

# THE ASHES OF WRATH

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RACKHAM®

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**the Ashes  
of Wrath**

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ISBN: 2-915556-04-0

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Transcribed by Krillion the Librarian; June 2021

## PROLOGUE

*"The lodge of Hod is a reality. Tales and witnesses agree: this secret organization intends to destroy the foundations and laboratories of the glorious Empire of Syharhalna. The enigmatic Old Master who leads it is a templar known as Masselius. His death must be a priority for you and for us."*

- Letter sent to the Syhar True Born by the Erratum archivists.

The odor permeating the vessel's cabin is nauseating. The ophidian hates coming here and having to make his way through the narrow alleyways to reach the back of that ship. Jowls under his fur hood, he frowns with impatience.

The humans around him smell of sweat and humidity. He can sense their nervousness, sometimes even fear.

Their chief, a pale-faced Akkylannian, remains unperturbed. An abyss separates the Templar from the ophidian, although fate has brought them together.

A strange and circumstantial alliance. Both know they are bound by a fight to death, a pact that will one day end in a pool of blood. The ophidian hisses between his fangs. The Templar rises and walk to his desk, an ebony table, and grasps a silver box. He opens it delicately, removes a flask and holds it up to the rays filtering through the dormer window.

An amber liquid shines from within: the object of the ophidian's desire.

An antidote. A means to fight the evil devouring his being. The Akkylannian grins and glances at the other four Templars present for the exchange. The creature knows he is counting on these witnesses, that the simple act of handing over the antidote is repugnant to him and tests his faith.

The ophidian observes the Templar's hand shaking although his scent bears no trace of fear.

"We must forget our gods..." whispers the creature. "It's time for the exchange."

He feels the Akkylannian hesitate. His fanatic gaze casts a shadow on the thin smile distorting his lips.

"There has always been one and only one god: Merin," murmurs the Templar.

He cites the *Codex of Merin*, maintaining his grin. The ophidian greedily grabs the flask and slides it into his coat.

"The moment is near," says the creature.



Under his hood, he nods from left to right. The Templars slightly bow their heads.

“We’re ready,” confirms their chief.

The ophidian hesitates. He could leave the ship, escape from this confined atmosphere and go home to his people. The pale-faced Akkylannian notices his guest’s hesitation.

“Do you want to see her?” he asks.

The ophidian’s forked tongue emerges from the depth of his hood.

“No,” he murmurs. “Not this time.”

The Templars must not feel his immense distress, the heavy burden weighing on him and reducing him to silence when he is with his people. No one is to discover that his mother is detained here, in the bowels of an Akkylannian vessel. She guided him here; she saved him.

He remembers the first time, the tension in the air that moonless night on the ship’s deck. The Templars were waiting for him – him or another son – his mother serving as bait.

He cannot remember the precise moment he thought of treason as a solution. No doubt it was because he had seen her in the hold, a prisoner terribly weakened by years of captivity. If the poison that has turned him into a renegade had not prevented him from calling upon his people for help, he would have come back with them. He would have happily conquered the vessel and massacred this handful of Templars to free his mother.

But evil is upon him and gnaws at his insides. The antidote is a reprieve, a means of saving time and finding the right moment to fulfill his promise to the Templars.

He reflects upon the sacrifice required to save them both: his mother and himself. History will undoubtedly remember him for that alone. He will hand the most prestigious library of the Ophidian Alliance over to Light.

This does not seem important any more. Not now. Evil has become his battle, and his mother, his redemption. He knows he will live with regrets, that he will no longer be able to seek refuge in an ophidian sanctuary, that he is condemning them both to a life of exile. He also knows that the library and its tens of thousands of banned texts, stolen or purchased from the four corners of the world, will disappear and reveal their secrets to Light. His treason may cause the destruction of the very foundations of the Ophidian Alliance. All this stored knowledge may threaten the very existence of the serpent people and redirect the course of the Rag’Narok.

No matter.

All that matters is her, is him. And Darkness.

The chief templar breaks the heavy silence that has weighed on the cabin for an endless moment.

“When will you come back?”

“In two weeks.”

This news visibly displeases the Templar. With clenched teeth, he sets his hand on the silver box.

“Soon, no antidote will be left,” he says. “You have to move fast.”

“I’m giving you the Erratum, the library of the Alliance,” hisses the ophidian. “You can wait a few more days.”

The Templar’s shoulders tense.

“Once the Erratum falls,” he mutters, “I won’t owe you a thing.”

“I’ll be far away.”

“You’d better be.”

A snicker emerges from the depths of the hood.

“You’re insolent,” says the ophidian in a muted voice. “Arrogant like Light. Beware, Templar. Strange events are shaking the Alliance. The loss of the Erratum could mean changes the breadth of which you can scarcely imagine.”

The Akkylannian frowns and replies.

“We don’t understand a thing you’re saying. Speak. Explain.”

Under the hood, the ophidian unclasps his rings, shaking the entire cabin.

“Learn to keep quiet,” he whispers. “Understand, Templar, the cost of hitting the Alliance at its core. If you achieve your goal, if the Erratum falls into your hands, you will awaken a sleeping beast. And you do not know – you really don’t know what you’ll lose.”

The Templars whisper nervously among themselves. Their chief signals them to silence with a flick of the hand and turns to the creature.

“Are you trying to frighten us? Do you want to give up?”

“Me, no... but you will give up one day. Light will give up.”

“Enough! Just come back and hand over the Erratum.”

The Akkylannian does not see the ophidian’s face distort, nor the hatred in his dilated pupils. The creature leaves in a rustle of cloth and disappears down the alleyway.

A few seconds later, the vessel quakes as the creature crosses the deck and the footbridge to the quay. Moaning rises from the hold.

The Templars pray.

# CHAPTER I

*"We will live in the shadow of Cadwallon. Its sewer will become our kingdom. At the surface, we will leave the upper city to its aristocrats and encourage their fall and decadence. In the lower city, we will maintain misery and violence. That is our role, brothers: to prosper in the shadows and await our time in the bowels of the city. "*

- Speech by the Founder of the Erratum to the Patriarchs.

The City of Cadwallon: it is almost six o'clock in the evening. Warm, heavy rain is falling on the three towers of the Couturiers Quarter and its hanging gardens. The atmosphere is humid, saturated by the fragrance of flowers bending under the weight of the heavy storm drops. Perfumers run along the paths to gather nectar, hiding under the shelter of their hoods. Their nostrils quiver and drink in the scenes floating in the air. They whisper as though they fear disturbing the groves and flower banks on which their fame, and maybe even their fortune, depend. They have been there forever, since the very first roots started running through the cobblestones and climbing the towers to the terraces, culminating in this exceptional garden. They know that nature has its way here, under the hold of the knotty trees and their sap, born in the depths of Cadwallon, that perspires and lends the flowers their unique color and fragrance. They also know that the masters, the only true masters of the flowering terrace in the Couturiers Quarter, reside in a narrow house rising from the northern slope. *Shakas*, shamans with mysterious secrets, who sell recommendations for gold, like the right to pick the flowers, a right that one purchases at a heavy cost.

Two shadows mingle under an arch of roses marking the entrance to the garden. An ophidian and a human. The first is hiding his massive body under a great loose-fitting coat and ignores the furtive glances of perfumers who can sense his smell from under the material. A woman is walking behind him, her face uncovered. She is not quite thirty years old, with unruly short black hair and a moon-shaped face. Her candid traits are enhanced by her pouting mouth. A child almost, if you only saw her face. But you can see her body and long, slender legs confined in thin metal leaves, her arms roped in and her breasts bandaged in white silk. Her waist bears a red woolen belt. The scars across her stomach are exposed. Men who dare



look at her grimace in both fear and excitement. Her body and full lips stand out like promises, but her gaze says otherwise. Her eyes are frightening. They are the color of a cold and hostile sea, a dark, opaque and glacial blue.

This woman is a *syhee*, a human who has relinquished her soul and offered it to a master ophidian.

Her name is Ayane. Her lips turn up in a thin smile for a perfumer who hands her a white flower, desire blazing in his eyes. A fat, elderly man, with drooping cheeks, thwarted in his very tight suit. She feels his confused desire, his cowardice and feverish daring moving him forward, despite himself, to face danger in the hope of possessing her. She eyes him and notes his hand trembling in the rain, the stem pinched between two fat fingers, the flower shimmering like a ghostly apparition.

Ayane does not like flowers and even less the fact that they are sold. Her smile turns to a frown. The man's trembling worsens. She glances forward and sees her master waiting. She has delayed long enough. With her index, she takes the stem, grasps the flower in her palm and crushes it under her admirer's amazed eyes.

