



## ALISTAIRE

*The tournament begins in six months, Alistaire thought, staring at the spectacle in front of him. ‘Tickets to the World Fair. One livre a piece! Come quickly, reserve your spots!’ The street announcer cried. However, the crowd of people in the market were far too occupied by their lives to bother listening. Though Alistaire was occupied himself, he did listen — he did care. He knew that the tournament, which would occur during the World Fair, would set the course of his life. Success in the tournament would propel him into the life he had always wanted to live. Failure, however, would most certainly imprison him to his current place in the social hierarchy. *There won’t be another chance like this.**

*I have to win. Alistaire thought, raising his eyes to the cloudless sky.*

‘Attention, imbécile!’ The voice of an old man called out from behind him.

Alistaire quickly turned and saw a horse carriage bounding its way towards him. He lunged out of the way and, in doing so, dropped a few apples from the bag he was clutching by his chest. The old man, perched high on top of the carriage, shook his head and sneered.

‘Espèce de rêveur,’ he muttered.

The commotion had caused quite a stir, and so, Alistaire’s younger siblings peeked from under the shop stall to observe. The owner of the stall, hearing the rustling under him, glanced down under the table. His nostrils flared in anger seeing the several little heads poking out from under his stall, holding his produce. Cursing, the man grabbed a wooden stick by his side and ran after Alistaire’s siblings.

‘Run!’ Alistaire shouted.

His siblings, grasping armfuls of bread and vegetables, scattered at once, running out the side of the stall. He watched them as they ran towards the winding alleyways of the Marché de L’Aigle. The shopkeeper cursed and tried to catch up to them, but Alistaire’s nimble siblings proved too swift for the lumbering man.

Smirking, Alistaire shook his head and crouched to gather the apples he had dropped. Looking down, he saw that one had landed on a pile of horse dung. The old man on the carriage was already several paces away, trotting away with the same smug air he'd had before. Then, for one reason or another, Alistaire became irritated by the man's attitude.

*Fucking merchants.*

He picked up the soiled apple by its cleaner side, scooping up the dung, and, without hesitation, hurled it at the man's head. Years of throwing rocks as a boy came to his aid, and the shit-covered apple struck with a satisfying thwack as it splattered all over the man's head.

'Putain!' the man screamed, turning around furiously, his face red. 'Va te faire foutre!' he shouted, trying to flick the shit off of himself.

Alistaire was already laughing. 'Va te faire enculer!' he shouted back as he took off, chasing after his siblings. Once he caught up with them, he breathlessly recounted what had just occurred. His siblings bawled out in laughter as they kept running together before turning down the familiar alley that led towards the river Anese. As usual, they jumped the railing by the river and made their way under the bridge towards their usual hiding spot.

Alistaire halted midway when he noticed Charline, his nine-year-old sister, struggling to climb over. He ran back and lifted her up before quickly carrying her towards the others who had already gathered inside the small area under the bridge that was enclosed by large wooden crates. He lowered her there, and once they were in the clear, he laughed with them again as he took a headcount — five, all present. With the rush slowly leaving his body, he closed his eyes, exhaling deeply, allowing the bliss of the moment to settle over him.

‘Brother, why do we always hide here?’ asked Lucas, his eleven-year-old brother.

Alistaire opened his mouth to answer, but Julien, seventeen years old and sharp-tongued, cut in. ‘Are you thick, Lucas? How many times do we have to tell you? We hide so no one knows where we live.’

Alistaire smacked Julien on the back of his head. ‘Shut up Julien, don’t be such an arse. You used to ask stupid questions as well when you were his age.’

Julien briefly stared back at him but looked away without a word.

Undoubtedly to break the tension, Amélie, his nineteen-year-old sister, clapped her hands together and asked everyone to hand in their haul. She looked at Alistaire first, raising her eyebrows, as she held open an

empty potato sack, prodding him to hand over the apples he was still holding. Camélie, thirteen and always eager to help, took the sack from her older sister and went around collecting what everyone had stolen. Bit by bit, they emptied their haul into it — bread, fruit, vegetables — whatever they had grabbed.

They stayed like that for a while, talking, teasing, passing time beneath the bridge. When Alistaire decided they had lingered long enough, he told his siblings to brush the dirt from their clothes. Then he stepped away and glanced up at the bridge to see if anyone was crossing. It was clear. He signalled, and together they clambered over the railing back onto the streets of Hestrisis.

The six of them walked in loose order, not because it was planned, but because that was how it always was. Camélie and Charline stayed in the middle, hands often close, the elder always ready to reach for the younger's hand if necessary. Camélie, soft-featured and simple in a way that never sought to impress, wore her auburn hair in soft waves that curled to her shoulders. She spoke with an easy but confident cadence, her tone always level, even in teasing. Charline, much shorter, with eyes full of mischief, kept glancing around at everything with a lightness in her step that made it seem like she was always skipping.

Julien and Lucas took the rear. Lucas moved like a boy half-lost in daydreams, often slowing his steps to look up at rooftops or distant birds. His hair curled at the tips, and his smile came easily, though he wasn't smiling now. Julien, lean and dark-browed, walked stiffly beside him, head low. He had barely said a word since the earlier scolding.

Alistaire noticed. He always did. His gaze lingered on Julien for a moment, then he shook his head and looked forward again. *How many times have I set Julien straight these past weeks? Too many.* He felt it each time. He wished that his brother just understood. But he didn't — he never did.

He was still thinking when Amélie moved up beside him. She didn't say anything at first. Her long chestnut hair was tied in a low braid, and her slim figure was wrapped in a white dress drawn at the waist by a worn leather belt. Bracelets lined her wrists — some collected over the years, a few passed down by their mother. She wore them as she wore everything, with ease, as if every garment in the world had been made with her in mind. Her sleeves were rolled up to her forearms, and she walked with her hands folded behind her back. Her eyes were calm but never passive. They held questions she often didn't voice.

She nudged his shoulder. 'You're frowning. Thinking about a girl?'

Alistaire smirked. ‘Maybe.’

She looked sideways at him. ‘You need to stop messing around. One day you’ll wake up and be too old to walk, let alone chase. Find someone good before then.’

Alistaire tilted his head and raised his lip, returning the sideways glance. ‘I already live with three girls. One more might kill me,’ he said it lightly, but Amélie didn’t answer. He glanced at her. ‘What about you then? You seeing someone?’

Her posture didn’t change, but she took a longer breath before answering. She bit her bottom lip. Her eyes shifted forward. ‘No.’

Alistaire narrowed his eyes slightly. There was something more in her voice, but he let it pass. Whatever it was, she would say when she was ready.

They walked in silence for a while. The city around them changed. Less white, more grey. Less chatter. More stillness.

Then, she turned toward him more fully. ‘We can’t keep doing this forever,’ she said suddenly, her voice low. ‘Stealing, scavenging, lying. All of it. We’re getting older.’

Alistaire clenched his jaw. He knew. He felt it too. The words hit something he had been trying not to name. Something he had spent countless nights wondering, countless nights staring at the ceiling as sleep refused to come. The thought of them splitting apart, drifting away

into different corners of the world, wounded him deeply. He didn't want to be parted from them. Any of them. But without money, without a path forward, he knew that time would tear them apart.

He stopped walking and looked at her directly.

'I'll find a way.'

Amélie nodded, slow and silent. She said no more and resumed her pace, her hands still folded behind her back, now more apprehensive than before.

Half an hour passed before they reached their district.

The city behind them had been bright and clean — beautiful, even — with smooth stone paths and symmetrical terraces of pale stone, everything laid out in perfect rhythm. Here, the air shifted. The streets turned narrow and uneven, and the polished roads gave way to crooked stone. The scent of fresh bread and flowers faded, replaced by the sour tinge of old water and the weight of smoke clinging to wooden beams. Wooden houses leaned into one another, their beams cracked and softened by rot. Junk gathered in the corners where weeds grew in clumps. Shoes lay without their pair. A dented kettle. A broken mirror frame. All things left behind and never cleaned up.

They were home now.

Their home stood at the back of a narrow alley, far from the street, where sunlight only reached for a single hour

each day. It was quiet. The kind of quiet that wasn't peaceful.

Alistaire approached the door and, by old habit, reached for it to knock. His hand stopped halfway.

*No one's home. It's just us now.*

He rummaged for the house key from his inside coat pocket and quickly placed it inside the keyhole, turning it open. All his siblings rushed inside except for Julien, who lingered at the door.

He looked up at Alistaire with conflicted, remorseful eyes.

'I'm sorry for what I said to Lucas earlier — you're right... like always. We need to stick together as a family... that's the only way we can survive.'

Alistaire raised an eyebrow, then gave a small, surprised smile. He hadn't expected that. 'Julien...' he said gently, in the manner a parent would speak to their child.

His younger brother continued on breathless. 'Thank you for everything, frère — without you... w—we all would have been sent to a foster home or worse. After your fight with Pa, I thought it was over for us, but now, because of you, we're even better off than we were before.'

Alistaire's smile grew wider. Hearing Julien say this eased his previous worries. His brother was right — even though they were still so far down, they were at least

moving up in the world. He reached out and held Julien's shoulder. 'It's not just me — everyone has a part to play, even you. You're seventeen now. Start acting a man, and in time you'll become one. When I'm away, with the boys or elsewhere, you're the man of the house. You'll have to take care of everyone. Can I trust you to do that?'

Julien looked down, uncertain. 'I really don't know frère,' he said, shifting his feet uneasily against the ground.

'I do. Here,' Alistaire said, taking off his flat cap, 'take this, wear it and you'll become a man.' He extended his arm out and his brother took the flat cap somewhat reluctantly.

'But it's just a ragged old cap,' Julien mumbled.

'It is, sure, but it's also *my* ragged, old cap. Remember me while you wear it, and, in time, you'll become like me,' Alistaire said, grinning.

Julien clenched the cap in his hand. 'That sounds stupid, but I guess it can't hurt.'

'Sounds stupid huh?' Alistaire said, giving him a mock glare. 'Get inside before I throw you in — it's starting to get cold,' he said, smacking Julien lightly on the back, nudging him through the doorway.

Inside, Camélie and Amélie had already started the fire and were tending to it. Lucas was hunched over their rickety table, chopping vegetables, glancing up briefly at Julien.

‘Jul, come help,’ Lucas said, brushing the hair off of his brow with his wrists as he tried to slowly cut a carrot, careful not to cut his finger like he had last time.

Charline, meanwhile, was in bed playing with a toy that Amélie had made for her by stuffing hay into an old, cut-up fabric fashioned into the shape of a bear. Monsieur L’Ours, was his name.

Alistaire smiled, taking in the harmony and unity around him and the purity of his siblings, who had become so capable now that they were on their own. He sat down by the fire and let the warmth settle over him. Their life was crude, yes, but there was something oddly wonderful about it. Their hardships had drawn them close. The dire situation in which they lived forced each and every one of them to cooperate in some form. Even little Charline, with her wide, persuasive eyes, was vital to their way of life. She was usually the distraction, the one whom strangers felt sorry for. She drew the eyes off her siblings, who, efficient in their craft, would carry out their work unnoticed.

His thoughts were cut short by a sudden crash. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Lucas had tripped over a table leg. The tin cup in his hands went flying and bounced off Julien’s chest, splattering water all over him. Then it landed on the cold stone floor as it rattled to a halt.

Everyone stopped whatever they were doing to look at the two. Lucas shrieked and shielded himself, anticipating a smack from Julien. But none came. Though clearly infuriated, Julien did nothing except intently stare at Lucas and clench his teeth. Lucas peeked from behind his arms, and when he realised the strike wasn't coming, darted behind Alistaire for cover.

Julien exhaled and drew in deep breaths, snapping out of his rage. He then slowly looked at Alistaire. His expression was striking — it was not anger nor frustration, it was something he had never seen before on his younger brother, it was an expression of maturity, growth.

Alistaire gave a satisfied smile, thinking how the flat cap which Julien was now wearing suited him well. He then turned to face his youngest brother. 'Lucas, stop hiding, apologise to Julien and get back to work.'

Lucas nervously stood up and straightened himself before he went back towards the kitchen. He apologised to his older brother and started to wipe the water off the floor.

Julien stared at him and tilted his head knowingly — his previous animosity completely vanished. 'It's fine, just clean this up while I go up to change my shirt, and hopefully you'll be done by the time I get back. Right?' He said, turning to walk up the stairs.

Lucas looked up almost doubtfully. Unsure how to react to such a civil, unfamiliar interaction with his usually hot-headed brother. ‘O–okay frère,’ Lucas finally said after a moment of pause.

Julien was already halfway up the stairs but paused and gave a nod before continuing towards his room.

Alistaire chuckled. *I didn’t think my cap would work this well so soon.* He thought, standing up to check on Amélie and Camélie. They had finished lighting the fire and were talking amongst themselves about the latest piece of gossip in their neighbourhood.

‘She did what?!’ Camélie exclaimed.

‘I know,’ Amélie replied, eyes wide. ‘I heard she’s already sailing from Ephyraea towards god knows where.’

‘Ephyraea?! But she doesn’t even know him.’

‘Love makes people mad I suppose,’ Amélie said, shrugging.

Alistaire shook his head and walked away, saying nothing — he did not want to take part in their chatter.

Amélie looked up at him with a certain glare, seeming ready to pounce at him because of his apparent disdain for their conversation. However, she quickly averted her gaze and turned her attention back to her sister.

Alistaire noticed her, but he did not acknowledge it. Instead, he looked at the dwindling stack of logs next to

the fireplace and reflected that they ought to steal some more soon.

Folding his arms, he stared into the fire, watching it flicker and crackle as if dancing. Then, movement caught his eye. Lucas was struggling to lift a heavy sack of potatoes, gritting his teeth with effort. Before anything else could go wrong, Alistaire stepped over and helped him lower it safely to the ground. Together, they grabbed a few potatoes and tossed them into the wide tin pot, which they then filled with water and carried over to the fire. Once it was settled on the iron grill, Alistaire left the task to the girls and returned to the kitchen with Lucas trailing behind.

