, his tongue licking it with delight.

He smiles, probably for the last time in his life, however long it may last, and lets out his darkest dementia.

\*



## XXVIII

The Mother's Children had succeeded in repelling the Beasts to the gates of Olonesse. Now they were cornered against the great walls, between the stone buildings of the Seekher garrisons.

Every tree, every blade of grass, gave the Children of Gaia their vitality and dried up as soon as its substance was used. From nature, the Mother's Children drew their strength and power, leaving behind only a heap of shrivelled branches, yellow foliage, and crumbly, black earth.

But the Beast was paying the price for this sacrifice. And of the Amroks who had penetrated the city walls, only a few wounded or dying members remained.

\*

## XXIX

The Amroks lay on the ground. Nephilim weeps under Liv's worried gaze. He turns his head and sees in the woman's pale eyes that she has become, the smiling little girl who took his hand before falling asleep for a night thousands of years long. He recalls the too-bright light of the narrow corridor that gives him a headache. He sees Lucas lying in his translucent coffin. The little boy is long asleep. He sees Hans and Travis again, side by side, spying on each other for obscure reasons. He sees Howard doing his calculations over and over again, grimacing with concentration. He sees Miles and his terrible distress at being the last of his race, or the first of another. He sees the clouds in the sky again, and the explosions in the distance that light up the night with a blood-red glow, like a warning.

He sees the moon again. They all looked at it one last time. The last moon [*Dernière Lune*]. The one before oblivion. Before rebirth.

Liv holds out her hand to him, as she did an eternity ago. He helps her up, looks at the wound on her neck, says nothing. She smiles at him. She smiles again. He can't, never will be able to. His eyes are still wet.

*"He's dead, he says simply".*

Liv frowns in incomprehension. Then suddenly she guesses. She knows.

*"No... NO!"*

And she runs towards the gates of Olonesse.

## XXX

As Nephilim joined Liv in the empty square, as Lucas did his best to help the healing priests in the overcrowded taverns, as Miles and Howard charged into the fray and bent the Beast's last forces, a guttural cry rang out, a senseless call to murder.

Hans and the remaining Seekher knights have pursued a group of Beasts to the edge of the forest. But they are still too far away.

A group of Aklains answer the call and race down the snow-covered slopes to pounce on the one who has spilled too much blood in their ranks. The few remaining Seekher are quickly pushed back by the columns of monsters that smash into them. The Beasts want to give themselves a victory in defeat.

Miles sees the few Amroks who were struggling against the Nomads flee and join the other Beasts who are regrouping.

A hundred Beasts charge at a single target, a single man, Hans Seekher. They strike his horse, ripping it in two, its legs continuing to beat the air in death. The soldier rolls to the ground and finds himself on his knees in front of an Aklaine who stands before him, defiant and deadly.

Detonation.

The Beast's head goes up in smoke.

Hans turns abruptly, looking for the man who has just fired. He knows the sound of that weapon. In the distance, he sees a silhouette that of a man. His face is hidden in the shadow of the hat he's wearing, but he recognizes him.

It was he who fired the weapon, but it was all for nothing just  
enough time for Hans to get up and die on his feet, as a soldier.  
And the soldier fires his mortal weapons, pushing back the enemy  
who roars with hatred and piles up at his feet.

Beasts trample the corpses of their sisters to reach the man now alone  
against them. They spring from everywhere.  
And they pounce on him.

A bloody arm still extends from the flood of teeth and claws that  
slams and crushes the body of the hero swept away by the wave. In a  
last-ditch effort, his hand grabs the head of an Amrok and snaps its  
neck, then his fingers stiffen.

And that's the end.

Unification soldiers come running, led by Miles Kaltan and Howard  
Fioul. But it's too late. They put their last strength into rage and  
destruction. Madness for madness, blow for blow, annihilation for  
annihilation.

At that moment, the survival of the world is all condensed in the  
heart of a man whose heart has stopped beating.

The dozens of surviving Beasts leave the game and disappear into the  
fog like ghosts, as if nothing had happened.  
In the snow lies a battered suit of armor oozing blood.

It's Hans Seekher's body.  
His corpse.

Miles continues to run, screaming, past the lifeless body of his friend, leading his people on a chase that may never end, into the thickening fog.

Howard stops beside the corpse in the lacerated armor. He barely dares to look at it, his reason defying reality, refuting the inexorable, refusing to believe what his eyes are showing him.

From the gates of Olonesse, from behind the walls, from the houses, squares and taverns, the clamor of victory rises from the entire population, yet the warriors march slowly across the windswept plain, heads low.

Liv comes running up to the remains of her father. Nephilim follows, face impassive, across the battlefield of torn corpses. She falls to her knees and embraces Hans's head, gently removing his helmet and covering his cold face with kisses.

Lucas hesitantly joins the small group forming around the first Seekher. Everyone keeps a respectful distance, but Lucas breaks through the crowd and grabs Liv by the shoulders. The only comfort he can give her.

He cries.  
Silently.

The Seekher start banging on their shields, louder and louder, the Fioul on their tool armor, the Kaltans growling in their throats. The mournful prayers of the Peoples mingle in unison. The rumor swells, covers the joyful cries of the populace and commands silence.

## XXXI

In the distance, a dark, motionless figure listens to the lament coming from the plain. The man takes off his wide-brimmed hat and places it against his chest in mourning.

He takes one last look at Lucas, hesitates for a moment...  
Then Travis Mädh covers himself and walks away into the fog.

\*





DERNIÈRE LUNE