The ophidian moves towards the center of the gardens and its venerable trees. The sky disappears behind their branches. Ayane slowly exhales to chase away the deep anxiety that takes hold of her each time they come close to their destination. The humidity is tangible and oppressive. Ayane watches her step, careful of the moss covering the ground, and ignores the strange golden insects fluttering around her face. She envies her master's ability to crawl as he consents to slow down so she can follow his trail. She knows she is a foreigner in this area, closely watched and repelled by the magic that impregnates the vegetation. Humans are not at home here. She dares not imagine what would happen if her master left her here alone in the midst of branches halfheartedly letting her by. She walks faster and finds the ophidian with the elder of the Couturiers Quarter gardens, an old orc, ageless, wrinkles crisscrossing his face.

Ayane wipes the sweat falling from her eyebrows and tries to forget the intoxicating odor of the *shaka*. Purplish lichens cover the scrawny arms and legs of the old man, cross over his chest, grow up to his neck and spread over his jaws, then hang like nets of dribble. Protected and nourished by this natural layer, the shaman is at one with nature. Crimson foxgloves hang from his ears. His nails are covered with fine bark. Bent over, he rests on a *corcom*, a strange stick with a mask at its tip seemingly composed of vegetation. The *corcom* shudders when Ayane appears. Small emerald eyes open, then close. The orc stops and turns towards her.

"He is shy. Ignore him," he gruffly mutters.

Ayane agrees with a quick shake of her head. The *shaka* fascinates her. Sometimes, when her master releases his mental hold and allows to dream, she sees herself in the arms of the orc. A prayer-like dream of softness where she can forget the past in his arms, far from the human race.

A brief hiss calls her to order. The *shaka* has already left, swallowed by the shadows. Behind him, a passage appears in a tree trunk. A winding ramp tunnels into the earth. Lodged in a structural pillar of the terrace, the ramp is a central point for all of the Cadwallon underground. Ayane advances, bent over, and follows her master. She is suffocating once again, fearful of this confined space calling her back the present. She cannot wait to see her sword, brought down these very stairs a few hours earlier with the master's personal belongings. *Shakas* do not tolerate any weapons in their gardens.

In the absence of light, Ayane finds her way by brushing against the outside wall and slowly taking longer strides. Her master slides along in the dark without difficulty. She hears the rattling of his scales, the light hissing of his tongue. She masters her breaching and gains confidence as they distance themselves from the surface.

An hour, maybe more, has passed since they stopped descending. The spiral ramp has slowly led to a series of hallways dug out of the rock. The master advances more slowly, using the scents left by his people to carefully move forward. The humidity increases as they continue on. Ayane hears the murmurs of the underground screams and feels warm air brushing her face. The sounds from the city echoing down to them have finally ceased. With the tip of her fingers, she can at times feel the contours of a broken statue or the distorted frame of a door. With each new hallway and each new cave, they journey back in time. She is not sure, but she thinks she can see the guards of this silent museum – rustling from behind, yellowish and fugitive sparks that eclipse when the master hisses.

They reach an esplanade divided in two by an abyss. The rock is smooth and shiny under the light of the heavy bronze braziers affixed to the archway. Ayane bends over and sees black water thundering below her. The master crosses the narrow stone bridge that links the two sides of the abyss and stops at the foot of a tall bronze door with clear lines engraved on its frame, the lines of Light perverted by the ophidians. Ayane recognizes the light, airy writing of the Sphinxes. The master had already introduced her to copper tablets engraved by this ancient civilization. Here, the engraved characters are slightly distorted. Like Ayane, they were shaped to serve the ophidian cause.

She wipes a lock of hair from her forehead and crouches at a distance to observe the master. He is leaning against the door, rising in slow undulations. She no longer knows the true reasons for her adoration of a snake over ten meters long. She knows almost every scale and crack. She can cite from memory the many cuts that have crossed him from top to bottom since his last sloughing cycle. Like this hole, a recent scar left by a bullet under his face. She has kept the small piece of lead twisted by the impact in a mother-of-pearl box like all the others, thus adding to her collection. At daybreak, she sometimes feels the need to gently shake the box and

hear the bullets roll and cling inside. A way of remembering that the master is eternal and that serving this creature means handing over her destiny to a god. She often repeats this to him when she washes him. When they are intimate, and only then, he becomes her "eternal" one. This name amuses him, causing his jaws to crack in a guffaw.

His muscles fascinate her. Invisible magic running underneath his scales. She remembers the first time she had measured their strength, when a young Templar was lying in agony before her. Wrapped around the young man, the master had tightened his hold with perverse patience, taking pleasure in seeing the armor bend and grind his victim's body. Constriction as a warrior's art form. She has an almost hypnotic memory of the metal crunching, the rivets ceding with a dry crack, the scarlet face distorted in agony. The master had waited for the Templar's last breath before ripping his head off and spitting it at the feet of his *syhee*. Ayane did not move. She was not meant to move. This was at the beginning, when he still tried to destabilize her, to discover her limits. She had simply smiled.

The master's face turns in her direction as if he could read her mind. She does not lower her gaze. She no longer fears his look. On the contrary, she provokes it because she belongs to him. His two reddish eyes narrow. She feels him hesitating. Sometimes, he punishes her for no apparent reason, using the power of his eyes to send a cutting sensation through her brain until the pain is such that she can no longer control her tears. She consents to this cruel game because of his need: for an ophidian, torture preserves mental health.

The master is now standing on his tail. Ordinarily, he measures less than three meters, coiled in a squashed 's' form. Now, stretched over ten meters in length, he oscillates like a scale-covered trunk and uses his arms to keep an uncomfortable balance.

Ayane can barely make out his hands groping towards the middle of the door. She probably knows them better than anyone. She admires the delicate alchemy that characterizes ophidians best, a combination of strength and gentleness. The master's hands cannot pat her hair or lightly lay on her shoulder without her realizing that a little more pressure or a simple nervous gesture could turn the caress into a death sentence. An intangible boundary, a permanent threat that keeps her alert despite her having become a *syhee*. She must not forget fear. She must never believe that her status keeps her safe from her master's moods. Her hand covers the scars on her stomach. In saving her life, the master had also branded her like cattle.

The *syhee* looks up and notices the silent ophidians who have slid over the stone balconies to observe the master, guards with crossbows, content to remain still and wait for the double-door to open. Their weapons are pointed at the abyss and esplanade to ensure that no one takes advantage of this occasion to slip inside.

Only an ophidian can open the door without breaking it. It has neither lock nor key. The master has told her about the spirit living within and how his people use

magic to trap and imprison their victims' souls in the wood and metal. A common practice. Their way of honoring those who had challenged them with intelligence. Complex and delicate, the enchantment is anchored in a gaze, in the very "depths of the eye". The poor vision of ophidians hides another reality: secular magic that dates back to the age of the divine.

The spirit must see the very *depths of the eye* before it will consent to open the door. The master has raised himself to his utmost and faces a twinkling crystal globe embedded in bronze. Ayane can see the animation on the surface of the globe but cannot make out the prisoner's features. According to the master, it is a free leaguer who, alone, with a torch, sword and old dented armor, managed to make his way here. The ophidians had admired his daring and killed him on the edge of the abyss.

For the time being, his soul grants the master the right to enter.

## CHAPTER II

*“They are fragile, aren't they? You will learn to measure your strength at each slough. Bipedes who now pace Aarklash are ephemeral creatures who know how to live together and help each other, however. For this reason, you will learn to tame them.”*

- Vortiris

The Erratum, the leading ophidian library, spreads over five square kilometers on the surface of a rectangular underground lake. Divided over almost twenty islets connected by stone bridges, it has sheltered for over a century the most prestigious books of spells and codices of Aarklash. Its name makes it special. The Erratum collects the works listed on the Index. Since the beginning, the Patriarchs have sought to gather together under the same roof all banned works threatened with disappearance and all those that disturb or shed light on historical lies.

The site was not chosen by chance. In the beginning, the ophidians used this site as a hideout under the shadows of Cadwallon. Archivists transformed this natural refuge into a great library and used the cave's favorable climate to protect their works. Humidity has become a tool of preservation. Typhonism, ophidian magic, grants condensation the power to treat parchment and vellum so they can resist the ravages of time.

S'Erum stops for a moment at the entrance. He does not take in the scene with his eyes, but senses it with the tip of his tongue. He has only been here once before, almost twenty years ago, and the smell is the same.

The odor of red ivy is heavy, intoxicating and penetrating, mixed with the odors of the gray and blue climbing plants reaching outwards to the shores; the odors of the light wood of the boats floating around the small islands; the odors of alabaster, a gypsum rock, bronze and fragile, used for most buildings; the odors of humans as well, disturbing and musky, and, most of all, the odor of parchment, the indefinable perfume of knowledge and solitude.