He was halfway through slicing a tomato when he heard footsteps creaking down the stairs. Glancing up, he saw Julien, wearing a dark red woollen sweater he had never seen before — probably one they had recently stolen.

Alistaire called him over and handed him the knife. ‘Okay, frères, I have to go now. Lucas,’ he said, patting his youngest brother’s back, ‘try not to make a mess again, and Julien,’ he said with a smirk. ‘Very clever. Now if Lucas spills tomato on you, no one will even notice.’

Julien smirked. ‘Sure, frère sure, so when will you be back?’

Alistaire wiped the tomato juice off his hands and paused to put a hand on his chin.

‘Ahh... can’t say. Whenever I get tired, I guess.’

‘Please come back quick!’ Charline called out to him, holding Monsieur L’Ours close to her chest.

Alistaire smiled and nodded to her. ‘I will.’

He walked to the front door, grabbed his coat, and rummaged behind the cupboard for his sword — but his fingers found nothing.

*Odd, I know I left it there, or did I?*

He turned back to face his siblings. ‘Have any of youse touched my sword?’

They looked back at him with blank expressions.

Julien stepped out of the kitchen, wiping his fingers, with a puzzled look on his face. ‘Are you sure it’s not behind the other cupboard?’

Alistaire knew it wasn’t there, but he decided to look anyway out of desperation. ‘No, it’s not here.’ He eyed Lucas. ‘Have you touched it?’

‘No frère, I swear, I haven’t!’ Lucas pleaded, waving his hands in front of him.

‘Well then, fuck. Where is it?’

Panic consumed Alistaire. He paced around the house rummaging for his sword, opening cupboards, checking behind furniture, throwing blankets.

*Some fucker must have stolen it from our house. Who the fuck would dare?!*

‘Arrgh!’ He screamed out in frustration, slamming the side of his fist on the wall.

Amélie’s voice then rose in behind him.

‘Alistaire... I—I know where it is,’ she said quietly, hands gathered in front of her, a guilty look plastered on her face.

‘You do?! Wh — ’ He stopped himself mid-shout, seeing the fear in her eyes.

*I can’t shout at them like that — otherwise I’ll be no better than our dick-wash of a father.*

‘Amélie, where is it?’ He asked, steadying his voice.

She hesitated. ‘Umm... C — Can I talk to you outside?’ She asked, her gaze tilted downwards.

*What does Amélie have to do with my sword?*

‘Well, come on then,’ he said, motioning her outside. He opened the door and let her pass. She grabbed her scarf from the couch on her way out and once outside, wrapped it around herself tightly, breathing into the wool, her hands trembling slightly.

She stood in silence for a while before opening her mouth and shutting it again. Then, finally, she began speaking in a remorseful tone. ‘I gave your sword to Jean. He told me he only wanted to see it — that he’d give it back before we were home. I didn’t want to, but he — he

insisted. He was here this morning when you were out with your friends. I — I,’ tears began flowing down her cheeks. ‘I’m sorry Alistaire. I’m really sorry.’

Dread poured through Alistaire’s soul.

*That fucking bastard Jean.*

He stared past her tearful face, the world around him blurring. He paused for a while before uttering. ‘Do you know... W — Where he is at this moment?’ he said, struggling to contain his rising anger.

She wiped her eyes. ‘He usually hangs around the dock around this time... He might still be there. With his friends,’ she said anxiously.

Alistaire sighed and ordered her inside. Without another word, he turned and began jogging down the alleyway toward the dock. Halfway down, he glanced back and saw Amélie still lingering near the doorway.

‘Alistaire, wait!’ she called out.

He slowed, turned to face her, and roared, ‘Amélie, I don’t want to hear it. I told you not to be around faggots like Jean.’

Then, without giving her a chance to reply, he broke into a dead sprint. As he reached the corner of the street, he looked back once more and saw that all of his siblings had stepped outside to watch him. He shook his head in disapproval and kept running, his boots pounding against

the cobble as he turned onto the adjacent street and bolted toward the main road.

*Should I gather the boys...? No — not enough time.*

The street was mostly empty now. Dusk had thinned the crowds, and the few people that still lingered gave him wary glances before quickly turning away.

*Shit, am I too late?*

After several minutes of weaving through the darkening streets, he reached the entrance to the dock — one of many along the river Anese. This particular dock catered mostly to small pleasure vessels for the wealthy. Trading vessels rarely ever came this far inland, so close to the heart of Hestrisis. Most unloaded near the sea, their cargo then brought inland by train.

As Alistaire approached the entrance to the dock, he noticed a vessel still loading passengers.

*Shit!* he thought, letting out a faint groan of frustration. He slowed to a walk and ducked behind a stack of crates. Peeking through, he saw wealthy, well-dressed noblemen and women. Most were older couples, waddling past the boarding ramp with indulgent smiles. A few were accompanied by their young. His eyes narrowed. He looked at their fine clothes and well-groomed faces and grimaced with anger at the sheer opulence of their lives. His jaw clenched as he pondered why he and his family were

doomed to live such menial lives while these pompous bastards could rent out a luxury cruise for the night.

*Fucking aristocrats, I hate them, yet I can't help but envy them.*

A line of guards blocked the entrance to the dock. There was no way he'd get in through there. So, he scanned the edge of the dock and followed the length of the fence, hands in his pockets. Once he was sure no one was watching, he vaulted over in one smooth motion. His boots landed on the gravel with a soft crunch.

Without pause, he brushed the hair out of his eyes and moved along the water's edge. Jean would still be at the old dock — he had to be. Alistaire crouched low and kept walking under protruding branches and thorny bushes until the concrete platform of the old dock came into view.

There he saw several figures loitering around, including a man holding his sword.

*Jean.*

He ducked behind a crooked tree and circled around, taking a longer path to the dock to avoid being seen. As he got closer, he could make out the voices and faces of the figures. They looked young — Amélie's age, maybe a little older. Alistaire crouched behind a bush and watched them for a while.

Jean was there, of course — swinging around the sword like a drunkard, dropping it more than once onto the stone, chipping its edges. Every clang made Alistaire wince. Rage boiled up inside him, and it took all his will to stop himself from rushing them. *Not now... not like this. There's too many. That would be suicide. What the fuck should I do?*

There were four boys, including Jean, and two girls. Jean stood the furthest from him, closest to the river's edge. The boys were swinging wooden sticks at the sword, laughing as they clashed them against its blade. The two girls sat on a crate to the side, legs crossed, looking bored.

One skanky-looking girl, chewing something while twirling her hair lazily, called out to Jean. 'Are you done swinging that thing around? When are we going?'

'Shut up,' Jean snapped. 'We'll go when I say we go. Look over there at the water's edge, there's fucking nobles boarding a cruise right now. You wanna jump a fence in that dress? Sit and wait.'

He held the sword out in front of him, inspecting it with a twisted grin. 'This is the finest fucking blade I've ever held. How the hell did that penniless rat Alistaire get his hands on this?'

'Ooo, don't say that about the thief prince,' a lanky boy chimed in. 'He might come and get you.'

Jean snorted. ‘Thief prince? More like whore prince. With that many sisters in the shack he calls a home, he’s practically running a brothel in there. I’ve already fucked one — maybe I’ll go back tomorrow and fuck another? Wonder if they’ll be open late, I’ve got work ’til nine.’

The boys erupted into laughter. Even the girls smirked, seemingly amused. Alistaire, however, was not. His entire being became utterly consumed by anger. He clenched his fists so hard that his nails dug into his skin, almost drawing blood.

*THAT FUCKING BASTARD!*

*I’LL KILL HIM, I’LL FUCKING KILL HIM, I’LL KILL HIM!*

He screamed internally, his body trembling in rage.

Without thought, he grabbed a nearby rock and hurled it at the nearest boy. It bashed the boy’s head squarely in the temple, and he immediately dropped to the floor like a doll. The others spun around, alarmed. The girls shrieked and scrambled behind a nearby pillar.

Jean shouted, ‘Where are you?! Show yourself, coward!’

Alistaire stepped forward with two more rocks in his hands. ‘I’m not hiding you fucking faggot!’ He spat, flinging another rock.

It missed its intended target — the lanky boy — but struck another in the thigh, knocking him to the ground. The lanky one tried to flee for cover, but Alistaire was

faster. The second rock flew and clipped the back of the boy's head. He crumpled on the floor, twitching once before going still.

‘Tu putain de péde!’ Jean snarled, charging with the sword.

Alistaire ran forward to meet him, veering to grab a wooden branch from the first boy he'd struck. He lowered himself to reach it and grabbed it just in time before Jean swung at him. Alistaire straightened his posture mid-sprint, seeing the world around him slow, and lunged to the side with one foot. Jean's swing missed, but if not for the lunge, would have sliced him right through the head. He felt the gust of Jean's blade slicing through the air beside him — barely missing his face.

Using the momentum of his lunge, Alistaire twisted his body and swung the branch hard across Jean's face. It struck, bashing the side of Jean's face with great force, sending him tumbling to the floor. The swiftness of the swing threw Alistaire off balance, causing him to hit the ground and land hard on his wrists. He writhed in pain as he slowly stood up, holding his wrists. He stared down at Jean with deathly, satiated eyes.

From behind, another voice rang out. ‘Je suis toujours là, enculé!’

It was the boy he'd clipped in the leg — closer than expected. He lunged, swinging his own branch. Alistaire tried to parry the blow, but the incoming branch smashed his own out of his hand, and the tip of it struck him in the nose.

The pain was blinding.

*FUCK.*

Alistaire staggered, eyes watering. His vision blurred as he held his nose with one hand. Cursing, he swung blindly with the other, reaching out in the dark.

By chance or instinct, his fingers caught the boy's collar. He held fast. The boy, stunned by the suddenness, didn't react. Alistaire hooked his leg behind him and drove him down, slamming him hard onto the concrete.

There was a dull crack as the boy's head struck the floor. His eyes shut as if he were dead. Perhaps he was.

Alistaire lowered his hand and saw it coated in blood. His own. Breathing hard, he crouched, disoriented.

A sudden flurry of steps from behind startled him. He clambered for the closest branch and turned to face the person — Jean.

Jean, wild-eyed, roared as he swung with both hands, intending to kill.

As the sword arched toward him, Alistaire's life flashed before his eyes, and he saw his siblings' faces.

He would not die here. Not now. Not like this.

He sucked in air and hurled the branch forward to meet the blade.

That should have deflected the blow.

But the branch shattered on impact. The blade — razor sharp, sharpened by his own hand time and time again — cut clean through the wood and sliced into his left forearm. The gash was deep. Blood spurted out furiously.

For a moment, he just stared. Stunned. His mind reeled as the sight sent a cold jolt through his chest, but there was no pain. Not yet.

Instinct took over. He swept Jean's legs out from under him and sent him crashing to the floor.

Then the pain came.

'AAAAARRRRGH!'

Alistaire screamed — a long, raw cry that tore his throat open. The agony was absolute. His mind emptied. Every thought dissolved into white noise. Blood sprayed from his arm in fierce bursts. He pressed his other hand against the wound, trying to hold it in, but it only splattered across his face, into his eyes.

The searing pain consumed him, sharper than anything he had ever known.

STOP. STOP. STOP.

PLEASE — JUST STOP!

He fell back and stared upwards at the darkening, now crimson-tinted sky as his vision faded into nothingness.

\*\*\*

The crowd cheered his name. The Princess was eyeing him up and down. He raised his sword in victory and planted his leg upon the fallen enemy.

*ALISTARE! ALISTAIRE! ALISTAIRE!* They chanted.

‘Alistaire! Wake up!’

He was in a château, leaning on a stone railing, looking down on a beautiful garden below. A girl stood beside him. Green-eyed. Alluring. Her hand rested gently over his.

‘You’re hurt,’ she said in a dark, disturbing voice which did not match her beautiful face.

‘I am?’ he asked her, his voice faint, misty.

He looked down and saw his half-severed arm resting on the railing.

Wailing, he stumbled back and fell into a deep, dark pit.

His screams echoed at first but then faded as he fell deeper and deeper into the infinite void.

Above him, a silver, crystalline glass pane shimmered. Upon it, his future raced on like a continual barrage of paintings. He was rapidly progressing with age. Armless, and still living in that dark alleyway. He had never risen above his social hierarchy. He was still poor. Still trapped. His beloved siblings either succumbed to illness, accident, or just simply left. He was the last to die, alone and without ever amounting to anything.

He lived alone for years, completely alone. Nameless, worthless. His life had been meaningless.

A cold sensation emerged on his forehead, so very cold, so very soothing.

*Tap... Tap.... Tap... Tap... Tap.*

Then a sharp pain pierced his left arm. His eyes flickered open for a brief moment. He was being dragged into a room. To his left, he saw his brother, Julien, and to his right, his sister, Amélie.

Then the darkness consumed him yet again.

When he awoke, he could feel that he was lying on a cold metal bed. There was a strange numbness on his left arm. He tilted his head to look. Someone had bandaged it tightly. He moved it ever so slightly. The pain was dull now, no longer searing. Relieved, he let his head fall back. He looked around. The room was dim, shadowed in places. Faint voices murmured nearby, but he couldn't make out the words. Outside, rain struck the glass in steady rhythm. Somewhere farther off, a fire crackled.

Strangely, he could hear those distant sounds more clearly than the voices so close to him.

Then, he became conscious of himself.

What had happened? Why was he here?

'Will he be alright?' the voice of a little girl asked fearfully, cutting through the dullness in his ears.

*Who is that? I know this voice.*

‘I know he will. He’s Alistaire,’ the voice of a young man replied with conviction.

*That voice... Immanuel?*

Alistaire lifted his head, just enough to see the group of people gathered around a table by the door. Their voices were still not clear to him, and their faces were dim under the amber light of the oil lamp hung on the doorframe.

His vision sharpened slowly, and he recognised that the man who had spoken was indeed Immanuel — his closest friend. Tousled black hair, the same sharp grin, the same scar tracing the side of his mouth. But now his face was softened by concern as he leaned down to speak to Charline.

Alistaire smiled at the sight of them, the people who mattered most. But the moment he did, a cough seized his chest.