S'Erum makes out the quiet lapping of water disturbed by boats, but focuses on the very different vibrations stimulating his instinct and defining the forms around him with more clarity than his eyes. Vibrations that grant him an acute sense of surrounding proportions and movements. A slave is standing to his left. A landing

deck is at the foot of the stairs below the door. Brothers move towards him. Only one sound is of interest to him now: the familiar and fragile steps of Ayane moving in his direction. He wants to feel her near him: she is his guide.

Three ophidians have glided towards him. Two of them, warriors in bronze armor with elaborate spears, stand on either side of the third, a sickly creature with a slender face. Wearing a red silk cape, he bows before him.

In silence, each one introduces himself with a subtle change of temperature, a thermal identification characteristic of ophidian greetings. Standing back, Ayane smells the warm air of the presentations reach her cheeks. For these creatures, warmth is a sign of life.

S'Erum pays no attention to the two warriors and concentrates on the timider S'Ylice, an archivist at the Erratum, whose discomfort is obvious. Once again, his reputation precedes him. He is a *sydion*, literally “he who takes back”. Judge and executioner, untiring pilgrim, he wanders the continent to uphold justice and track down ophidians who have infringed the greatest of laws by murdering one of their own.

S'Ylice turns, tongue flaring, and with one vibration informs him that his belongings are safely stored in a room at the inn reserved for his use. S'Erum intends to make sure of this personally and demands that he be conducted to the room.

With the warriors at his side, the archivist acquiesces and escorts his guests to the landing stage concealed by the fog. This fog is an integral part of the library and covers the lake with heavy veils of mist.

All five climb into a long boat of braided reeds and start heading south. It navigates between the first two fortified islets facing the entrance and slightly turns westward to pass under a stone bridge. Shrouded in mist, the main tower rises before them, an austere building reaching up to the vault. Divided into three quarters, this tower is the pillar of the enormous library. S'Erum easily senses the archivist looking at him. He feels a tingling around his sockets, a sign that the eyes of a powerful being are seeking behind appearances to delve into *the depths of his eye*.

The boat passes the pillar to its left, glides by the flowered shores of an islet, then under another bridge and reaches the inn landing a hundred meters later.

It is here, in the largest of the Erratum's buildings, that the master archivist lodges his guests and organizes dinners for them. *Dalmenes*, ancient cousins of weeping willows, border the shores, their heavy purplish leaves hanging over the water. An island emerges from behind this floral screen in the coarse shape of a horseshoe. From the center rises the main building, a vast circular construction crowned by a glass dome imprisoned in a mass of red ivy. On each side, rooms form a set of large bronze bells linked to each other by narrow tunnels.



Human slaves, dressed identically in robes of rough cloth with sandals on their feet, silently watch the procession advance towards the entrance. They all bear a faraway look, with their dilated pupils and deep sockets striped by blackish veinlets. Their minds are controlled by hypnosis. Their minds have become bottomless wells where only flickers of intelligence remain. Assigned to the simplest tasks, they plod away heavily. Soon, only habit will keep them awake. They will die without a word, lacking any substance, before being thrown on the shores to feed the *dalmenes*. S'Erum feels a quick tinge of anxiety. He knows that, one day, the pale eyes of his *syhee* will cover over as well and that he will have to free her or kill her.

He will kill her, he believes, as she belongs only to him.

The procession crosses the threshold of the inn and enters the main room where, on a stone disk in the center of the room, the innkeeper presides: S'Hysme, a grand person, almost a legend. His ample body is a pile of large coils, stretched by the feasts that punctuate his existence. At the top of the pyramid, his face is always in movement as he directs with a click of the tongue a number of slaves much livelier than the others, kept busy between the basins and *eyzoms* where the guests will take their places. This dance continues day and night. S'Erum has never seen the innkeeper anywhere other than on the disk that serves as his throne.

S'Hysme turns his attention for a moment to welcome his guests. His greeting pleases S'Erum. Frank and dry like a desert wind. Hissing and vibrations are exchanged in a few seconds and define the details of the guest's stay. S'Erum will have a spacious apartment with a private perfumed pool. S'Hysme has left no detail to chance and accurately remembers each of the judge's preferences. For this occasion, he has created an *eyzom* in his favorite wood, walnut, and entrusted it to his personal woodworker so that the curves favor the *sydion's* lethargies. S'Erum appreciates the attention. The *eyzom* is the crowning piece of a residence. S'Erum likes to listen to the workers describe how they choose the original tree, the manner in which they cut it and remove its essential core: the trunk and its roots. Torn between their respect for the object and their focus on its vocation, the woodworkers ensure that the trunk, once turned over, becomes a permanent base, and that its roots, crystallized and carved, spread out like a harmonious bank where their brothers can rest.

A slave leads them to their room. S'Erum studies it with a circular glance, finds it suitable, and approaches the five long lead crates set to the side. Nothing differentiates the first four crates. Sixty centimeters high and thirty centimeters wide, they look like narrow, dark coffins bearing no distinctive signs. All four are sealed with a similar lock made of plants, the *margore*. An excrescence with dark green blisters throbbing on the surface of the lid. The last crate, the heaviest one, contains the master's personal belongings, in particular the tools he needs to practice necropsy.

Ayane is kneeling by the pool, checking its temperature with the tips of her fingers. Over time, the *syhee* has learned to accurately determine the best temperature for her master: it is perfect. Ayane nods her head briefly at her master and retires to a corner of the room. At no price will she disturb this moment when he communions with those who invade his dreams.

The *sydion's* body oscillates above the crates. His hands brush their surface, his nails tap the sides with a dry crack to carefully check them and ensure they were not damaged during the journey. Ayane feels his exaltation and impatience. The master's scales tremble. He has chosen a crate and slowly leans his face over the *margore*. His jaws open, his tongue emerges and digs deep into the plant. This strange kiss persists. Ayane hears the roots cracking and retracting under the cover. The *margore* folds over itself as the master irrigates its organism. Its color brightens, its blisters gather together like the petals of a flower. Sleep will come.

The master removes his tongue and gently opens the crate.

The bottom is covered with yellowish soil. The crate contains thirteen flowers lying one beside the other. Thirteen nostalgic promises draping his solitude with a timid veil. Thirteen stems for the thirteen ophidians he executed with his bare hands, erased from his brother's memories, surviving only here in this narrow sanctuary where the ashen flowers emit a few fragrances from their former souls.

S'Erum refuses to go further. It is still too early to succumb to memories. He has come to see them, smell them and make sure they are there, still and docile, and that he can visit them again when his suffering overwhelms him and his want alters his judgment. He cannot give in. Not yet. His tongue, however, weighs like an anchor and pulls him towards the petals.

"Master."

The steady voice of the *syhee* rings like a warning. He growls, removes his tongue and brutally closes the crate. Once again, she is his guide.

S'Ylice, in the company of the same warriors, has taken the pole to lead the boat to the Pillar. They travel in silence. S'Erum is irritated by the events that occurred in the room, this dependence that puts him at the mercy of his memories. It has taken him time to admit to this weakness. He is strangely reassured by the idea that Ayane shares his burden. She knows his impulses and regularly intervenes to tear him from his thoughts. Sitting at the back of the boat, legs stretched out, she balances her sheathed sword on her knees. The sweat on her cheeks looks like dew. He has never wanted her in a human way but likes to sense her when he sleeps. At such times, he feels the same emotions as he does when faced with the expirations of the age of the divine. Sincere respect. Like her, these scented works are precious in their beauty and fragility.

The boat reaches the vast, white marble esplanade that surrounds the Pillar. Its three quarters, separated by narrow faults, resemble a monolith cut into slices. S'Erum dismisses his escort and enters the closest fault to reach a metal door opening onto the base of a narrow central pillar. He opens it and uses a circular ramp that stops at various floors before reaching the top. Behind narrow panels made of horn, small nooks shelter cinnamon scented candles that diffuse an orangish light.

Almost forty meters separate them from the ground. It is nine o'clock in the evening: they enter the apartments of S'Ardai, the master archivist.

The ophidian welcomes them into a large room with an *eyzom* of white wood in its center. All around, parchments and books of spells are spread out in indescribable disorder, chaos occupying almost all of the space, with small precarious bundles here and there. Only the *eyzom* is spared and holds within its roots perfectly ordered quills and ink. A balcony opens to the north over the entrance to the Erratum and is lit by the braziers resting on the ground itself.

The Erratum's founder is one hundred and thirty-four years old. The smell of a recent slough emanates throughout the room. His scales shine of pale purple and are compressed by rings arranged in regular intervals, like hair shirts of gold and silver that keep him alert. Time has aged his face and sockets, and narrowed his jaws. His eyes shine with painful intensity, like black suns. His nails are distorted, his fingers emaciated and twisted like molten metal.

S'Ardai uncoils, leaves the *eyzom* and stands in front of S'Erum. The complicity between them is obvious from their greeting: they cross tongues. A rare intimacy, a way of imparting one's confidence to the other.

In a single vibration, S'Erum presents Ayane to him and makes an unexpected request: the conversation must take place orally so that his *syhee* can understand. The master archivist's temperature rises, but he accepts.

"It's been almost twenty years..."

"Since I left the Erratum."

"You have been away for so long," says S'Ardai, with a hint of nostalgia.

"I've travelled a lot."

"And killed?"

The master archivist asks the question with a faint smile.

"I obey the law," replies S'Erum with a similar smile.

"You make it as well."

"No, I incarnate it. I act in its name."

S'Ardai clenches his jaw.

"Did you execute S'Iris?"

S'Erum freezes, then sighs.

"Yes. But not with my own hands. Maybe it's better that way. "

They look at each other for a moment in silence. S'Iris was a sister to both of them. S'Ardaï is the first to look away.

"I think I would have been happier if you had killed her," he admits. "To know that the Templars..."

"She gave in to Vice. Forget her."

Ayane listens carefully. Ophidians do not easily talk about Vice. The master flees as soon as she asks pointed questions on the subject. On the basis of rumors and whispers heard in a conversation, and using her own logic, she believes it is a disease or at least something similar. It takes hold of each being differently and at any age. She does not know what this Vice reveals nor why it operates so very differently from one Serpent to another. She does know, however, that the master has a fierce aversion to beings tainted by Vice.

S'Ardaï remains silent for a long moment. Besides his sincere sadness he sometimes hides behind, S'Erum notes a different emotion, a sort of vertigo or drunkenness, like a faraway and shameful emanation of this quest for knowledge that at times leads him to the very limits of the law, perhaps to see the depths of Vice as one sees into the *depths of the eye*.

S'Ardaï sends him a reassuring vibration and pretends to chase the image of S'Iris away with a flick of the hand.

"You're here," he says. "That is what's important. But you must act quickly."

"Who is the victim?"

"S'Holth, my steward."

"When?"

"Two days ago. At night."

S'Erum frowns.

"I should have been told earlier."

"We're quite lucky that you were in Cadwallon."

"Time is my enemy."

"So much so that you went to see your ghosts first when you arrived?"

The tone is bitter, almost accusing. S'Erum knows that the master archivist dislikes his dependency on the ashen flowers.

"I still have my old ways," he replies, with a tired voice.

S'Ardaï clicks his tongue. He is disappointed and wants it to show.

"I would have thought that with time, you..."

"Don't think about it," S'Erum interrupts dryly.

"It's none of your business."

S'Ardaï shivers and turns to go back to the balcony of his room.

"No one knows yet," he says while turning his back to the *sydion*. "Except S'Ylice."

"Why?"

“Just enough time to put the essentials away. To select the works that will leave the library.”

“Any precise threats?”

S'Ardai says nothing and, with no transition, starts to communicate by vibrations only, the only way, in his mind, to convey his present emotions. For Ayane, it is more like a vague buzzing, similar to that of a bee. However, S'Erum receives a true logorrhea, confused and frenetic, a deluge of symbols and concepts tightly knit together, translating the master archivist's state of mind.

*The key is the steward; he is the one who gave us the books; he is the key to the surface, a dangerous and vital link with the outside world. Has the enemy infiltrated our walls? Should I order an evacuation? You must answer these questions and tell me if the books are in danger. The Ophidian Alliance needs us and our knowledge. We are the “fragile basis of the essential” correct? I want to believe that one of our own acted under the influence of anger or Vice. No link between this murder and the surface. There must be no link. Caution and care. Unknown circumstances. No precedent. I must know if he was the target, if it was just a personal matter, or if the key was the target. If it is the key, someone is trying to get to the Alliance and destroy its foundations.*

S'Erum interrupts him with a vibration so strong that the parchments lying on the ground shiver.

*You are too nervous.*

The master archivist glances viciously at Ayane.

The idea of continuing the conversation orally is repugnant, but he does not want to irritate the *sydion*. He needs this judge, even if the Patriarchs of the Alliance are already talking about his successor behind closed doors.

“The steward bought and sold on the surface. He is dead. Find the assassin.”

“Any potential murderers?”

“None.”

“The body.”

“At his home, on the islet of Cults.”

“Will you take us there?”

“S'Ylice will take care of that. He is the one who discovered the body. He was going to pick up the latest delivery of books and he found...”

“I don't care for S'Ylice.”

“Try to get along. He is my right-hand man. He is obedient and motivated.”

“He is young, impressionable and nervous. That could slow down my investigation.”

S'Ardai shakes his head and sets his twisted fingers on S'Erum's arm.

“I feel affection for him.”

“Are you getting softer?”

“It's compassion. S'Iris was his mother.”

## CHAPTER III

*“Enskēm is a type of magic related to both hypnosis and bewitchment. The power of Darkness strengthens the effectiveness of the mesmerism techniques it uses. It is no longer the subject's subconscious that is affected, but the soul.”*

- Excerpt from *Aspects of the Obscure*, by S'Ophine, psyche of the Ophidian Alliance

The steward's residence is ensconced at the southeast point of the islet of Cults behind the vast library buildings. S'Ylice calmly indicates that it contains various sections devoted exclusively to faith.

“Theology, morality... the most important. Some ecclesiology, a lot of history of cults and comparative religion.”

The master and his *syhee* walk along high white walls draped in trellises of red ivy. Their guide takes them along a cobbled pathway past the shore shaded in mist. The fog stagnates on the side of the library: like a dozing monster, springing up in thick clouds as they walk by.

The point of the islet ends with a half-moon stone arena, a shell open to the sky. A building with alabaster curves sits between the black slopes of this wall rising close to seven meters.

The steward's personality is slowly revealing itself to S'Erum. An ophidian looking for a refuge, a sanctuary for him alone. Those who live in cities for too long change. They are cast aside because they bear an odor associated with humans, an odor that sticks to one's scales, carting along with it the miasmas, filth and moods of the lower species. The *sydion* cannot but help clench his jaws. He, too, has felt this disgust, a kind of contamination. Although he orders Ayane to bathe herself carefully every day, he cannot keep himself from chasing her away at times, disturbed by her scent, a powerful musk impregnating her skin and making her ugly.

For the time being, he has ordered her to remain outside. Her very presence could disturb him. From experience, he knows how important first sensations can be. An impregnation that often conditions the rest of the investigation. He has to trust his instinct, the virgin look of a crime scene, to forge a conviction.

The doorway opens before him.

“It was open when I came in,” says S'Ylice, sliding in behind him.



The *sydion* bends over the vegetal lock. There is no apparent sign of a break-in but that does not prove anything. Able tongues can break a lock without damaging it.

Just behind him, the hallway is in total darkness. Complex and murky odors. S'Erum grabs his lantern and moves toward the opposite wall with S'Ylice.

A simple silk veil separates the hallway from a large rectangular room. Ten meters by five, white walls, and an abundance of dried flowers in vast bronze bowls. In a corner, a large ebony desk with a writing block, and an opening just behind obstructed by a heavy curtain of garnet-colored velvet. The fragrance of flowers is nauseating but does not entirely conceal the smell of death. S'Erum slowly glides across the room and notices on his left a traditional egg-shaped chest placed on a granite base. The atmosphere confirms his initial intuition. The steward was solitary, maybe even a misanthropist as a result of his destiny and role within the Erratum. The flowers seem to be there for a purification ritual or maybe to separate this sanctuary from the library. He pulls the curtain aside and discovers a room of human proportions.

"For the slave," says S'Ylice, from behind.

S'Erum takes a quick glance: a straw mattress, a table and chair, a few pages of a partition lying on the floor. He draws the curtain back and moves towards a stone disk opened at the back of the main room.

"He is there, just behind," warns S'Ylice.

The partially opened disk turns on itself, raising a fetid smell. S'Erum leaves his guide at the threshold and disappears down the passage.

The steward's bedroom. A bare wall to the north in moist black rock. In the center, an octagonal pool filled with stagnant water, blood red. *Neomas*, strange lilies with blue leaves floating on the surface. Some are torn. On the edge, an extinguished torch. Unusual details: a chromatic harp and a stool set out in a nook and, in particular, no books.

The steward is lying in the pool, partially immersed. S'Erum moves closer and holds his lantern above him. For the time being, he wants to take the scene in with his eyes. *Feeling* the scene will come later.