Everyone at the table turned.

Charline jumped to her feet. ‘Alistaire!’ she cried, rushing toward him.

But Camélie caught her just in time. ‘Charline. Stop — he’s hurt.’

‘Oh...’ Charline murmured, stepping back, guilt flickering on her face.

Immanuel stood and walked over, his smile calm, his voice warm.

‘Alistaire. Finally. We took you for dead when Julien and Amélie dragged you in.’

Alistaire looked up at him, his lips curling into the faintest grin. Immanuel’s scarred face, his rough features, and heavy stare often gave strangers pause. Yet, his clear green eyes, full of warmth and wisdom, gave him away. Immanuel was a good man, a kind man, and the truest friend Alistaire had.

Alistaire tried to rise, pushing himself up with effort, but barely lifted an inch before Camélie was at his side.

‘No Alistaire, you can’t. The doctor said you have to lie down.’

He coughed, wiped his mouth, and shook his head as he gently moved her hand aside. ‘Fuck the doctor, I want to sit up.’

Immanuel let out a wild laugh. ‘You stubborn little shit. You’re lucky to be here at all. You should be more careful. Julien found you by the old docks. He followed you there. Somehow dragged you back, bleeding like a butchered hog.’

And then it returned — the memory.

The blood. The pain. The sword. The cold tap of water against his forehead. The vision of his siblings.

‘Where are we?’ he asked, turning to Immanuel.

‘At Doctor Georges, of course,’ Immanuel replied, a concerned expression growing on his face. ‘Sure you didn’t hit your head as well? You seem dazed.’

‘No... I — I didn’t,’ he mumbled, recalling the fight. How his nose had been smashed, how he had painfully landed on his wrist, how he had skilfully fought, parried, dodged, and struck. All for the branch to give way, all for his own deadly sword to be his undoing.

‘The damned nobles by the main dock didn’t even offer to help, Julien told me. They only sneered as he dragged you,’ Immanuel spat with malice. ‘Only the few people on the street showed any concern. Halfway here, an old man on a carriage offered to load you on and transport you here. You might have bled out if not for that.’

*An old man on a carriage... No, it can't be.* Alistaire thought as guilt seeped into his veins.

‘We all arrived here after Jaime came to tell us what had happened. Your other siblings saw you on the carriage and came with Julien. Ha, you know what else?’ Immanuel said jeeringly. ‘Julien says you said to him, “Don’t take me to a doctor, they’ll only make things worse.” Your fucking stubbornness has no limits. You’re lucky Jaime’s father was at home and not out in the hospital.’

Alistaire smirked. ‘Luck triumphs over all, that’s why I never lose. As L’Aigle once said.’

‘That’s not what he said,’ Immanuel replied, shaking his head.

‘No? Then it’s what I said.’ Alistaire shrugged.

‘Ah yes, another one of Alistaire Cedar’s iconic quotes.’

Alistaire laughed. Immanuel could always make him laugh, no matter how bleak the circumstance.

Then a chilling thought overcame him. *Did I win?*

‘Wait, one of them — Jean, he was still conscious. How did Julien get me if he was still there?’

Julien stepped forward now. ‘His head was bleeding, I thought you’d thrown a rock at him, but I guess you must’ve tripped him, and then he must’ve landed on a rock that you’d thrown earlier. You are lucky frère. Everything lined up just right for you to make it out alive.’

‘The luck of the devil,’ stated another voice.

A short, old man with round spectacles stepped into view. He wore a bloodied apron over a neat shirt. His wild white hair made him look half-mad, but there was something about his face, a certain familiarity that reminded him of Jaime.

*Doctor Georges... He’s aged so much.*

‘You’re lucky to be alive, very lucky. What in god’s name were you thinking boy?’ the doctor said, peeling off his apron. ‘Running into a pack of armed lads with nothing but some rocks and your fists? That’s not bravery, that’s

stupidity.’ He shook his head and muttered, more to himself now. ‘Utter insanity.’

‘Why did you attack them, Alistaire?’ Julien added on. ‘It’s not like you.’

*Why did I attack them?* The question perplexed him. He had thought against it in the beginning, and so why...?

*No... I remember now. They attacked my honour, the sanctity of my family. I would do it all again.*

‘I...I. No t — they.’ He paused. How could he express this to them? He could not.

His eyes drifted over to Amélie, who was still standing next to the table, away from him. She averted her eyes when he looked at her.

‘I — I don’t know. Just the things they said about... me.’ He lowered his voice. ‘It ticked me off,’ he let out with malice lingering in his voice.

Immanuel tisked. ‘I never knew you were so hot-headed, twelve years your friend and you still surprise me every day.’

The old doctor pushed past Immanuel and interjected. ‘You’ll live... for now. Though that left arm of yours will never work the same way. Not left-handed, are you?’ he asked, stepping closer to inspect his arm.

‘No, I’m not,’ Alistaire said, lifting his right hand.

‘This means you can’t fight in the tournament anymore!’ Camélie exclaimed, covering her mouth. ‘You’ve been talking about it so much...’ She added, frowning.

‘No, I’m still going,’ he said, remembering his terrible dream.

The doctor scoffed. ‘Do you want to die so soon boy? Do you know how much blood you’ve lost already? Look at this,’ he said, pointing at his bloody apron. This is your blood. You need rest, plenty of it. At least a year or two. I know you youngsters think you’re immortal, but believe me, you’re not. If that wound opens up again, or if it becomes infected, then you really might die. Only time will tell now,’ the doctor noted grimly.

His siblings gasped, and even Immanuel clenched his jaw.

But Alistaire was unfazed. He would not die. He would live through this, and he would lead his family towards the riches they deserved.

‘The tournament is still six months away. This wound will heal, and if not, I’ll fight one-handed,’ he declared, a fire burning in his eyes.

‘Bah! Nonsense, I hope the others can talk you out of these delusions,’ the doctor said, throwing his arms up in frustration and turning to leave the room.

Immanuel put a hand on the doctor's shoulder. 'Don't worry Mr Georges, Alistaire likes to make us laugh from time to time to lighten up the mood, you know?'

'This is no time for laughs! I need to rest now,' he said, swatting Immanuel's hand away. 'Stopping a burst artery is no simple task,' the doctor muttered, wiping his brow. 'You were minutes from exsanguination. I managed to clamp the brachial just in time, then packed and sutured it without anaesthetic. Be glad you were unconscious. And I did all this with no team!' He groaned, letting out his frustrations, as he hobbled out of the room. 'No more miracles tonight.'

'Ah...eh, yes. Thanks Doc,' Alistaire replied, struggling to comprehend his words.

'We appreciate your help doctor,' Camélie stepped in, a worry in her eyes. 'But will my brother be alright now?'

The doctor was at the threshold of the door leading to the living room. He paused and looked back, a darkness in his eyes. 'I said before. Only time will tell.'

*Why is everyone so worried? Do they not know me? Have they forgotten who I am? Even if my arm was completely severed, I would not stop. I would rise.*

Alistaire looked over to Immanuel. 'How long have I been asleep?'

Immanuel looked at him, his expression unreadable. 'A long time, I don't know when you went down, but I'd say

around five hours. The other boys were here as well, but you know, they have lives to live, so I told them to come see you tomorrow.'

'My sword, where is it?' Alistaire asked, subconsciously feeling for a hilt beside his hip.

'I had a few of the boys go back to get it. Luckily, it seems Jean's gang left it behind. I don't think you killed any of them, if you had, well, shit, we'd be in some trouble,' Immanuel said, finding a chair to sit on.

'We have to be careful now, I've started a war, Jean's part of the district opposite the Anese, isn't he? They're a serious group, and even though Jean's just a lowly henchman, they'll still want us to pay with blood for what I've done.' He looked over at his siblings. 'I'm sorry for all of this.'

Julien looked back at him directly. 'No Alistaire, we'll follow you wherever you want to go. It doesn't matter if a war starts, we'll all fight beside you.'

'That's right,' Immanuel said, his arms folded.

A brief tension settled over them as they all pictured how a war with a rival gang might unfold. Street feuds were nothing new to them. It was common to have disputes over turf, quarrels over tribute, the odd brawl from time to time with boys from other districts. But this... this was different. They'd never gone to war with an

organised crime group before. Despite this, Alistaire was prepared — however it might play out, he would face them head-on. And, with his intellect and skill, he would defeat them.

Immanuel snickered all of a sudden and let out a sly grin directed towards Alistaire. ‘You know that girl...’ he paused and looked around the room. ‘Wait, actually, don’t worry. I’ll tell you about it later.’

Alistaire smirked. ‘Why do I get the feeling I already know what you’re going to sa — argh!’ he screamed out in pain. The searing pain from before was returning to his left arm. He grabbed it with his right arm to try to ease it, but this only made it worse. He looked at Immanuel, gritting his teeth. ‘Tell everyone to leave. I — I want to talk.’

Immanuel nodded. ‘Everyone, Alistaire needs to rest for a bit, would you all mind waiting outside for him?’ he said as he looked at Julien, nodding to him.

Julien understood and began ushering the others out. Lucas ran to his side immediately while the girls still lingered. Julien glanced back at Alistaire with a furrowed brow — something was clearly weighing on his mind, though he said nothing. He then called for Charline, who was still beside Alistaire, clinging to his side. She tried to hug him one last time, but Camélie was already there,

gently pulling her away. At the door, Julien looked back once more, clenched his fist, then stepped out into the hall.

Amélie lingered. She stood in the doorway, eyes fixed on the floor. She didn't speak. After a moment, she stepped out too, leaving only Alistaire and Immanuel.

Immanuel moved to close the door behind them, then pulled a chair across the floor and turned it backwards before sitting on it. He rested his arms on the top and met Alistaire's gaze.

'Alright,' he said. 'What's this about?'

Alistaire leaned forward, the light of the oil lamp flickering in his eyes.

'The plans for war.'

'I thought so,' Immanuel said, pulling a cigarette from his pocket. He lit it with a flick of his lighter, then paused to blow out a slow stream of smoke. 'Tell me something,' he said, puffing the cigarette. 'Why did you go after them?'

The rage he had felt earlier returned along with the pain in his arm. It filled his entire being and clawed up his chest and throat.

'That fucker Jean... had his way with Amélie,' Alistaire uttered with malice. 'I wanted to kill him, and I would've, if not for his fucking pals. Still — at least I won.' He glanced down at his bandaged arm. 'If you can even call this a win.'

Immanuel looked away. ‘Winning like this huh? There’s a phrase for this, but I forgot what it was. Anyway, so you were serious about the tournament. You actually still want to compete?’

‘Of course I do. I — ’ Alistaire stopped himself. He felt like a boy making excuses to an adult.

Immanuel continued. ‘The doctor’s right, you know. You could die.’

‘I could die today, tomorrow, the day after, or any other day. What makes dying in the arena any different?’ He looked directly at Immanuel now. ‘At least there, I’ve got a shot. A real chance at m — our dream.’

Immanuel exhaled, the smoke curling around the corners of his lips. ‘Our dream...’

Alistaire wiped the sweat from his brow. The room was thick with heat — a humidity that made him shift uncomfortably in his seat.

‘More than anything... I want to live like a noble,’ he said, his voice rising. ‘Not just me — everyone. Why the fuck should luxury and comfort only belong to them? Why?! I’ll rise, I swear it. I’ll rise, and I’ll take you all with me.’

Immanuel let out a quiet laugh. ‘You’ve always been like this. Since we were kids. Dreaming up things most men wouldn’t dare think. Some would call your ambitions

impossible... but I'm glad you're still the same. I was worried this incident would change you.' He reached up and scratched at the long, jagged scar across his jaw. 'Getting cut changes a man.' He dropped his hand and looked at Alistaire. 'The ones who did this to me —'

Alistaire already knew.

'They're across the Anese,' Immanuel continued. 'Not just Jean. You understand that, right? What we're walking into isn't a skirmish with some fool. We're heading straight into Ishmael's world.'

'Ishmael.' Alistaire winced slightly, the pain in his arm throbbing again. 'For someone I've never met, I've sure heard a fuck-load about him.'

'There's a reason for that,' Immanuel's tone hardened. 'We're lucky, Alistaire. No real gang has claimed our district, which is the only reason we're even standing at the top of it. But on his side? The Red Vipers run everything — and somehow, he's still above them. They answer to him.' Immanuel leaned forward. 'He's dangerous. More than you think. And in some messed-up way... you two are alike.'

'So what, he wants to rise too?' Alistaire asked, squinting at him.

Immanuel didn't smile. 'He did, and now he already has. Now he wants more.' His eyes were dead serious. 'Domination du monde.'

Alistaire blinked. Then snorted. ‘World domination? Hah. That’s a bit — ’

Immanuel stood, letting the cigarette fall to the floor. ‘I’m serious, Alistaire. Don’t take him lightly.’

The sharpness in his voice startled him.

‘You’ve never looked this afraid,’ Alistaire muttered. ‘Who the hell is Ishmael, really?’

Immanuel paused.

‘A man you should also learn to fear.’

‘Well, I don’t know if I can say I will. But I’ll try to be on guard,’ Alistaire said, trying to lighten the mood. ‘Anyway, what was that thing you were about to say earlier?’

Immanuel’s face brightened. ‘You know that girl you’ve been trying to woo? Louise? She visited earlier when she heard what happened to you.’

‘No way, I thought we were done. So she still wants me huh?’

Immanuel laughed. ‘Either that, or she wanted Doctor Georges. I’m not sure which is more likely.’

‘Oh please, it’s obviously me,’ Alistaire said smugly.

‘Is it though? Doctor Georges does have a way with his hands,’ Immanuel replied with a crooked grin.

Alistaire laughed alongside his friend, and for a brief moment, the air in the room loosened — however, that

didn't last. A knock sounded at the door, suddenly catching their attention. They both glanced over, and after a moment of silence, the door slowly opened. Instinctively, they tensed, bracing for whoever was about to enter the room. They relaxed when they saw that it was only the doctor.

'Still awake, good. Now you can tell me who's going to pay for all the trouble I went through to save your life,' the doctor said, irritation thick in his voice.

Immanuel scowled. 'Ah, doc, can't you say you did it out of the goodness of your heart? Must you really charge us poor peasants?'

'The goodness of my heart won't feed my family,' the doctor shot back. 'I need money. How will you pay?'

Alistaire straightened his back. 'Mr Georges. I'll pay you, don't worry — right after I win the tournament.'

'Bah! You'll never win. And even if you somehow did, the tournament is six months away. I can't wait that long. Better you two start working now and pay me in portions each week. You'll also have to pay for the medicine I'm about to give you, and for every bandage change.'

Alistaire smiled. 'Thank you, Mr Georges, for saving my life. I'm truly grateful. I have great respect for men of learning like yourself who choose to serve the poor and live modestly, rather than bow to the rich and live as they do. I

have nothing to give you now, but I'll take your advice and start working. Believe me — in time, I'll repay you tenfold.'

The messy-haired doctor stared at him. 'Tenfold you say, huh? Well, I'll be holding you to that word.'

Alistaire shifted uncomfortably. 'Well... maybe not actually tenfold — that was just an expression, you know. And don't worry about the medication. They're just painkillers, right? I can live without them.'

The doctor blinked at him, rapidly and incredulously. 'No painkillers? That's madness. You seem convinced you know best, so I won't waste my breath.'

Immanuel leaned toward the doctor and murmured something out of earshot.

Alistaire smirked. 'What are ya saying there?'

'Nothing, nothing. Anyway, I think you should rest. Sleep's the best medicine. Isn't that right, doc?' Immanuel quipped.

The doctor glanced up, eyes narrowed. 'No, it really isn't.' He hobbled over and inspected Alistaire's arm. 'Hmm... and where exactly are you sleeping tonight?'

'Where I always sleep. At home,' Alistaire replied nonchalantly.

'Then I'll make you a sling. Your bones aren't broken, but it's better to keep your arm still than have it swinging around.'

Alistaire gave a half-nod. ‘Alright, but uh...is this... of additional cost?’

‘This one’s free,’ the doctor said, shaking his head as he went to fetch his materials.

Immanuel watched him go, arms folded, his eyes fixed on Alistaire with a trace of amusement. When the doctor was gone, his tone changed. ‘So... what do we do about Ishmael?’

‘Send a few of the boys across the river. Have them watch the place. I doubt Ishmael will move on us right away. We need to make contact — see what he’s after. Tell the boys to leave a message that gets to him. “Let’s talk. Southern canal. Morning. One week.”’ He rubbed a hand on his chin. ‘What do you think?’

Immanuel nodded, eyes down in deep deliberation. ‘Sounds good. Who should I send?’

‘Send ones who won’t get noticed.’ He paused. ‘Marque and Henri. And — ’ He clenched his teeth, the sharp pain in his arm cutting him short.

His friend looked at him worriedly. ‘Alistaire. You sure you’re going to be alright? That cut is pretty bad.’

*Alone, without ever rising up the social hierarchy.*

‘I’ll be fine. Let’s just focus on what we’re going to do for now,’ Alistaire said, masking the pain still threading through his body.

The door swung open before Immanuel could answer. Mr Georges stepped in quickly, leather sling in hand. He looped it over Alistaire's shoulder and adjusted it under his arm with practiced care. However, even the smallest movement sent a jolt of pain through his arm, even still, he gritted his teeth and let the doctor work.

A few minutes later, the doctor was done and told him he could go. Immanuel braced his shoulder, helping him off the metal bed. Alistaire struggled to move — his whole body sore in places he didn't know could ache. The pain in his arm pulsed outward and took root in every joint. He limped forward, leaning on his friend for support, the two of them inching their way to the coat hanger. They slipped on their shoes, then their coats, then Immanuel helped him ease the sleeve over his bad arm before holding the door open. They offered the doctor a word of thanks, who replied with a low, distracted mumble.

They crossed the living room on their way out. His siblings were nowhere to be seen. Alistaire assumed they had probably made their own way home. Looking around, he noticed that the doctor's place was far nicer than his own. Yet he took pains in the thought that even this was nothing in comparison to the opulence the nobles lived in. Even here, in these modest comforts, Alistaire felt the sting.

*One day, one fucking day, I will have it all.*

Immanuel led him to the couch by the fireplace. Alistaire dropped into it — more a collapse than a sit — and instantly regretted it as his left elbow struck the armrest.

‘Putain!’ he screamed out in pain.

Immanuel laughed and slouched onto the couch beside him, only to spring up a moment later as if something had come to his mind. ‘Jaime’s still asleep, I think. I’ll go wake him,’ he said, glancing toward the stairs.

Alistaire nodded and sank deeper into the couch. He leaned his head back and looked up at the ceiling, at the large wooden beams supporting the roof. His good hand ran over the leather couch, and he noted how comfortable it was. *Much better than the piece of shit I sleep on at home. I have to get myself one of these.*

He lifted his right leg to cross over his knee, the way he usually sat, but lowered it when he felt a sting in his left arm. Leaning back, he closed his eyes. The sharp crackle of logs pulled him back. He sat up straighter before hunching before the fire, watching the flames twist and dance. There was something deeply hypnotic about it. Its warm glow emitted to him a mixture of both pure happiness and profound sadness. The dream returned to him, and, for a moment, the face of the green-eyed woman appeared in

the flame, slyly grinning at him. He reached out with his right hand, and the illusion dispelled.

It was nothing, just the flame, just his imagination.

He clenched his fist and kept his gaze fixed on the flames.

The creak of the stairs drew Alistaire's eyes. Immanuel was coming down with Jaime, who looked as though he'd been dragged from bed. He scrubbed his brown hair, yawning and stretching as he descended. His face illuminated when he saw Alistaire on the couch.

'Alistaire! You bastard! I thought you had died,' Jaime exclaimed as he ran forward to embrace him.

Alistaire put his hand forward. 'Easy, Jaime. I'm a cripple now.'

This didn't stop him. Jaime pulled Alistaire into a careful embrace, minding the injured arm. 'You have to tell me everything so we can get back at those low lives.' He stepped back with a grin. 'Oh, do ya know? Louise was here earlier.'

'Ha, I know. Immanuel's already told me,' Alistaire said, smiling.

Immanuel came up behind Jaime and rested an arm on his shoulder, lazily pointing at Alistaire. 'He's good with women, isn't he?'

Jaime laughed. 'No, I'm better. Alistaire's good, but he's second to me. Can't be the best at everything pal.'

Alistaire fell back on the couch, careful to not bump his left arm. 'You? Better than me? I think my frère, Lucas, gets more girls than you.'

'Ah, maybe. You're right, Lucas is the best, but I'm still se — ' A sound at the door cut him off. Someone had come up the stairs outside. All three turned, their cheerfulness gone in an instant. Jaime reached for a metal fire prodder shaped like a fork beside the fireplace and began edging toward the door. 'It's one in the morning... who the hell would be coming here?'

Immanuel crept toward the door as well, taking the opposite side. He put his hand lightly on the handle and looked at Jaime, they nodded as one prepared to pull the door open and the other to strike. But then a voice called from outside.

'Ah... is anyone still awake?'

It was a woman's voice — Louise's voice. The tension broke at once, and both men eased their stance. Alistaire rose, crossing the room. Jaime gave him a tap on the back as he passed, then dropped onto the couch. Alistaire threw him a sly grin. Jaime chuckled and shook his head.

Then another knock. 'Hello? Anyone awake?'

Alistaire opened the door. Louise stood there, her hand still holding the knocker, her face caught between surprise and relief.

‘A — Alistaire,’ she breathed.

He smiled. ‘Want to come in? It’s cold out.’

‘Yeah... sure,’ she said, breathing out cold mist.

Louise’s curly brown hair and pouty lips, coupled with her round face and large eyes, gave her an odd mix of fragility and seduction. Her family were still new to the city, they had migrated from the countryside, chasing a better life. Alistaire had been with her once, but after that, their relationship thinned out into nothing. Now, she seemed to want him again.

They stepped inside and settled by the fire with Jaime and Immanuel. She pressed him with questions, one after another, and he answered each without much warmth. *Stop asking me this shit, I just want to go home.* His reprieve came when the doctor strode in and, without ceremony, told them all to get out — his own son included.

*That kind old man.* Alistaire saw straight through the façade. The doctor’s gruffness, his selfish talk — none of it hid the truth. Underneath, he was as selfless as they came. Sending Jaime out with him was no dismissal — it was deliberate. That was also why he had sent Jaime to sleep early — so he could stay up all night observing Alistaire.

Outside, the cold bit at his skin but somehow eased the throbbing in his left arm. They walked together toward Louise's house, not far from the doctor's. She clung to his right arm and leaned her head against his shoulder.

'Alistaire, be careful... please. You really could have died,' she murmured, her breath warming his sleeve.

*From ignoring me to leaning on my shoulder... maybe the secret to getting girls is pretending to die.*

'Alistaire!' she said again, looking up at him.

'Sorry, I was just thinking about something.' He smirked to himself. 'So, Louise, why did you walk out by yourself to see me at this hour? I don't know about the countryside, but in Hestrisis, late nights aren't exactly safe, especially for women.'

She shot him a glare. 'Do I need a reason? I just wanted to see if you'd died yet.'

He heard laughter in the back. Immanuel and Jaime had clearly heard what she'd said. Alistaire gave them a sharp look, then turned back to her. 'That's cold. I thought you came because you cared.'

Louise didn't give a clear response and continued to bury her face into his shoulder. Shortly after, they reached her house. He walked her to the door while she dug for a key in her pocket. She unlocked it, glanced back, and said goodbye before disappearing inside. Alistaire turned

toward his friends with a grin, but the door creaked open again.

‘Alistaire — when you get better, we should go somewhere together.’

He smiled, ruffling his hair. ‘Su — ’ The door slammed shut before he could finish.

Jaime and Immanuel laughed with him as they made their way back.

‘Women... I’ll never understand them,’ Jaime said, helping Alistaire along.

‘Yet you’ll also never stop wanting them,’ Immanuel retorted.

After a slow walk, Alistaire pushed the pace. Immanuel called him reckless, Jaime complained, but he ignored them. He just wanted to get home and think of something other than the sharp pain flaring in his arm. He was relieved when they finally arrived at his street. Before turning into the alley, they crossed towards Immanuel’s house, which was on the larger road. Jaime leaned his hand on Alistaire’s right shoulder and called out to Immanuel, ‘Hey — before you go, tell me. You think he’s serious about this one?’

Immanuel smirked. ‘Alistaire? He’s not serious about anything. He wants a princess. He’s got his eyes set on

Adeline. Louise? She's just a passing thought. Isn't that right, Al?

Alistaire could really feel the pain boiling up in his arm, but he tried his best to smile. 'Who doesn't have their eyes set on Adeline? Not only is she beautiful, but she's also a free ticket to kingship,' he replied, 'and Louise isn't bad, but you're right Immanuel, I have higher aspirations.'

'We're told she's beautiful, but who really knows. Have you ever seen her?' Immanuel retorted.

'Maybe she's hideous, you never know.' Jamie nodded in agreement.

'I've seen her, she's beautiful,' Alistaire declared.

'No you haven't,' Jamie quipped.

'When?' Immanuel asked with genuine curiosity.

'In my dreams,' Alistaire replied flatly.

Silence stretched, before they all burst into laughter, holding each other for support.

'You bastard,' Immanuel laughed loudly, holding his stomach and resting his other hand on Alistaire's good shoulder.

As their laughter died down, echoing through the empty streets, Jamie squinted his eyes, facing Alistaire. 'So, tell us seriously, what're you gunna do with Louise then?'

'Don't know, I'll just see how it goes, I guess,' Alistaire replied nonchalantly.

‘Alright, you bastard — just don’t break her heart. I’m off to bed,’ Immanuel said, waving them off as he headed inside.

At Alistaire’s house, he knocked, and Julien opened the door. Everyone was still awake except for Charline.

‘Thanks for the company,’ Alistaire told Jaime.

‘Nothing to it,’ Jaime replied, wandering toward the kitchen. Alistaire looked around the living room for Amélie and saw her huddled in a blanket looking into the fire. *Amélie...*

‘Hey Alistaire, where do you keep the glasses?’ Jaime called from the kitchen.

Alistaire turned to face his friend, but his sister Camélie interjected, ‘I — I know where it is, I’ll show you,’ she said, rushing to stand from her bed.

Jaime smiled and nodded. ‘Thank you.’

Alistaire narrowed his eyes. *Better not try anything Jaime...*

Spotting his youngest brother standing idly on the stairs, Alistaire called out to him. ‘Lucas, you should go to sleep now,’ he told him.

Lucas nodded nervously, still clearly shaken by what he had seen.

Julien was further up the staircase, resting both his arms on the slanted railing. He met Alistaire’s gaze, nodded, and

waved Lucas up. They then both trudged upstairs to sleep on their hammocks in the attic.

Amélie was already asleep and turned away from him, the covers wrapped tightly over her as she nestled next to Charline. Camélie followed shortly after helping Jaime with a glass.

Later, after some idle talk about Louise and other passing nonsense, Alistaire stretched out on the couch by the fire. Jaime, just as he'd suspected, stayed awake on the opposite side of the room, keeping a steady eye on him.

The pain in his arm deepened with each hour, and a fever slowly crept alongside it. He drifted in and out of sleep, stirring awake each time a sharp sting ran through him.

The fire crackled softly beside him. Shadows moved along the walls, and outside, the rain had turned to mist. By the time his eyes closed again, the line between fever and thought had vanished, and he could no longer tell if he was dreaming or still awake.

\*\*\*

The following days passed much the same. Jaime stopped coming by, his father having deemed Alistaire no longer in danger. It offered little solace. Alistaire had never doubted he would recover. His mind was fixed elsewhere.

*The tournament.*

Immanuel arrived the next morning with a packet of painkillers. After interrogating him, Alistaire found out that he had been slipping them into his drink each day. He had gotten them from the doctor.

*So that's what he was talking to the doctor about.*

Even so, the painkillers did little. The ache in his arm worsened with each day. His only relief was sleep, but even that came hard. The pain was relentless, but worse than that was the gnawing worry that plagued his thoughts. He couldn't rest while imagining his siblings alone.