Death by constriction. He distinguishes the distorted scales on the visible part of the body. He leans over the half-opened jaws and notes that the tongue has been cut off. The remaining section sits in the middle of a *neoma* like a putrefied worm. Its ragged edges seem to indicate that the steward had cut it himself under the effect of pain. Typical contractions a few seconds before death. The victim had struggled to escape his killer: deep lines mark the pool's marble work. S'Erum proceeds with a summary examination of the two arms spread out in a cross and notes that a few nails are broken. They will have to be analyzed and checked to see if

the steward could have clawed his assassin. If he's lucky, the odor of dried blood may identify the murderer.

Slowly, the *sydion* allows the room's atmosphere to enter him. For the time being, nothing excludes the hypothesis that the murder was carried out by a number of brothers, although constriction is not usual in that type of case.

A shiver of excitement fills his nostrils. The chase presents positive signs: this murder was calculated. These are the traces of a killer who flees, the profile of a killer who runs away, who acts in the shadows leaving no sign behind him. A killer known by the steward. The position of the body indicates that the steward was facing the door. He probably saw his assassin enter and did not feel the need to leave the pool. Unless he did not dare move under the threat of a weapon, but S'Erum instinctively doubts that. The killer sought an intimate death. Death by constriction creates a deep tie between the murderer and his victim. You feel his vertebrae crack. You hear the rhythm of his heart accelerate with every twist. You hear the change in his breathing, the gasping, the death rattle. Finally, the agony, eyes revolving and their magic disappearing, the *depths of the eye* clouded over for eternity.

S'Erum moves backwards, opens the lantern and blows on the flame under the wary eyes of S'Ylice, standing in the background.

Darkness: his ally. A fragile instant when reality dissolves, when the scene escapes him so as to be better reconstructed through his senses, the reason for his fame.

By their very nature, ophidians have an exceptional sense of smell. His defies belief. Like others, he could have succumbed to madness, let himself be invaded and submerged by the flow of information that binds the mind and can destroy him or result in his cutting his tongue and withdrawing. He chose the trial. The face to face that has lasted decades, that has placed him against his body and limitations. A long, fastidious effort to discipline himself and conquer his sense of smell so that his mind remains victorious.

He remembers the beginning, the feeling of suffocation that still haunts his catalepsies caused by the muzzle of old leather that prevented his tongue from flickering. He had practiced removing it gradually over many months, millimeter by millimeter, to train himself to decipher the flow of smells and then master them over time. He was discouraged at times, his skull transformed into a sounding box. He was a prisoner of his fantasies, led on by his imagination, balancing at the edge of an abyss that seemed everywhere. A face, a life, a history behind each smell. Removing his muzzle in a city, even when quiet, had seemed impossible for a long time. To conquer this feeling, he had to escape from a desire to mutilate and forget that a single bite would silence the voices haunting his mind. He wandered for nights on end in deserted neighborhoods, his body seized by convulsions caused by his resistance.

But he resisted. For nights, then months, and finally years until the day when, with his fingertips, he cut through the straps of his muzzle a few hours after being appointed *sydion* by the Ophidian Alliance.

Nighttime, which was his most loyal enemy for many years, the territory of the irrational and imaginary, became his lover, a known space, familiar and reassuring. His sense of smell became a menacing weapon transcended by darkness.

S'Erum stands petrified on the fringe of catalepsy. He must fade away, empty his mind and maintain its independence, leaving it open to the slightest nuances that haver within the room. No shivers, not even a slight quiver, affect his many scales.

His tongue shoots out like an arrow, trembles in the air and then suddenly retraces. A quick probe to measure difficulty. He easily isolates S'Ylice's scent and concentrates on the bedroom.

S'Holth, the steward, lived here. In any event, long enough to leave dominant smells that impregnate most objects. At times like these, S'Erum saddens for a smell that is condemned to disappear. A feeling that spreads and almost numbs. Soon, S'Holth will no longer exist. There will only remain of him a few smothered bones tied together by the smell of death. The small number of individuals left in the serpent world makes each disappearance crueller than the last. For almost a century, the Ophidian Alliance has protected its eggs better than it has its Patriarchs.

The scents that identify the steward resemble a pack of invisible ghosts. On the sides of the pool, there remains a musky and intoxicating odor of his return to the surface when he slid into the water with relief. Cadwallon and its miasmas entered this place. The marble also preserves the signs of the final meal as well as a silver tray. Vague scents of almond, barley and saffron and the last one, stronger, that of a human liver, a traditional meal appreciated by gourmets. Eating has not always been a form of art for the snake people. Culinary appreciation has grown over time, like a need to invent new pleasures in the darkness of Aarklash. S'Erum has never appreciated this art except on rare occasions and to satisfy his curiosity. Cuisine aromas sometimes produce primary scents restful to his sense of smell.

His tongue shoots out again. He looks towards the alcove at the instrument that, for the time being, does not fit in with the rest. As far as he can remember, no ophidian has ever played or listened to the harp. The scent of a human, a male, infests the seventy-eight strings. S'Erum senses contradictory emotions, fear and pleasure entwined. He will have to interrogate the human and investigate the relationship between the master and his slave.

Now, the books. Their absence intrigues S'Erum so he moves slowly into the room, tongue deployed. The smell stagnates almost everywhere. Despite tanning and soaking in lime water, parchment skins retain vague animal traces. He recognizes the smell of sheepskin with no surprise as it is commonly used. For their part, ophidian parchmenters prefer vellum, which is of much higher quality.

Conclusion: S'Holth did not keep any of the books purchased at the surface. Maybe he came here to read them or simply browse through the pages before giving them to the Erratum archivists.

S'Erum realizes that he only has a vague understanding of the steward's role within the library. He had imagined a scholar coiled over a pile of old books, a skinny brother with a dusty mind and scales. Death, however, does nothing to dissipate the cadaver's visible vigor. He is already anxious to proceed with a thorough examination, to be able to touch, lift, spread, dissect and, in other words, reconstruct the history of the body to understand the victim. The investigation will take time, he believes. The enemy is lurking. An intuition, the feeling that nothing was left to chance, that the hunt began the second he entered the library, maybe even before, when he left his refuge to return to the gardens in the Couturiers Quarter. He was killed at a distance, away from the crowds in a stony enclosure and left no trace. For S'Erum, the damning proof will be the trail left behind: the discovery of this trail will be the fundamental act binding the *sydion* to his prey.

Nothing in what he has seen or smelled speaks of the assassin's panic or hurry. The act was therefore premeditated. Thoroughly thought out, anticipated, with a before and an after, prepared with the choice of site and a planned escape... The victim was killed in his home in a moment of relaxation. The assassin feared him in some fashion and was wary of a fight between equals. He preferred to attack when the victim was at his most vulnerable.

S'Erum detects no other odors in the room. In any event, he has had enough. If he perseveres, he will be taking risks. On the perimeters of his consciousness, he feels the first symptoms of withdrawal. His temperature has decreased and minute hissing, brief but insistent, resonates in his ears. He needs to be purified.

S'Ylice escorts him to the entrance of the residence in a rustling of cloth.

"No one must enter here," S'Erum orders when they cross the threshold.

"Of course."

"I suppose that the Erratum has carefully closed its doors since the body was discovered?"

"My master saw to it."

"I thought that no one was or was to be informed of the murder..."

"We often close the doors as a precautionary measure. The procedure hasn't raised suspicions."

"You have passageways that are more discreet than the main entrance, I suppose?"

"Only one. In the axis of the Pillar."

"Also closed?"

"The master took care of it personally."

"Have you checked to see if someone is missing?"

S'Ylice's eyes narrow.

“If that were the case, you wouldn't be here.”

S'Erum hesitates. He can see that the archivist has hidden within his cape to conceal abrupt changes in his temperature. The warriors have not noticed anything, but S'Erum notes a murderous pulse bordering on savage emotions. An incredible, inextinguishable rage.

Silence separates them. The *sydion* knows that he will have to be careful with this young male and try to understand the nature of the message sent by the master archivist. Is this a warning, a subtle way of reminding his guest that S'Ylice plays the role of a guard dog whose leash may be released at any time? Worse even, the crime may be a trap orchestrated by the Patriarchs, a means to draw him here in order to get rid of him. Careful manipulation with S'Ylice as the perfect culprit. Who would be surprised to see a son take revenge for his mother, her scent lingering on her executioner's hands? Also, is it not strange that at the very time when the murder was committed and he was needed, he was in Cadwallon...? A troubling coincidence. He must be careful, see the Erratum as neutral, maybe hostile, territory, and not lose his focus because he is a friend of the master of the building.

S'Erum feels his withdrawal sharpen his paranoia.

“I am going to retire,” he says in a neutral tone. “Make sure that an accurate list of occupants is delivered to me as soon as possible, including slaves. And a precise report on the comings and goings over the past forty-eight hours. Warn your warriors: I will interrogate them during the night. Where are the steward's slaves?”

“There is only one. We have hidden him in the master's tower. He didn't see anything...”

“A *syhee*?”

“No.”

“I want to see him first. I will start with him. One last thing: warn the guard that it should be on the alert. Make sure that patrols are doubled in the adjoining caves and that the number of marksmen is doubled at the entrance. The threat could come from inside or outside. The assassin is hiding here amongst our brothers.”

Water eases his want.

Back in his apartment at the inn, he dives into the pool and observes his *syhee*, her eyelids almost shut. Standing and facing him, she undresses slowly. She first takes off her sandals, then, in a brief movement, unties the clasp that holds the silk across her chest. Her breasts are small, firm and of a milky color. She offers herself to her master's gaze, feels her nipples stiffen and arches her back. Then, she leans forward and snaps off the bolts of her gaiters. The metal opens up to reveal pale thighs. Around her knees, the articulations of the armor have left a narrow trace similar to a scar. Ayane stands up, smiles and ruffles her hair.

Eroticism brings them closer. Sensuality is a sort of a subterfuge, a disguised way of creating a silent dialogue between the human and the ophidian, like a

vibration.

Ayane squats at the edge of the pool, resting on her heels, arms wrapped around her legs, and bores her dark blue gaze into her master's dilated pupils. She realizes how close he is to breaking, how the rest and forgetfulness promised by the ashen flowers underlines their life together. He has not said a word about the crime and keeps his jaws closed as if the muzzle were still in place.

Ayane unbends and, using her arms, slowly slides into the pool under the light of the candles burning on the ground. The master's eyes move to her stomach before it disappears in the water. The stitches are morbidly fascinating to him.

The water reaches just below her breasts. She advances slowly and feels the *neoma* petals floating on the surface and stick to her chest. He lets her approach, not reacting, but trembles when she takes the sides of his jaws in her hands.

"My eternal one..." she whispers.

She rests on his left side, picking up a large pumice stone from the side of the pool. She holds it in her hand and brings it close to his face. A ritual. A moment when the master consents or not to her caresses. He closes his eyes, exhausted by his inner turmoil.

Under the gaze of his only *syhee*, he can relax and just be, without lies nor breastplate. S'Erum does not want to tell her how much his brothers have worn him down, how it is increasingly difficult to resist the desire to fall forever into ashen dreams. His faith is intact but his heart hardens at each treason. It is no longer very wise today to have him as a friend. The Patriarchs have never become used to the idea that a self-taught being could become a *sydion* and make them tremble, that he resists their pressure and refuses to compromise. They hate his freedom; they fear his pride and loyalty to the founding principles of the Alliance.

A freedom won dearly. S'Erum has seen the vise tighten without being able to convince them that the laws, as ancient as they may be, must remain the cornerstone of the Alliance. Under the pretext that the snake people cannot lose a single soul at this hour of the Rag'Narok, the Patriarchs have suggested that some assassins be freed from justice. These types of suggestions reinforce the *sydion's* determination. S'Erum believes in his fight, his mission, a fierce justice that will prevent the poisons of decadence from contaminating the entire Alliance.

Ayane slides an arm around his neck and uses the other to gently stroke the pumice stone over his scales. The ophidian's mind becomes numb, then shuts down.

An hour has elapsed. Ayane is resting on the threshold, her sword covering her thighs. Free from the Cadwë miasmas and all the parasites that could disturb his dreams, S'Erum leaves the pool and coils around the twisted branches of the *eyzom*, offering his body privileged space to ease the tension of his muscles and vertebrae.

A cloud of nostalgia fills the *sydion's* heart. With almost painful acuity, he remembers long expeditions with his old friend, S'Orayle, the purveyor of the



throne, for a few weeks of escape over ancient paths in the Emerald Forest and their search for exceptional *eyzoms* fed by the earth's magic. In the company of his friend, S'Erum had felt peace for previous moments when he could breathe away from intrigues and prefer the trails of nature to those of murderers. Ayane was not yet a part of his life then and S'Orayle was his only escape.

They killed him, my brother, he bitterly remembers. They could not take our friendship. They could not tolerate your dreams and sincere desire to belong to no family. Like me, you were free, but they treated you like a pariah. They followed you and harassed you. They led you to a ghastly death and made sure that suicide was your only recourse. I still remember the Patriarch with his evasive gaze announcing the worst. I later found out that you had made your own rope to hang yourself, that you had chosen the time and place, that you had found refuge one last time in the Emerald Forest to pick the best branch among the trees you so loved... Believe me, one day, I will make the pilgrimage to that spot to find your scent.

Withdrawal makes him fragile. Thanks to Ayane, however, the fiery tongue that burned his innards is only a dying ember, a tolerable and simmering pain.

The last candle has died with a hiss. Its waxy scent glides over the pool. In the shadows above S'Erum, the silhouette of an ashen flower floats by. He has chosen the chest containing the oldest one to remember the taste of his first execution. His memories of S'Orayle have overwhelmed him with nostalgia.

His tongue flickers, oscillates for a brief moment in the air, runs along the petals and pierces like a bee's stinger into a gray pistil.

A long journey to the past, a long journey through flowers that enshrine the memory of his victims. From the very first instant, S'Erum feels himself escaping his body. He dives into a world of darkness, a world that could be as large as a continent or as small as a cave. He never sought to explore this space for fear of getting lost. His body is there in the darkness. Like a beacon, a lighthouse leading him back to reality in its time.

His mind begins to move. Slowly, then faster and faster. It advances in circles around his own body and already radiates a familiar scent, that of S'Aramand.

The scents that characterize the personality and history of this themiurgist still form a chaotic bouquet, a protean mixing the past with the future. S'Erum has learned to distrust him. The storm must be tamed so that his memories become organized and draw a coherent portrait of the victim. Here, away from his body and its weight, he evolves in a garden of memorial scents, his eyes closed.

The themiurgist had killed a child whose scent S'Erum can feel at times. A small creature, out of the egg for only five or six hours before the sacrifice on the altar of research conducted by the themiurgist. S'Erum never sought to understand the assassin's motivations. During the confrontation, S'Aramand pleaded his case

with sincerity, but the *sydion* did not listen. Nor did he listen to the Patriarchs' plea for a reprieve, visibly interested by the themiurgist's research.

A simple case. No tracking, no trail. Just a sentence and summary execution at the edge of the sanctuary. In the darkness, senses numbed, S'Erum remembers the scene with accuracy. He remembers crawling to the surface. He still hears the rustle of dead leaves under their scales in the forest and his prisoner's pleas. He had wanted the execution to take place in nature under the trees, far from the sanctuary and Patriarchs. S'Aramand took his time in accepting to stand against a tree and receive his sentence. S'Erum remembers his face mangled by fear and frustration. To the end, he sought to justify his crime and argue that a newborn is nothing in comparison to his research. S'Erum remembers having laughed when he pulled the trigger before the themiurgist's skull exploded and splattered on a trunk leaving a pinkish stream.

The memory calms S'Erum. It relaxes his muscles and nerves. The ashen flower is an outlet, a means to fight his most primary instincts.

Time goes by in slow motion. Darkness is a cocoon. Again, he tastes the smell of recently chopped wood, the smell of the corpse burning in the flames. The themiurgist had burned for a long time before S'Erum could gather the ashes and slide them into the victim's empty shell, an egg turned into a funerary urn. He buried the egg in the middle of a clearing and waited until the end of the fall to return and gather his first ashen flower.

S'Erum always finishes his journey by remembering the scent he smelled on that day, the first time he bent over the petals to inhale the defunct soul of the themiurgist. This scent left an indelible print on his memory, a milestone that keeps him serene to this day.

## CHAPTER IV

*“Necropsy is the study of the Obscure. The study of a cadaver can be compared to the rape of a sepulture. Who, other than the servants of Darkness, could defend as a scientific discipline a practice born of the profanation of the deceased and the most abject torture.”*

- Masselius

One o'clock in the morning. They leave the main room of the inn where S'Hysme welcomes his guests for dinner. S'Erum intends to accept the next invitation and take advantage of the occasion to put names to faces within the Erratum. He still does not have a clear impression of the inhabitants' state of mind, nor does he grasp the daily reality of the library or have a more general feeling for its mentalities and habits.

S'Ylice is waiting for them at the landing stage with a warrior. They silently board the boat and head towards the Pillar to meet S'Holth's slave, secluded in silence.