Yet somehow, they managed.

Camélie and Charline stayed close, tending to him, keeping him company. Their presence was comforting. The other three went out to procure food and supplies. He was worried for their safety now that hostilities with Ishmael's lot had begun. Thankfully, they returned each day without commotion.

He had lost all appetite. For two days, he had eaten nothing. Though it worried his siblings, he took it as a small mercy — more food for them.

The pain itself was terrible, but bearable. What tormented him more was the time he was losing. Time he could not spend with his sword. He felt himself slipping further from the edge he had worked so hard to reach.

His frustration grew.

Twice, he snapped at his sisters, shouting over small things — cold food, a misplaced cloth. He hated himself for it the moment the words left his mouth, but the guilt never stopped him from doing it again.

*I can't stay like this for much longer — otherwise, I will wither away and rot on this couch.*

More days passed, and though his health improved, it was only by the slimmest margin. When Immanuel came to visit, he reminded Alistaire of the meeting they had planned with Ishmael. Reluctantly, Alistaire forced himself to rise from bed. Dressing proved near impossible. His body would not obey him. Even lifting his arm took effort, and walking was a battle of will. His siblings helped him into his clothes, and when he finally stepped outside, he saw all his friends waiting.

A pounding headache throbbed behind his eyes, and every step sent pain lancing through a body still weak from days in bed. Still, as he emerged, leaning heavily on Jaime for support, his friends greeted him warmly. Including him, they made seven. Each wore a patchwork coat, the garb of

poor young men. Christopher, the Alban boy, eyed him with concern and said that he looked too sick to be out here, much less going to a meeting that could change everything. Chris suggested that they go without him. A few others seemed to agree.

Alistaire refused. 'We can't show them that I'm too ill to appear. They'll take it as a sign of weakness. I'm going.'

Their numbers gave them an aura of intimidation, and onlookers looked away as they waltzed through the street. Merchants lowered their voices. Commoners stepped aside. And when they reached the canal, they made it to the meeting point unchallenged.

But no one was there.

So they waited.

*Where are they? I was looking forward to seeing what Ishmael looked like.*

Samuel, a local like them and a close friend of Jaime, wandered off to scout the area. Minutes later, he came sprinting along the canal edge, waving his arms and yelling. At first, they watched him, puzzled and half-amused. But amusement faded when they caught his words.

'The guards are here! The guards are here! Run! Run!'

They all stood at once.

Alistaire turned to the others. 'We split. Meet back at my house.'

They nodded, but Jaime stepped forward. ‘What about you? There’s no way you can outrun them.’

‘I’m not planning on running,’ he said, breath short. ‘I’ll hide.’

Immanuel cursed under his breath. ‘Are you stupid? Hide where? No. You’re coming with me.’

Before Alistaire could protest, Immanuel and Jaime grabbed him and dragged him forward. The rest stood still, buying time. Alistaire tried to turn back, to stop them, but his body wouldn’t listen. He shouted over his shoulder, rage and desperation clashing in his voice.

‘This is what Ishmael wants! You fucking idiots, run! Leave me!’

He didn’t see what happened to them.

Back at his house, tension hung like a storm cloud. He waited, heart hammering, until one by one, they all arrived. Safe.

Immanuel paced the room. ‘Bloody Ishmael. He has no honour! He set us up. There was never going to be a meeting.’

Christopher studied Alistaire, who looked barely alive. ‘What now? We can’t risk another move. Not while Al’s like this.’

‘Chris’s right,’ Jaime added. ‘You need rest. You look dead.’

Alistaire nodded at his friends, then hobbled inside. He was feeling worse and worse and could barely stay on his feet. Julien was inside and helped him to his couch–bed. He lay down and tried to fall asleep. Just after drifting off, he was jolted awake. His vision was blurry, but he could make out Jaime’s distinctive long brown hair.

‘Jaime, what the fuck. I just fell asleep.’

‘Just fell asleep? It’s been four hours, you idiot,’ Jaime said, sitting on the adjacent couch and rummaging in his pocket. He pulled out a small glass container and handed it over. ‘Here, you need to take this. The painkillers Immanuel gave you were fake. My father really wants to stop you from going to the tournament.’

Anger rose in Alistaire. ‘What? Who the fuck does your father think he is?’

‘He’s just looking out for you, Alistaire. No one expects you to go to the tournament. It’s madness. You can barely stand,’ Jaime said.

Alistaire didn’t have the energy to argue. He slumped back into the bed and nodded. He pointed to the table next to him. ‘Just place it there. I’ll take it later.’

‘No, you’ll take it now. I’ll go get some water,’ Jaime said, heading toward the kitchen. He returned moments later with a glass. Alistaire sat up and took the medicine. He muttered a quiet thanks before falling back asleep.

\* \* \*

Alistaire woke from a long sleep. Around him, his siblings were still curled up in blankets, their breaths slow and even. No one had awoken yet. He tilted his head back lazily, gazing at the high ceiling above. Then he raised his arms in front of his face. His left arm moved with slightly more control than before. He could wiggle his fingers now — weakly. His right arm felt stronger, almost steady.

*Finally, he thought, I'm starting to feel better.*

From the girls' bed, he heard the faint rustling of someone sitting up. He turned his head and shut his eyes. Through flickering lashes, he watched Amélie rise and shuffle sleepily toward the bathroom, clothes in hand. Minutes later, she returned with her hair tied up and a fresh dress on, a focused, resolved expression settling over her face. She moved to the front door, paused, glanced back at her sleeping siblings, then slipped out and closed the door behind her.

Alistaire rolled from bed. His joints protested, but he forced himself up anyway. As he dressed, he noticed just how much strength had returned to him. Not nearly enough, but more than the past week — that was something.

*Where are you going, Amélie?* He wondered, stepping outside. The air was cool, the street quiet. At the far end, he caught sight of Amélie rounding the corner. He jogged

stiffly until he reached it and spotted her walking with purpose deeper into the city. He followed at a distance.

His tension eased when he saw her going to the market. She stopped at a stall and began talking to the vendor. Alistaire drifted toward a nearby stand and pretended to browse the vegetables. He turned his head just slightly. The shopkeeper she was speaking to was a young man, too eager in his tone, too animated in his gestures. And Amélie — clever Amélie — played along with a sweet smile while subtly slipping potatoes into her bag.

Alistaire sighed and stepped beside her. She jumped.

‘Alistaire!’

He gave the young shopkeeper a certain smile as he moved her aside to look down at the potatoes himself. The man faltered, then turned away and busied himself with crates at the back.

Amélie pulled him aside. ‘What are you doing here? You should be in bed.’

‘I saw you leave. I wanted to know where you were going.’

‘I always go to the market early. The fresh stuff gets taken if I wait any longer.’

He looked at her closely. There was so much of their mother in her face — the same softness, the same natural charm. A dangerous thing for a girl in their world.

‘Is that the only reason?’

She smirked. ‘Well, it’s also easier to steal when the market’s just opening. Most shopkeepers are usually too busy setting up to keep an eye on other things.’

‘That’s a good reason, I suppose,’ he murmured, eyes drifting past her to a crowd gathered further up the road.

A Lucerian priest stood atop a wooden platform, robe heavy with dust and fraying at the hem. His voice rang thinly down the street, pleading for repentance, for alms, for believers. He raised a hand to the sky, invoking judgement and salvation, but no one listened. His eyes searched the crowd with desperation, yet most walked past without even a glance. Those who lingered did so out of pity or habit, not belief.

Across from him, a man not much older than himself stood atop an overturned crate. His clothes were like theirs — frayed and patched, stained with the dust of the same streets. His voice was hoarse, uneven, but it carried just enough to hold the crowd. Around him stood others, passing out pamphlets, crude flyers calling for the end of nobility, of kings, of inherited power. *Democratia*, rule by the people — these were the words being shouted and handed from hand to hand. The man spoke poorly, but they listened, not for eloquence, but out of exhaustion. Tired of

hunger, of filth, of being stepped on, the crowd listened because they had no one else left to believe.

Alistaire studied both scenes. ‘Funny, isn’t it? The priest speaks of Heaven, and no one gives a shit, the other of bread, and yet he is the only one being heard.’

Amélie nodded, expression unreadable. ‘People don’t want promises anymore. They want change they can see.’

‘And they think this one will give it to them?’

She shrugged. ‘He sounds like them. He looks like them. That’s more than any priest has ever done.’

Alistaire folded his arms. The wind stirred the papers at his feet. He didn’t reach for one. ‘And us? What will we do? Which side will we pick?’

Amélie looked down at the pamphlets fluttering around their feet and picked one up before reading it. ‘The collective must rise against nobility. Sounds grand, but once the nobles are gone, who will rule over us then?’

‘Chaps like him, I suppose.’

‘Is that much better?’

‘Who knows? But still — fuck the nobles.’

‘You always say that Alis, but don’t you want to become like them?’

‘No, not really, I just want to be rich, to have so much money that we don’t need to struggle for it, and so that we can have whatever we want.’

‘And what if we want things which money can’t buy?’

‘What can’t money buy nowadays?’ He scoffed.

‘Family...’ She said, looking back up at him.

*Then why did you go and betray that...* He thought, his mood shifting.

She let out a deep sigh. ‘I don’t know if there’s a side for people like us,’ she said. ‘We’re not nobles. We’re not preachers. We don’t have anything to give except ourselves, and even that feels like it’s been taken already.’

Amélie then let the pamphlet go. It caught the wind and flew far away into the distance.

Alistaire watched her carefully. Her voice wasn’t bitter. It was simply tired. He lowered his tone. ‘You think they’re wrong, then? These revolutionaries?’

She hesitated. ‘I think they’re desperate. Just like everyone else. But I also think when people are desperate, they’ll follow anyone who gives them a reason to shout. Doesn’t matter if the reason is hollow.’

‘And the priest?’

She gave a faint laugh. ‘He’s shouting too. But no one wants to repent when they’re starving. People have learned that prayer does not provide food.’

He turned from the crowd and took a breath. ‘Come. Let’s go somewhere else more quiet.’

She hesitated, sensing the change in the air, but nodded, tucking the stolen potatoes deeper into her satchel.

And together they walked, away from the noise of sermons and slogans, towards the edge of the Anese where no one was speaking at all.

He looked down at the coursing blue waters, then at her, and without hesitation, he spoke. 'Did he force you?'

Amélie didn't answer at first. Her lips parted, then closed. 'Ye — no, not really.'

'What does that mean, Amélie?' he asked, voice tightening.

'I didn't want to, but he didn't care. I could have stopped him if I really tried.' She stopped walking. 'I know why you fought them, Alistaire. But I didn't need you to do that for me. That was stupid of you.'

Anger flared inside him. 'I did it for your honour! That fucking bastard Je —'

She stepped in front of him. 'Stop, Alistaire. Stop. Please.' Her voice broke. Tears welled in her eyes. 'You don't have to do everything for me. For us. I'm a woman now. I can take care of myself, live my own life. I'll make mistakes, sure, but who doesn't? Why can't I sleep with whoever I want? I'm not a princess. We're not royals. There's no prince waiting for his virgin bride. You go out

and sleep with as many girls as you like, you think I don't know?'

He blinked, caught off guard. 'Wha — I don't, and it's not the same! You can't do whatever you want, Amélie, it's different for men and women!'

Tears streamed freely now. 'I did it for us, Alis. Jean's father owns the potato shop across the river. He used to get me a crate every week.'

'So that's where you got it from! I wondered why you never told me!' Alistaire shouted.

She winced, then slapped him hard. He felt the sting reverberate across his face, but he didn't move.

'Alistaire, all you ever think about is yourself, your goals and above all, money! Money, money, money! All you ever think about is your dream. Have you ever thought about my dream? Have you ever once thought about us? Really? Do you even know what I want, what the rest of us want?!' Her voice cracked. She murmured something, but he couldn't make it out. Then, she turned and ran.

'Amélie! Wait!' he shouted after her. His voice shook with rage and helplessness. *What is your dream?!* he shouted internally.

He looked down at the water and saw his reflection, rippling and warped. But the face that stared back was not his own.

It was his father's.

'Fuck!' he growled as he let out a raw scream.

He ran.

He didn't know where he was going, only that he had to move. The streets blurred around him until, somehow, he arrived at the old dock where he had fought Jean the week before. At the end of the road, he saw noble carriages approaching.

*Why are they here so early in the morning?*

Before they drew near, he slipped inside the gate and made his way to the waterfront. The air was still, the smell of rust and brine sharp in his nose. He stepped onto the concrete platform.

*I can't believe this is where it happened.*

Faint stains still marked the ground — his blood. He scanned the area and spotted the broken wooden sticks discarded in a heap. He picked one up and began moving through the motions, sparring with invisible opponents. He replayed it all. Jean's crazed face, the steel blade, the pain. He tested different strikes, shifts, parries.

*I did everything right. Everything — except that last thing. How could I be so stupid? A branch against steel? In the moment, there was no time to think. But next time, I will think. I must. For the tournament. For them.*

He had been practicing for some time, striking at the air with the battered branch, adjusting his footing, his stance, envisioning every attack he had suffered, every mistake.

Then he heard it — a rustle from the bushes.

He froze.

Turning slowly, he faced the sound. From the far edge of the dock, rising from the line where water met land, a figure emerged.

She was unlike anyone he had ever seen.

A noblewoman, that much was certain, but not completely Hestrisi. Her skin was smooth and olive-toned, her dress, Parfaran in cut and colour. She wore an embroidered pink headdress adorned with light-coloured flowers.

Her light hazel hair flowed from beneath the headdress in soft waves, up to her shoulders. It matched the warm shade of her eyes. And her face — her face stilled him. Her face was the most beautiful thing he had ever laid his eyes upon. From her striking jawline, to her full lips, to her skin so flawless it seemed unreal, she was, to his eyes, perfection. Her beauty struck him like a blow.

She paused as she saw him, her expression caught between wonder and uncertainty. Her lips parted slightly, revealing even teeth, then closed again as she placed a hand on the railing up to the platform he was on.

She looked as though she meant to speak, but instead only stood, gazing at him in silence.



Then, she lifted her dress, walking closer to him.

‘Sorry to disturb you,’ she said, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. The movement revealed a teardrop-shaped golden earring.

‘Um, I said I’m sorry to disturb you.’

Alistaire blinked, shaken out of his trance. ‘No — it’s fine. You’re not disturbing anything.’

*What a stupid thing to say.*

‘Good,’ she replied, offering a smile so radiant it seemed divine. ‘Are you... to put it bluntly, are you the man I saw the other day? The one who was terribly hurt?’

‘That — ’ he faltered. ‘Uh, yes. That was probably me.’

*Get your act together.*

‘Has your health improved? Your injury looked horrible!’ she said, stepping closer, her hand lifting gently to her chest. ‘I couldn’t sleep all week. I felt so guilty, letting you leave like that.’

*She was there?*

‘I do feel better,’ he said quickly, suddenly self-conscious about the stick in his hand. He set it down, trying to seem composed.

‘Oh, I’m so relieved!’ she said, exhaling. ‘I wanted to help, but my father wouldn’t allow it.’ She shook her head, then straightened. ‘Forgive me, where are my manners? It is

a pleasure to meet you. I am Duchess Alessandra, daughter of Archduke Elmont and Archduchess Serissandra.'

*Holy shit.*

'Alistaire Cedar,' he said, stiffly. 'Son of... someone, someone.'

*Her mother's name — that explains her foreign looks.*

She froze, likely catching the implication behind his jest, then smiled. 'Apologies. I usually don't converse with commoners. My mannerisms must seem odd to you.'

'And I usually don't speak to nobles, least of all a Duchess. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my Lady,' he said, bowing.

She covered her mouth and laughed, airy and graceful. 'Oh stop, I know you're mocking me.'

He scratched the back of his head. 'Sorry. I don't mean to. It just... comes naturally.'

'Of course,' she replied, still smiling. But her expression softened when her eyes found the sling around his arm. 'Why? No... what happened to you that day?'

'I did something stupid. To defend my sister's honour. And because some bastards stole my sword.' *Why did I tell her everything exactly as it was?*

'Oh my. What happened to them?' she asked, genuine concern in her voice.

*What a saint. She worries for everyone. Even the villains of the story.*

‘They’re not dead, if that’s what you were wondering. Honestly, I don’t know what happened to them.’

‘Though I’m sure your reason was just, please try to refrain from violence. Hestrisis is becoming more dangerous by the day. I don’t want it to get any worse.’

*What an idealist.* ‘I can’t promise that... Alessandra? But I’ll remember your words.’

‘People don’t usually call me by my first name...’ she said, biting her lip, eyes thoughtful.

Before she could continue, he spoke. ‘Oh. Sorry. Duchess.’

She stepped closer, hands raised as if to ward off formality. ‘No, no. I mean you can call me Alyssa. That’s what my close companions call me.’

He blinked, surprised.

She caught herself. ‘I don’t mean to say you are one — we just met. I — I just thought you’d be more comfortable. I mean — you, being a commoner. Not that I meant to offend.’

He laughed. ‘Go on. I’m not offended.’

‘I thought you might feel more at ease calling me Alyssa, since that’s how commoners speak to each other, right?’

Using contractions of their names? Or otherwise informally?’

He couldn't help but grin at her obliviousness of the world. 'No, not all commoners, for example, my friends — sorry, companions — refer to me just by my name. Which is Alistaire. Sometimes Al, if they're feeling frisky.'

'Companions?' she said with a roll of her eyes. 'Sorry — are all commoners as difficult as you?'

He laughed again. 'No. I'm just a particularly difficult one.'

She tried to keep a stern expression, but it cracked, and she joined in his laughter. 'I jest. You're not difficult. You're... surprisingly easy to converse with.'

'I kn — ' He stopped mid-sentence as two guards approached from the dock.

Alyssa turned to follow his gaze. Her posture stiffened when she noticed them too. She ducked low. 'They haven't seen us, have they?'

Her worried face enchanted him, and he stared at her for a while before responding. 'No. Come with me.'

He led her towards the same bushes he had slipped through when he had stalked Jean and his friends. She hesitated, then followed as the guards drew closer. Alistaire could feel the excitement welling up within him. He felt like he was in a dream. A beautiful noble girl was with him,

and he was leading her through the bushes alone. The branches tugged at her dress as she crouched, shielding herself. The sight amused him more than he expected, and he had to fight the urge to laugh.

‘Where does this path lead?’ she whispered as the guards neared the old dock’s edge.

‘Look ahead. Back to your carriage.’

She rose, brushing leaves from her dress. ‘Oh, I see.’

They reached a short ledge. Alistaire leapt down easily, but paused when he didn’t hear her behind him. He turned and saw her hesitating at the edge.

She extended a hand.

He stepped forward, taking her hand in his. *So this is what a noblewoman’s hand feels like. Not coarse. Not rough. Just delicate.*

She looked down, eyes narrowing with caution. Before attempting to descend in the same refined manner as expected of a noblewoman, which he found absolutely hilarious. She tested a small, sloping mound of sand beside the ledge, weighing her step as though it were a ballroom floor.

He waited, knowing that the mound would give way. And when it did, he moved into place.

Alyssa let out a wail and fell. He caught her easily and spun her around to guide her down gently, like wind carrying a feather down a hill.

Flustered, she patted down her dress. 'T — Thank you, Alistaire. I — I really don't do this sort of thing often. As I'm sure you can tell.'

Smirking, he stepped back from her, noting how good she smelt close up. 'Don't mention it.'

Her expression changed as she grew serious. 'You as well, Alistaire. Please don't mention this to anyone. Those guards were sent by my father. He would be furious if he knew that... that — never mind.' She looked back toward the stairs and turned to leave. 'I should go.'

He stood dumbfounded, staring at her in confusion. *Did I do something wrong?*

'Wait!' He called out.

She turned, her dress fluttering serenely in the breeze. 'Yes?'

'Where are you headed? Leaving Hestrisis?' he asked, trying to get her to stay and talk with him a while longer.

'I am. To Parfara, to the capital there. But before then, we will be stopping over at La Belle Île. It's a small island near Albion. My family owns the land. We visit every year. You should visit sometime. There is a garden open to the public.'

*Parfara? I knew it... And she tells me to visit so easily. Instead of inviting me, she suggests I wander through the public parts of her little island. Why not just ask me to your manor?*

He raised his eyebrows. ‘Perhaps I will, my Lady. Though I currently lack the funds to charter across.’

Her lips curled into the most charming smile he had ever seen. ‘Thank you, Alistaire. For the company. I enjoyed it.’ She paused. ‘I will be back for the World Fair. Will you be there?’

He smiled. ‘Be there? I’ll be competing in the tournament that’ll occur then.’

‘Competing? But your arm — surely you jest.’

‘I don’t “jest,” my Lady. I will compete. And I will win.’

She stared at him. ‘You truly mean to risk your life.’

‘I don’t see it like that.’

She gave a wistful smile. ‘Perhaps I’ll see you there. But now, Alistaire, I really must go.’

He stood frozen. *Fuck, think of something. Say something. Do something — or you’ll never see her again. And if you do, it’ll be from behind a golden fence, watching her walk on a pedestal you’ll never be able to reach.*

He stepped forward unconsciously, his foot hitting something on the ground. He looked down and saw a peculiar object. Intricate. Blade-shaped. He picked it up.

Alyssa saw it and gasped. ‘My hairpin!’

She stepped forward to take it, but a voice cut through the air. ‘Alessandra! Where are you?! Your father is worried sick!’

Alyssa turned pale. ‘That’s my mother. Goodbye, Alistaire.’ She turned and ran.

‘What about your hairpin?’ he called, holding it up.

She glanced back. ‘Keep it.’

He stood in silence, watching her go. *She’s so fragile... and yet, so desirable.*

He breathed in the scent she left behind. Flowers, sweet and faint, just like the ones on her dress.

He watched her ascend the stairs, lifting her skirt and hurrying upward. At the top, she paused, turned back over her shoulder, and called out with a bright, unshaken voice. ‘Win the tournament!’

Then she vanished as quickly as she had appeared.

Alistaire waved toward where she had been. ‘Goodbye, Duchess Alessandra. Not only will I win the tournament, but also you.’ He bowed dramatically, then jogged toward the fence he had jumped the week before. This time, he was too weak to climb it. Fortunately, a broken section allowed him to squeeze through. He slipped carefully, protecting his arm.

On the other side, he exhaled. The dock was beside him. Ahead, voices.

‘I was only going to touch the water, Father. I should have told you,’ Alyssa’s voice said, drifting further and further away.

Far off, she stood with her father, surrounded by nobles. Just before she boarded the vessel, she turned and looked his way. She was too far for him to make out her expression, but he could feel that she recognised him.

Then the vessel departed.

Alistaire looked down at the golden hairpin in his palm. Blade-shaped. Ornate. He crouched and clutched it to his chest.

*No way. No fucking way.*

*Did that just happen?*

\*\*\*

He walked back to his house with a wide grin on his face. He had already forgotten about his fight with Amélie. While passing through the market, he heard someone call his name. He turned. It was Louise, smiling happily as she ran toward him, clutching a bag of vegetables to her chest.

‘Alistaire! What are you doing here?’

He smiled back, his joy less about her and more about the lingering glow of his meeting with Alyssa. ‘Nothing really. Just shopping, you know.’

She tilted her head. ‘Shopping? You’re not holding anything.’

‘That’s right. Just got here. Fancy seeing you here — you usually shop this early?’ he asked, stepping a little closer.

‘Yes, of course. It’s the best time to shop, you always get the fresh stuff,’ she said happily.

*Women think alike.* ‘Ah, yes, that’s why I’m here as well. What are you doing this — ’ *Don’t invite her over, you idiot. You’re after Alyssa now. Remember that.*

‘This afternoon?’ she prompted.

‘No... I mean, what are you doing at this time in the market?’ he asked awkwardly.

‘What? I just told you. Wait, aren’t you supposed to be resting? How come you look so well?’ she said, squinting at him.

‘I don’t know. You’d have to ask the good doctor. Seems he finally gave me the right stuff.’ *And meeting Alyssa has made me feel better too.*

‘That’s great! You really look so much better than last week.’

She bit her lip and glanced aside. ‘Do you want to come over for dinner tonight?’

*Do I? Free food I guess... More for the others.* ‘Uh, yeah, sure. Why not.’

‘Great!’ she said, beaming.

He scanned the nearby stalls, hoping to spot Amélie among the crowd, but saw no sign of her. Turning back to Louise, he nodded. ‘So, I’ll see you tonight then.’

‘Bye Alistaire, see you later,’ she said, holding her bag tighter and skipping off.

‘Bye,’ he replied, waving. *Fuck. What game am I playing here? What do I want with Louise? I need to think with my head more instead of my dick. Ah damn, Alyssa... I can’t get you out of my mind.*

To clear his thoughts, Alistaire made his way to Immanuel’s house. When he arrived, he knocked several times and waited. The house was a narrow little thing, wedged between two taller ones, and looked like it might fall apart under a strong breeze.

He knocked again. *Is no one home?*

Just as he was about to leave, the door creaked open. Out from the dim interior stepped Immanuel's frail grandmother, greeting him with a warm smile.

'Alistaire...' she said feebly. 'I haven't seen you for some time.'

Alistaire smiled. 'Hello Ma, is Immanuel at home?'

'No no, he just left to go to work. What happened to your arm? You boys really need to be careful when you play.'

'I promise we will from now on, Ma. Thank you.' He scratched the back of his head. 'I guess I'll be off now.'

'You should come over from time to time. It's been such a long time,' she said again.

'Sure thing. Bye now,' he said to her. *Poor thing, her mind is beginning to fade. I only just came over last week.*

He began jogging towards the shipyard, his pace increasing until he felt lightheaded. *Fuck. I can't push myself too hard yet.*

At the shipyard entrance, he passed two men carrying a large beam. He slipped by without a word and headed straight for the building shed. The clanging noises of the yard were deafening. Alistaire tried covering his ears, then remembered — he could only cover one. *Fuck, my hand.*

Inside the shed, he saw Immanuel hunched over a large tanning rack. Alistaire crept behind him. ‘Hey, son. How you feelin?’ he said in a gruff voice of an old man.

Immanuel turned abruptly as Alistaire ducked behind a shelf.

‘Who the fuck — ? Alistaire, is that you?’

Alistaire couldn’t hold back his laughter. ‘Yeah, it’s me.’ He stepped out.

‘Fuck, I thought I was about to — Wait, how — why the fuck are you here?’ Immanuel asked, standing up.

‘Jaime gave me the right stuff. Anyway, that’s not why I’m here. You won’t fucking believe who I just met.’ His grin stretched wide as he grabbed Immanuel by the shoulders and shook him.

‘Woah, calm down! Where’s this excitement coming from? Did you meet Adeline or something?’ Immanuel asked, half-laughing.

‘That’s pretty goddamn close. I met Duchess Alessandra, daughter of... uh fuck, some important geezer.’

Immanuel burst into laughter. ‘No, you didn’t.’ He brushed Alistaire’s hands off.

‘I’m fucking serious. She even gave me this.’

He pulled the hairpin from his coat pocket.

Immanuel’s face changed. ‘Woah. Is this real? Looks valuable.’

‘Yes, you cocksucker, it is.’

Immanuel squinted, inspecting it. ‘She gave you this, huh? Sure you didn’t just steal it?’

‘She didn’t quite give it per se, she dropped it when she fell on me and said I could keep it after,’ Alistaire replied, laughing.

‘So you’re practically engaged to her then, huh?’ Immanuel said, jeeringly.

Alistaire pushed him lightly. ‘Well, one day maybe, but she did invite me to see her.’ ‘That’s great,’ Immanuel said, smiling. ‘In the same way that she "gave" you her hairpin?’

Alistaire leaned on a rack. ‘Maybe. She’s going to be at the tournament too. After I win, I can see her again.’