S'Erum is in fine form. The ashen dreams have sent his instincts into a corner of his mind. Two great straps of links forming cartridge belts cross each other over his chest. All of the instruments to study and analyze a crime scene are stored inside: a knife and sharpening stone, dissection tweezers, a brush, small bronze vials, cords, scissors... Each object has its place. He cannot abide wasting time looking for them and has drawn up a precise list so his *syhee* can prepare them and clean them before each investigation. This ritual is dear to him, particularly since he knows that many Patriarchs consider necropsy as a useless luxury in these days of the Rag'Narok.

He is anxious to meet the steward's slave. He certainly knows how humans can sometimes unexpectedly change the life of an ophidian.

S'Ylice leads them inside the Pillar and descends a staircase towards the basements. The Erratum jails consists in a large hallway with black, wet walls, flanked on each side by five identical cells of four square meters each.

Ayane distinguishes two filthy, scrawny men through the bars huddling in a corner of their cell. En route, S'Ylice notes that the prisoners are all subjects of

experimentation reserved for special guests. *Conscious subjects*, he concludes, with a greedy smile.

The stench is atrocious. The smell of fear and despair literally runs off the walls. S'Ylice stops before the third cell on the left. The prisoner is sitting cross-legged in the middle, eyes wide open, indifferent to the moaning of his companions. The master approaches as well and looks at him. A first glance reveals that the steward had treated him well. He must be approximately twenty years old and looks healthy. He is wearing pants and a woolen vest tied at the waist. Responding to a gesture by the *sydion*, S'Ylice opens the cell. The slave rises and greets them as S'Erum enters. His features are fine and austere, his hair cropped short.

"What's your name?"

"Maliek."

His soft, modulated, musical voice is a striking contrast to the severity of his face.

"Did someone threaten your master in your presence?"

"No."

"Did you live with him?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I live beside the master's bedroom. I have my own room."

"Did you go with him to the surface?"

"No."

"Did your master read?"

"The master reads."

The steward's disappearance has done nothing to dissipate the enchantment deep in the eyes of the slave. He cannot yet consciously admit that he is dead.

"What was your role?"

"I'm in charge of the upkeep of the master's home and make sure he doesn't need anything."

"How long have you belonged to him?"

"One year and seven months."

"What did you do on the surface?"

"I don't understand."

"Your profession?"

"I don't understand."

S'Erum sighs. The steward had cast a radical spell on the slave and his memories are sealed. For Maliek the world is now limited to the space between the walls of the Erratum.

"Do you play the harp?"

"Yes."

"Did you play for your master?"

"Yes, I play for the master."

"What is your sleeping cycle?"

S'Erum knows that each ophidian defines his slave's nightly rhythm. The answer does not surprise him.

"I sleep from midnight to seven in the morning."

"Do you remember your last night at the master's?"

"I don't understand. I..."

"Did you sleep from midnight to seven in the morning?"

"No. I was awakened at six by Master S'Ylice."

S'Ylice confirms this by nodding his head.

"Before, you were asleep. Did anything disturb you?"

The slave's mouth freezes for a fraction of a second.

"No," he answers.

S'Erum feels his heartbeat accelerate.

The assassin's trail, finally. He slowly repeats the same question.

"Did anything disturb your sleep?"

Once again, the hesitation is minute. A less experienced ophidian would have undoubtedly missed it. For S'Erum, this is tangible proof, a clue that confirms his prey's talent.

Handling the trace of a brother is particularly delicate. You have to bypass the original enchantment, known as the *enskēm*, take its place as long as needed to implement new orders, and then retire without leaving a trail so that neither the slave nor the master realize anything.

The *sydion* sees two possible explanations. Either the assassin has attempted to conceal his trail by erasing the night of the crime from Maliek's memory, or he has been manipulating the slave for a long time and uses his counter-trace to spy on the steward.

S'Erum takes the slave's chin in his claw and turns his face to see the light shine in his eyes. If the assassin has left a trace, it is invisible to the eye. To know more, he must consult S'Erin, the only ophidian able to decipher this trace and discover useful information.

Without the slightest hesitation, the *sydion* rapidly coils himself around Maliek. Arms and legs paralyzed in the grasp; the man ceases to struggle once the ophidian's fingers spread across his face to firmly hold him still.

Leaning over his prey, S'Erum acts with precision and proceeds with the removal of the slave's eyes. The pain stiffens Maliek's body, but no scream passes his lips. S'Erum wants to keep him alive. Once the two globes are placed in a vial, he takes another pear-shaped one out and delicately empties the content into the two empty sockets. This viscous paste, an elixir to favor scarring purchased from the *shaka* in the Couturiers Garden, will prevent the injuries from infecting.

He gently releases his pressure on the slave who collapses on the ground.

"Bandage his eyes," he orders his *syhee* and turns to S'Ylice.  
"I want him kept alive. Make sure he lacks for nothing."

Return to the vast terrace of the Pillar where intense activity reigns. Various boats have anchored at the landing stage and spew out tens of slaves carrying large wooden crates.

"Our most precious works," comments S'Ylice. "The master wants them evacuated as rapidly as possible in case..."

S'Erum remains silent, irritated by this feverishness that harms his investigation. He would like to reason with S'Ardaï, but doubts that the old one would listen to him.

Ten minutes suffice to reach the islet of Cults and return to the steward's home. The two warriors have not moved and still stand guard in front of the entrance.

The necropsy begins at twenty-seven minutes past two. Ayane has just written the time down with a quill on the first page of the codex, her eyes on the miniature technological watch resting on her knee. She is sitting in the harpist's seat, her back against the rock wall, her legs tightly held together. The dampness makes the task difficult, particularly as she does not like to write. The ink has already made a spot on a corner of the page and her letters, always awkward, look like scribbles.

The master is standing right behind the steward, indifferent to the smell of putrefaction, and very gently removes the corpse from the pool. Then he begins speaking in a low voice.

Her lips clenched, the *syhee* notes:

Present at the necropsy: S'Erum, *sydion* of the Ophidian Alliance (under orders of S'Ardaï, master archivist of the Erratum); Ayana, *syhee*, under the guardianship of the *sydion*, and S'Ylice, archivist.

*At the beginning of the examination, the victim is wearing a necklace of black pearls on the upper area. Specifically absent: clothing or pieces of armor.*

*External examination: the body is that of an adult ophidian, normally developed, measuring eight meters ninety-eight. Age: eight sloughing cycles. Last slough estimated at six or seven years. Preservation is good for the upper portion. The lower portion remained in the water. Lividity has extended to the scales. The face presents signs of "constriction." The tongue is cut. The eyes are open. Dry encrusted blood blocking the nasal pathways. Crusty and dry matter around the eyes. The irises are yellow, the corneas are clear. The pupils measure thirty-one millimeters. The teeth are natural and in good condition. The jaws are neutral.*



S'Erum stops, his tongue hisses. Raising the cadaver's head to examine the neck, he discovers a series of lacerations at the back of the skull. The marks seem to have been caused by the assassin's nails. However, the features of the injury are intriguing. In a muted voice, he continues for his *syhee*:

*Claw marks at the back of the skull. Four parallel furrows. Depth: five centimeters. Clean cuts on the scales. Too clean. Dry blood...*

The master's voice suddenly stops. He throws his head back, his jaws trembling. Ayane has already jumped up, the palm of her hand steady on the sword. He gestures her not to move and brings his face closer to the injury.

"Clarity," he murmurs...

His tongue flicks around in rage, a few centimeters from the lesions.

"Clarity," he repeats.

With a quick flick of the hand, he orders her to return and sit down again.

"Note this," he says. "Inexplicable presence of Light on the edge of the injuries. Irregular break of the cuts. Unknown origin."

S'Erum looks around him. He is worried. Light has left a sour and cold taste on his tongue. Confused hypotheses mix in his head. An enchanted weapon? An accomplice? He cannot admit that an assassin inspired by this Principle would be able to hide in the library without being detected by its residents. The ophidians know how to recognize the icy scent of Light better than anyone.

S'Erum wants to end the necropsy before drafting hypotheses. He takes various samples from the lesions and continues with his examination.

The *modus operandi* of the constriction reveals an interesting detail: the pressure placed on the body lacks precision. Until now, sure he was dealing with a methodical assassin, he had not paid attention. After a series of measurements, there is no longer any doubt: the death was caused by an amateur. The rupture points visible on the body's surface prove that the killer coiled around the steward and adopted ragged curves, almost awkward, while the injuries were delivered with considerable force. S'Hysme? An ophidian who does not know the art of constriction, but knows he is strong enough to compensate for his lack of experience with his strength? He likes that hypothesis. Especially since it justifies the use of a weapon of Light. Heavier and slower, S'Hysme would have preferred using a trick to immobilize his victim. To be truthful, the innkeeper would make an ideal assassin. Who other in the Erratum has privileged contact with the surface so as to procure such a weapon? Who else sees brothers and allies of the Alliance from throughout the continent every day and night, a perfect veil to dissimulate and bring this weapon into the library?