Immanuel clicked his tongue. ‘Still going on about the tournament? Alistaire, you’re not well. You shouldn’t go.’

‘Are you my fucking father? I’ll go — at least to see Alyssa,’ he said, winking.

‘If that’s the reason, I don’t object. Now look, my boss will kill me if he sees me talking to you. How’d you get in here anyway?’

‘I just walked in.’ He noticed Immanuel’s confused expression. ‘If you walk in anywhere with intent, you can fool anyone into believing you belong.’

Immanuel considered it for a moment, then shook his head. ‘Another Alistaire quote. Sure thing. Now get out of here. I’ll come over with the boys after work.’

*Ishmael.* ‘I — there’s another thing we need to discuss as well,’ Alistaire said seriously.

Immanuel nodded. ‘I understand.’

He returned home to find his siblings sitting idly. Charline spotted him first and ran over with a shriek of delight, followed closely by Camélie. Both threw their arms around him, astonished to see him in such good health. Alistaire smiled and patted Charline’s head with his good hand, telling her he was healed now and that everything would soon return to normal. But as his eyes scanned the room, his smile faded — Amélie wasn’t there. A slithering unease crept in. He remembered the morning. Turning to Julien, he asked where she had gone. Julien said she’d left earlier, though he didn’t know where.

He chose not to dwell on it and helped with the chores, then passed the time reading a book about famous knights — though it was a chore in itself with only one good hand. The chapter was about Sir Arthur Flavius, a farmer boy who rose to the highest peak of knighthood, Manus Regis of Albion.

*Man. Albion is so cool. They still have those sorts of roles, while everything in Hestrisis is “modernising.” Fuck. That. Take*

*me to the land of knights and ladies. I would rather die in battle than live comfortably working in a factory for the rest of my life.* Alistaire set the book down and stared at the ceiling. *Where are you now, Sir Arthur? Dead perhaps? Laying with some beautiful woman? Or doing something mundane?*

He shifted when the front door opened — Lucas was leaving. ‘I’m gunna go play with my friends,’ his youngest brother said, looking at him for approval.

‘Sure thing, Lucas. Just don’t get home too late,’ he said, smiling warmly.

Moments later, a group of distant voices sounded from outside. Camélie looked worried. Alistaire listened closely for a few seconds, then relaxed. *Must be the boys. Immanuel, you bastard, prompt as ever. How did you manage to gather them all so quickly? What would I do without you?* Alistaire looked back to his sister and assured her it was just his friends before asking her to open the door. She peered out, then smiled.

‘Jaime!’ she shouted. ‘Uh, thank you for making Alistaire better.’

Jaime laughed. ‘That wasn’t me, Camélie. Thank my dad.’

Alistaire stood from the couch. ‘Boys!’ He raised his arm. ‘Let’s go somewhere that isn’t my house.’

Fat-Tom, always holding a biscuit, raised both his eyebrows in surprise. 'Alistaire! You look so much better. Want a biscuit?' he said, lifting it up to show him.

Jaime pushed him aside. 'No, you fat arse, he doesn't want your half-eaten biscuit. Move, you're standing on Camélie's skirt.'

Fat-Tom stepped back quickly. 'Oh, sorry ma'am.'

Camélie smiled at Jaime. 'Thank you, that was kind.'

Alistaire raised a brow at Jaime, then turned to Tom. 'Tommy, it's fine and, she's not a ma'am, she's my little sister. Now, come on, boys.'

Jaime helped him with his coat, then stepped outside with him. Julien came rushing after.

'Frère! Wait,' he called, clutching something in his hand. 'Your cap — it belongs on your head. Take it.'

'You sure? I can probably find another one,' Alistaire said, taking the cap and giving it a brief look.

'No, this one's yours. I'll get a new one, don't worry.'

Once they were ready, the group made their way to the abandoned textile factory. At the yard, Alistaire sat on a log while the others gathered loosely around him.

Samuel, cross-legged on a container, said, 'Kinda chilly. Should we start a fire?'

Immanuel pulled out his lighter. 'Why not? Michael, get some wood.'

Michael, the tall, quiet shoemaker, nodded and went to retrieve the wood they had gathered in a neat pile previously. He returned a moment later and placed it in the pit. Immanuel threw his lighter and Michael caught it. As Michael began to start the fire, Alistaire shifted his attention to everyone in the group.

He sat with his right arm resting on his knee, his hand covering his mouth as he studied the faces around him. *What are they all thinking?* When the fire finally took, Alistaire straightened and spoke.

He asked what they'd been up to over the past week. One by one, they answered. Most of it was familiar — the mounting pressure with Ishmael's gang, the dwindling ease of their operations. Jaime recounted how they'd nearly been jumped while trading across the river. So far, it seemed they'd escaped anything serious.

When Samuel asked what he had been doing, Alistaire gave them the truth — mostly. He'd been bedridden, only venturing out to train in the early mornings. The part about Alyssa he kept to himself. Still, they all listened closely, even Fat-Tom, who halted mid-bite.

Then, with a level voice, he told them he'd be heading into Ishmael's district the next day to broker peace. Samuel, usually relaxed, spoke up immediately — it was too

dangerous, he said. Alistaire didn't disagree. But someone had to go. It was his mess, and he had to clean it.

*Besides, he thought, I want to see what this guy I've heard so much about actually looks like.*

Samuel continued to express his worries. 'Alistaire, my little brother, Henri told me he felt watched the entire time he was there. That district's different — people don't speak, but they see everything. Ishmael's grip on them is tight. If something goes wrong, how the hell are we supposed to get you out? It'll be impossible.' He shook his head. 'I really don't think you should go. I've got a bad feeling about this.'

'I'll be fine,' Alistaire said. 'You still have that pocket-knife you stole? I'll take it with me. They won't expect that.'

Immanuel, leaning on a crate, exhaled a long drag of his cigarette and gave Alistaire a hard stare. 'No. They'll search you. You walk in armed, they'll find it. You can't bring anything.'

Christopher, perched beside Jaime, nodded in agreement. 'Immanuel's right. If they catch you with a weapon, it'll just make things worse.'

Samuel dropped from the crate, agitated. 'You serious, Chris? What if they decide to kill him on the spot?'

Immanuel raised a calming hand. ‘They won’t. There’s no gain in it for Ishmael. He’s not like that. Alistaire will be safe.’

Alistaire nodded. ‘I think so as well. Anyway, what happened to those cartons of tobacco we stole? Have you managed to sell them, Chris?’

Christopher faltered. ‘Ah — uh, n–no, I–I lost them.’

The group erupted in outrage. Immanuel silenced them all by raising a hand, cigarette still burning between his fingers. As the noise died down, Alistaire studied Christopher’s expression.

‘What do you mean, Chris?’ he asked. ‘How did you lose them?’

Chris sighed and covered his face with a hand. ‘I left the warehouse unlocked. Went back the next day and they were gone.’

Samuel kicked the dirt. ‘That’s at least a thousand livres gone!’

Alistaire felt his anger stir but he kept his voice steady. ‘When did this happen?’

‘Uh... a week ago.’

Fat–Tom groaned. ‘You Albans aren’t reliable at all.’

Christopher snapped. ‘Shut the fuck up, fatty!’

‘No, Chris, you shut up. You lost us a month’s worth of earnings,’ Jaime uttered spitefully.

Alistaire tried to speak, but shouting overtook the circle. The chaos only stopped when Immanuel bellowed, 'Quiet, you bastards!' Everyone turned to look at him. 'Let Alistaire talk,' he commanded.

Alistaire took a breath and addressed Chris coolly. 'Why the fuck didn't you say anything earlier? We could've done something. Now it's probably too late.'

'I didn't want to deal with this shit, alright? I knew you'd all react like this. I'm sorry, okay? I'm fucking sorry.'

Alistaire sighed. 'Chris... look, we haven't collected tribute from the local shopkeepers. Why don't you go do that now?' he said, gesturing with his good hand.

Chris looked worried. 'Right now?' he whispered.

'Yes, now,' he said, turning to one he knew he could trust. 'Michael, go with him. Keep him company.'

Michael stood without a word, brushed aside his shaggy dark hair, and waited. Christopher looked hesitant, guilt flickering in his eyes. Still, he rose and moved outside their circle. Yet, he stood there for too long, indecisive. After a flick of Alistaire's hand, Michael approached and firmly took Chris by the arm. The two then disappeared quickly.

Samuel returned to his crate, arms folded. 'I don't trust him. Fucking Alb. No remorse at all.'

Jaime was fiddling with a leaf. He cast it aside and said, ‘No, he’s just like that. I think he made an honest but stupid mistake.’

Immanuel nodded. ‘I’m with Jaime. We shouldn’t be too harsh on him. He’s helped us plenty in the past — this is his first screw-up.’

Samuel leapt off the crate, voice raised. ‘First or not, it’s a big one! That idiot lost at least a thousand livres. He needs to be punished.’

Fat-Tom muttered something unintelligible, still munching a mouthful of biscuit, but clearly sided with Samuel. An uneasy silence settled over the group. All eyes turned to Alistaire, who hadn’t spoken yet.

‘It’s a shame,’ Alistaire finally said. ‘We’ve lost a lot — but we’ll make it back in the tournament.’

The tension broke, exactly as Alistaire had intended. *It’s impossible to find a solution to a problem when there’s emotions in the air.*

Immanuel groaned. ‘Seriously, Alistaire? That’s your solution?’

Jaime laughed. ‘Do you just say whatever comes to your mind? No wonder you’re single.’

Samuel joined in. ‘Says the guy who couldn’t even get Louise to talk to him.’

Jaime shot him a look. ‘That wasn’t me. And even if it was, I’m just being generous. Left her for you, Al.’

Alistaire chuckled. ‘Sure you did.’ Then he turned serious. *Now that the mood is loosened. It’s much easier to talk business.* ‘Look, about Chris — we’ll test him. See where his loyalties really lie.’

‘Test him?’ Jaime asked.

‘Yes,’ Alistaire said, watching their faces. ‘I’ll give him a task. Something important — something I know he’ll fail. Then we’ll see how he handles it.’ *Can’t trust anyone when they’re winning — you only get to know a person’s true character when they’re losing.*

Samuel stepped forward. ‘Ha! Good idea Alistaire! He’ll fuck it up and lie. Then we can be done with him.’

*Why does he hate Chris so much?* Alistaire wondered. ‘Maybe. But we’ll see. Not a word to him about this though, alright?’ He looked specifically at Samuel, whose usual smile had returned. ‘Understood?’

Samuel nodded eagerly. ‘Understood.’

‘What’s the task?’ Immanuel asked.

Alistaire glanced at him with a faint smile. ‘I’ll tell you later. Best if no one else knows.’

Immanuel gave him a nod and took another drag from his cigarette.

‘Alistaire, are you seriously planning on competing in the tournament?’ Jaime asked, arms crossed.

*Last to die, alone and without ever amounting to anything.*

‘How many times do I need to tell you?’ Alistaire muttered, clearly irritated.

‘I heard the Alb princeling, Robert or something, is going to compete too,’ said Fat Tom, rummaging through his bag for another bite.

‘It’s Roderic, dumbass,’ Jaime snapped. ‘And he’s the crown prince. There’s no way he’d show up to compete in something like this. He’ll be attending the fair for sure, but only seasoned warriors and idiots like Alistaire will be competing in the tournament.’

‘Seasoned warriors... Imagine I fight Sir Arthur Flavius,’ Alistaire said with a flicker of excitement. ‘If I knock him down, I’ll be famous.’

‘Yeah, and don’t forget to win us some coin while you’re at it!’ Jaime shouted.

The group bantered long into the evening, the sun sinking deeper beneath the horizon. Alistaire’s thoughts wandered to his siblings and to the thought of a warm home-cooked meal waiting at home. A quiet yearning stirred within him — he longed to return.

‘Boys,’ he said finally, cutting through the noise. ‘I’m meeting Ishmael tomorrow. If something happens to me,

Immanuel's in charge. Listen to him.' His gaze swept over them, steady and commanding. He exchanged farewells and headed home with Immanuel.

As they walked, Alistaire studied his closest friend, and warmth spread through him. He loved Immanuel like a brother — he'd die for him, and he knew Immanuel would do the same.

They had met when they were both nine, at a market fair. Alistaire's mother was still alive then. *Sweet times... The world seemed so bright back then. Now, it's all turned to shit.*

Immanuel had come from Latinum with his extended family — refugees escaping a war that had dragged on for decades and still hadn't stopped. Of all those who came with him, only his grandmother remained. The rest had either moved on or passed away.

Immanuel had been unforgettable from the moment Alistaire had first seen him — dark hair, piercing green eyes, and a scarred face full of mystery. They'd first spoken when they both reached for the same flat cap at a market stall. Immanuel had been dragging along an older girl, probably a relative. While Alistaire was with his mother and little Amélie in tow. The cap sat atop a bronze bust of some fierce-looking man, impossible to miss.

They both grabbed each end at the same time. Alistaire remembered that cold stare Immanuel gave him. Tension

crackled in the air. Then, with one swift tug, Immanuel ripped the cap out of his hand.

Furious, Alistaire lunged at him. They wrestled on the ground until their families separated them. Alistaire had come out victorious, holding the cap high like a war trophy. He remembered waving it smugly while Immanuel glared at him, eyes narrowed in a fury that did not match the frame of a little boy.

Their families had forced them to shake hands afterward. Alistaire had hated it but feared his mother's slap more. Despite the rough beginning, they kept running into each other, for they lived just across the street. And from bitter enemies, they became inseparable friends. Years passed. That bond only deepened.

Immanuel yawned and stretched, shaking Alistaire from his thoughts.

'So, Al, what's this great test for Chris? How're you planning to check his loyalty?'

'No idea,' Alistaire admitted with a crooked grin.

Immanuel laughed. 'I knew it. The moment you said, "best if no one else knows," I thought, he's making this up on the spot, he has no fucking clue what he actually wants to do.'

Alistaire chuckled. 'You know me too well. So, got any bright ideas?'

Immanuel looked up as they neared the old abandoned church. He pointed at its crooked roof.

‘You see that?’

Alistaire craned his neck. ‘What? That busted cross?’

‘Yeah. You remember old man Rob from the Golden Eagle tavern?’

Alistaire tilted his head. *Old man rob... Old man Rob...* ‘Shit. Yeah. Is that old fart still alive?’

‘He is. I dropped by last week.’ Immanuel rubbed his chin thoughtfully. ‘You remember the flag he kept behind the bar — the one he always claimed was a real Ascanian banner?’

‘Of course. That’s all he ever talked about. Bored me to death. You think it’s real?’

‘Eh, I don’t know, probably,’ Immanuel replied, shrugging. ‘Anyway, it doesn’t matter. That’ll be Chris’ task. To get that flag.’

Alistaire let out a laugh. ‘You want him to steal that thing? Fantastic!’

‘It’s locked in a glass case, and Rob’s half-blind, but still sharp as hell.’

‘How’d the busted cross make you think of that?’ Alistaire asked, shielding his eyes from the setting sun that now crowned the church.

‘I was thinking... How good would that flag look fluttering up there? If Chris somehow pulls it off, that is.’

Alistaire pictured it. A grand red–purple–gold flag waving over the crumbling church. He nodded slowly. ‘Yeah. Damn. That’d be something. You should’ve been an artist.’

‘Shut it,’ Immanuel said, slapping him on the back. ‘Focus on tomorrow. Ishmael won’t hurt you. He’s not like the others.’

‘What’s he like then?’

‘You’ll see. Just don’t lose your temper again.’ Immanuel cast a glance at Alistaire’s sling.

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Alistaire pointed ahead. ‘There’s your house. Go to bed, old man.’

Immanuel smirked and stepped to his door. Just before entering, he turned back. ‘Take care, Al. I’ll tell Chris about the task. Leave that to me.’

‘Alright. See you soon, brother.’

Immanuel paused. A shadow crossed his face. He looked down, then slowly back up. His green eyes locked with Alistaire’s — dark, bottomless. Then, he closed the door without a word. Even with it shut, that gaze lingered, as if piercing through the wood itself.

Alistaire stood for a moment, confused. *Why’d he look at me like that?*

A sting on his arm broke the thought. A mosquito. He slapped it, and blood splattered. He wiped the smear and noticed that he could move his left hand better than before. The scab on it was flaking off, revealing a pink scar. *At least it looks good. Something to show the girls, I guess.*

Then, as he walked through the streets back to his home, he began humming a tune his mother used to sing. The melody drifted softly through the crisp night air, which, like always in Hestrisis, smelt faintly of piss. Still, he felt lighter somehow — almost whole.

At the door to his home, he paused as a thought struck him. *Shit, I was supposed to go to Louise's house for dinner.* He opened the door to find only Julien at home. His younger brother was preparing dinner — a warm potato soup with diced green vegetables and a side of fresh bread one of them had stolen that morning. He raised the ladle to his mouth, then paused as he noticed someone was home. He lowered it and greeted Alistaire warmly. Alistaire took off his coat more easily than he had been able to in recent memory and slumped down on the couch.

Craning his neck, he looked back at Julien and asked, 'So, where is everyone? It's getting dark.'

Julien, still focused on his task, replied, 'I don't know where Amélie is, but everyone else is just at the park. They left a while ago, so they should be getting back soon.'

*Amélie*... ‘So Amélie hasn’t been home since morning?’

‘I haven’t seen her since earlier in the day,’ Julien said casually.

‘Alright, I’ll go and fetch everyone,’ Alistaire told his brother, donning his coat. *Where are you, Amélie?*

He adjusted his sling and headed towards the park. At the far end of the street, opposite where Immanuel’s house stood, he spotted his siblings playing on a seesaw. When they saw him approaching, Charline ran to him happily. He hugged her and told them it was time to go home.

Camélie took Charline’s hand and began walking with her. ‘Oh, Alistaire, Amélie is over there, by the way,’ she said, putting a finger to her chin. ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with her — she seems really down.’

Alistaire nodded. ‘Okay, I’ll go talk to her. You guys go on home,’ he said, ducking to look at Lucas hiding under a slide. ‘You too, Lucas.’

‘Oh, fine!’ Lucas said, jumping up and following his sisters.

Alistaire walked down a pebbled pathway and saw Amélie sitting on a swing facing the other way. He sat on a carved stone monument next to the swing. She noticed him and was startled by his sudden appearance.

‘Alistaire!’ she shouted. ‘I...I didn’t expect to see you here.’ Her voice was lower now.

‘Neither did I, sis. Why don’t we go home?’ he said.

‘Alistaire...’ She paused. A few strands of her chestnut hair flowed across her face. She looked at the ground, her features tightening as she fought to hold in her tears. ‘I’m sorry for what I said to you earlier... You care about us, and I understand now that what you did was for me. All I gave you in return was nothing. I should have cared for you better. I should have appreciated you.’

She sobbed and fell onto his shoulder. ‘And I let that bastard take your sword. I shouldn’t have. I’m a terrible sister, not just to you, but to Camélie and Charline. I’m setting them a bad — ’

Alistaire shook his head and interrupted her. ‘Amélie, stop. It’s me who should be apologising. I got us into this mess. I shouldn’t have acted so stupidly.’

‘But you did it for me,’ she said, clutching his shirt, tears welling in her eyes.

‘Yes, I did. But I could have done something better. Now my left hand barely works, and I can’t take care of our family properly.’

‘No. You don’t need to. We can do things on our own now,’ she said, wiping her tears away.

‘I know, and I’m glad. But I can’t be this useless forever. I’ll get us out of this life. I’m tired of always being hungry and afraid.’

She sniffled and straightened her posture. ‘Alistaire...’ she said, holding his hand. ‘We’re not hungry and afraid. Not since you gave us our lives back. I like the life we live.’

That... That struck a chord in him. He was stunned. *I haven’t thought about it like that... she’s right. We haven’t lived so poorly for a while. So why the hell did I think we did? Am I the only one who’s been hungry and afraid? If so, just what am I yearning for?*

He remembered her words again. *All you ever think about is your dream. Have you ever thought about my dream?*

‘Frère?’ she asked, peering at him.

He smiled and looked at her inquisitive brown eyes. ‘Tell me, what is your dream?’

‘My dream?’ She blinked. ‘Well...’ She placed her hands between her thighs and stretched her legs. She shifted on the swing, its chains rattling softly, then stood. Holding the chains, she looked ahead and proclaimed, ‘All I want... is — is for us to live happily like this forever.’

‘Wait, what? That’s it?’ Alistaire replied without thinking.

Amélie gave him a certain look. ‘Yes, that’s it. I know that’s what we all want, but what you said when you woke up at the doctor’s place... that really scared me. We thought you had died, Alistaire. I was so worried. I thought it was my fault. I had to reassure the others you were okay while

doubting my own words and wishing for my lie to be true. Who would look after us if you were gone? When you said you'd go to the tournament in spite of your injuries... it made me so angry. I thought you were throwing your life away. I thought you weren't even thinking about us. But I understand now that you are. You're trying your hardest to give us a better life.'

*Was I thinking of you and the others, Amélie? Or was I just thinking of myself?*

'I... I don't know what to say. You make me out to be much more... selfless than I can admit I really am,' Alistaire said uneasily.

'It's the truth, Alistaire. I've been terrible to you. I feel... like such... a whore. I regret it. I don't want Camélie or Charline to ever go through something like that. I understand now why they call it fatherless behaviour. The girls I know without a father crave a man's attention because they never had it from their own. But I don't have to worry about that with Camélie or Charline because they look up to you like a father. I just need to guide them. Not just them — Lucas and Julien too. Julien is getting older but still thinks like a child. I can't keep going off and doing things on my own. When you're out trying to help us, I need to be home looking after everyone.'

She took a deep breath. ‘Urrgh! How have I been so stupid? Fuck, fuck, fuck!’ she yelled, hitting herself repeatedly in the chest.

Alistaire shot up and grabbed her hand. ‘Stop!’ he said with a sudden fury. He hated seeing his siblings in pain.

She gritted her teeth and seethed. Slowly, the rage drained from her. She sat back down and looked up at him, smiling weakly. ‘I’m going to support you. I believe in you. I know you’ll do great things.’

Alistaire smiled and glanced up at the moon rising on the horizon. *Why am I so blessed with such perfect people around me? Is it because I have nothing else in life?*

He held out his good hand. ‘Come on, we should get back now.’

She took it. ‘Okay...’ she whispered, wiping the tears from her cheeks. She stood, her shoulder brushing his, and walked beside him on the short trip back home.

Along the way, Alistaire reflected that though he hadn’t planned it this way, he was glad that Amélie and Julien had secured honest jobs. From that thought, he resolved that his siblings should live only in the proper world — not the dishonest, criminal world he was sinking into.

He glanced at his sister. ‘So, Amélie, how’s the flower shop?’

She was looking at the ground, hands behind her back. ‘Same as always. Nothing interesting happens. Just the same kind of people come in.’

‘The young romantic type?’ Alistaire teased.

‘Yes, mostly men. We get very few women. I guess women don’t really buy flowers.’

Alistaire laughed. ‘No, they only expect to be given them.’

They paused outside their door.

‘Have you bought anyone flowers?’ Amélie asked curiously.

‘Uh... no, I haven’t. But — ’ *Alyssa*. ‘I plan to.’

‘Oh really?’ Her face lit up. ‘Who’s the special girl? Tell me.’

Alistaire laughed awkwardly. ‘You wouldn’t believe me.’

‘Try me. What’s her name?’ she asked, clinging to his good arm, peering into his eyes — he caved.

‘Her name is Duchess Alessandra, daughter of Archduke Elmont and Archduchess Ser... uh, Serissandra.’

She burst out laughing. ‘Seriously? No, really. What’s her real name?’

‘I told you, you wouldn’t believe me. That’s her name,’ he said.

Her mouth opened in shock. ‘Really?’ Then, seeing his expression, she continued. ‘Oh my god, you’re serious. How did you meet her?’

‘At the docks of all places. She was there the day of the incident. She saw me bleeding and said she felt guilty. When I was back there this morning, she happened to be there again.’

‘Wait, what?! You met her this morning?’ she said, stunned. ‘After arguing with me?’

‘Yeah. I really have to thank you. Without you, I’d have never met her.’ He reached into his coat pocket. ‘She also gave me this hairclip as a memento.’

‘Oh my, what did you two get up to at the docks?’ Amélie teased taking the sword-shaped hairpin from him. She studied it, her eyes widened.

‘This crest... Alistaire, do you know what this is?’

‘Uh, no. Not really. What is it?’

‘It’s the crest of a very powerful noble family. She’s not just some aristocrat — she’s the real deal. Almost royalty. How could you not recognise it? It’s everywhere in the upper parts of town. At the entrance to the botanical gardens and the royal fairgrounds.’

He examined the crest. ‘I’ve never noticed it. I don’t really look at things like that. Wow,’ he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Amélie crossed her arms and studied him. ‘I can see that you actually like her. But don’t get your hopes up. There’s no way you have a chance. Girls like her always go for high–up nobles or are already promised to one.’

‘She’s different. I know it,’ he said dreamily. ‘The brief time I spent with her was magical. I think this girl is the one.’

Amélie laughed. ‘Oh my god, Alistaire, I’ve never seen you like this. You know, there are probably a thousand other guys pursuing her?’

‘Well,’ he said, thinking back to their meeting, ‘I’m different from them.’

Amélie snickered. ‘Oh really? How so?’

‘Unlike the rest, I’m not a blue–blooded noble. Just a brown–blooded peasant.’

She hit him and laughed. ‘Alistaire, I don’t think that’s an advantage.’

They stopped talking when the door creaked open. Julien peeked out.

‘Oh, Amélie, Alistaire. What are you two on about? Come in already. I was wondering who was at the door.’

Amélie pushed the door open and stepped in. ‘Oh Julien, do I have a story for you.’

Julien looked alarmed. ‘Should I be scared?’

She smiled. ‘No, you should be excited.’

‘Excited? For what?’

Alistaire stepped inside. ‘Shh, Amélie, don’t go telling the whole world. You can tell Julien and the others, but no one else. Promise me.’

She frowned. ‘Really? How boring. Fine. I promise.’

‘Good. Now let’s eat,’ he said brightly.

They all gathered around their dining table as Julien brought forth their meals. The soup and bread warmed something deep in his chest which had gone untouched for too long. As he finished his second helping, he praised Julien for becoming such a fine chef.

Julien laughed meekly, scratching the back of his head. ‘I’m just getting used to it, that’s all. Been cooking loads at the soldiers’ mess.’

The room glowed in the golden–orange light of a flickering oil lamp and the low fire still burning behind them. Lucas reached across the table, his hand fumbling for more soup, but somehow he managed to tip his bowl over, spilling its contents all over the table. Everyone burst into laughter, including Lucas, who sheepishly dabbed at the spill with a cloth. Camélie, seated beside Charline, grabbed Monsieur L’Ours by his arms and raised them like a puppet, growling in a dramatic bear voice. Charline shrieked with delight, holding her stomach and giggling.

Amélie sat across from Alistaire, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear as she lifted a spoonful of soup to her lips. She caught his eye, and for a moment, the noise around them faded. She smiled knowingly, and he smiled back — the heaviness in his heart easing.

Later, as the evening quieted, Alistaire readied for bed. Amélie offered him her spot, insisting she'd take the couch instead. He refused, not wanting to inconvenience her. Standing in the dim stillness of the room, he looked around at the mismatched furniture and worn walls as a longing welled up in his chest.

*If only I could place them all in a palace, he thought, with hundreds of soft beds and golden windows let in sunlight freely. They deserve that much and more!*

The pain in his arm had dulled, but it still flared like fire when touched.

*Will I be ready for the tournament? I must be ready.*

Lying there, he questioned everything. What was he doing? Why was he so stubborn? Could he really compete? Doubt gnawed at him until, at last, he found resolve. He had no other choice. Try, or live a life full of regret. There was no choice at all. It was already decided.

*I have to do it. I cannot fail. My family and friends depend on me. I will give them the life they deserve. Fuck it all. I will succeed.*



*S*