The time of the crime remains to be determined and his alibi needs to be checked. Being tied to his throne, S'Hysme's absences are flagrant.

Returning to the body, S'Erum sees no other anomalies and decides to conduct an internal examination. He takes the dissection tweezers and immediately makes a first incision lengthwise. A visceral odor fills the room.

*Lower section unaffected by constriction. Areas of advanced necrosis. Cloaca neutral. Kidney neutral. Upper section. Serious constrictive damage. Spine broken in four places. Ribs also crushed inwards. Liver ripped, brown in color. The stomach contains greenish bile. Gray, pink pancreas, moderately firm. Esophagus neutral.*

The scratching of Ayane's quill transcribes down the litany of organs. No significant discovery. S'Erum has found no known or visible trace of a poison that could justify the steward's passivity.

The necropsy concludes with the cadaver's face. Obviously, the steward was not able to use his venom. With a slight incision, S'Erum frees the poison from the glands and inserts it in a vial. He has finished with the cadaver. Satisfied with the work he has accomplished, yet troubled by the results, he decides to finish with a search of the pool. His tail slides between the *neomas* and enters the stagnant water. His palpations result in nothing... until he jumps with disgust at the touch of leather. He carefully seeks the edges of the object and brings it up to the open air.

A satchel with a long strap, filled with water. The white gold buckles are undone. No apparent odor. Water and blood have seeped into it.

Ayane sets her quill down. She sees the master's face slide into reminiscences and already knows that the necropsy will go no further. He is tired, exhausted by the odors and, in particular, the smell of the leather that takes him back to his ghosts, the insanity that presided over his isolation when he wandered through the streets of a city to master Aarklash's miasmas.

He comes close to her, troubled. She could lower her head, escape the gaze that pierces through her, but she has already accepted the pain growing at the back of her skull. The mental needling is like a revenge. The master is punishing her for being real. She clenches her jaws and tightens her fists. With a studied perversity, he rhythms the pain like a wave, waiting for the best moment to give it his full power. The human and the ophidian are in communion. She doubles over herself, her temples crushed, legs in nervous spasms, and crashes to the floor.

Bent over her, the master tortures her without feeling pleasure, yet convinced he is filling an atavistic need for his body and blood.

Ayane no longer feels her body. Her life has become a blank line, a blade in fusion cutting her brain from one side to the other. Her master's frustration does not kill her this time. He keeps at it with disarming force; he no longer seeks to feel her or save her. She has seen men, humans, make love to her with this same indifference, preoccupied with their desire only, taken over by mechanical bestiality to the extent they deny her, even though she struggled under their assault.

Her tears save her. They stream and cover her cheeks despite her and put out the fire in her skull. The master brutally removed himself and moves away without a

word, his scales cracking.

Her hands tremble. She leans against the rock, wipes the blood on her lips and smiles in the dark.

## CHAPTER V

*“Merin is a loving and kind god. Those who believe in Him will atone for the faults of their fathers and will return to the Creator’s way. Those who believe in Him will dedicate their existence to atoning for the faults of unbelievers. Those who believe in Him will spread His word. Those who believe in Him will live through destruction and know oblivion  
But they will also live a rebirth and will see the second Creation.”*

- Excerpt from the *Codex of Merin*

Mankenz, the Templar, sips an amber liquor, his legs cross. His guest, a goblin administrator of the Cadwallon port authorities, observes him with deference. Small and round, with a soft belly, the goblin has come to make sure that the Akkylannian vessel will soon leave the port.

For the time being, the administrator waddles around, embarrassed by the silence that greeted his entrance into the Templar's cabin. The neglected attire of the Akkylannian puts him ill at ease. He is wearing a long, red velvet vest with large ivory buttons revealing a chest with protruding ribs. Ascetically thin, with a narrow, hairless face and an ashy complexion, his very light green eyes gaze at him with condescension.

The administrator grasps a large notebook close to his chest. He sweats large drops of his old cream and gold uniform from the captaincy and would have liked this devil of an Akkylannian to be good enough to give him something to drink.

Mankenz sets the crystal glass on the armrest of his chair and stretches his long legs. The goblin moves closer to the door and wets his lips.

“You must leave,” he says.

The Akkylannian acquiesces with a small movement of his chin. He has moved towards a standing mirror and slowly brushes his hair. His white hair falls flatly to his waist. He brings it back into a ponytail, and knots it with a pearl grey ribbon, then turns towards his guest.

“I’m leaving soon,” he confirms in a low tone.

A warm and melodious voice. The goblin sniffs and taps his notebook.

“It's just that... this time, I need a date, my lord. My superiors are worried. Your safety is no longer guaranteed. We fear an unfortunate... initiative by neighbors. The complaints about the noise are gaining strength.”

"I'm paying enough to keep the neighbors quiet."

"Certainly, my lord. And my superiors appreciate your generosity, please believe me. Having said that, it's not just the neighbors..."

Mankenz raises an eyebrow. The administrator takes one step back and adds in a trembling voice:

"The free leaguers and the militia, my lord. They are starting to listen. The rumor is spreading and my superiors don't know how to stop it."

The Akkylannian knots a sword to his belt as if the conversation should end.

"Tell your superiors that we will leave the port in less than a week."

Deep gratitude etches over the administrator's face.

"That's perfect, absolutely perfect... Thank you, my lord."

The Akkylannian closes his eyes and dismisses the goblin with a vague movement. A few seconds later, a Templar enters the cabin. Mankenz invites him to sit in the armchair and leans against a window giving onto the port.

Lysander is a giant of two meters ten, a force of nature with a baby's face.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, no problem. We are ready," says Mankenz while observing the lights on the quay sparkling. "The Old Master has given his approval."

The giant rubs his hands together. The Old Master's approval is worth every prayer. Five years ago, Lysander had even fashioned a small statue of him with his own hands, a figurine of clay that never leaves him, that he wears night and day around his neck on a silver chain.

"When?" he whispers.

"Very soon. I have to wait for our guide's signal."

Lysander does not understand everything. For example, he does not understand why Mankenz accepted the ophidian's visit and especially why he trusted him. Lysander believes the world is just a vast territory subjected to demons, women and heretics. His fists tighten. He dreamed about Sylene again last night and her large golden eyes. She will not leave despite his pleas. She returns almost every night to murmur horrors in his ears. He may hide under the cover and hold the Old Master's statue close to his heart, but Sylene never gives up.

Mankenz glides behind Lysander's back and sets a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"You dreamed last night. You talked a lot." Lysander lowers his eyes.

"She comes almost every night now," he says in a muted voice.

"The day will come when women will no longer be a danger to you or anyone."

"Even in dreams?"

"Even in dreams," confirms the Templar, squeezing his companion's shoulder.

Both men observe a moment of silence. Mankenz has raised his glass and drinks, eyes almost closed, lost in his thoughts.

Lysander fidgets in his armchair.

"I went to the hold," he confesses softly.

"Again? Even though I had told you..."

"Not to go down, yes, I know. But I... I had to."

"Did you torture her?"

The giant grimaces.

"A little."

"Merin is watching you."

"It's bigger than me, you know. To know she is there, in the hold... right under out feet. I feel better when I..."

"When you torture her? Say so, my friend. Say so. It's important."

"When I torture her..."

"You'll pray with me tonight. I have a feeling you are fragile."

"It's the waiting that's driving me crazy. And this damn boat pitching, always pitching. You'd think it was built to do just that."

"The end is near. You have to be patient."

Mankenz brings the glass to his lips and savors the alcohol's caress with a satisfied sigh.

"I want to fight," mutters the giant.

"I know. That's good, actually. You don't know how to do anything else."

"I want to fight," repeats Lysander with insistence. "Why won't you let me go on shore and..."

The slap strikes his cheek, leaving a reddish trace. Lysander wipes the blood away with his hand.

"We're not moving from here," says Mankenz. "Not you, not me, no one."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"We are Templars, Merin's soldiers. Do you think that our brothers lost patience in their cells before being taken to the stake?"

"No... no."

Lysander lowers his eyes in shame. The era of stakes had overwhelmed the lodge with the acrid odor of burnt flesh. Like the others, he cried when he heard the tales of the Templars, extenuated on their return from the battle at Kaïber, who had discovered an empire subjected to and scarred by the Inquisition. The servants of the Church had spread over their land like a hoard of voracious insects. The Templars called for reason. They dared go against the authority of the Church... Lysander feels his throat tighten. Mankenz told him in detail how they were followed like savage beasts, dragged out of their domains to be thrown alive into the flames.

Mankenz bends over the giant, his eyes afire.

"You will have to wait for the right moment to fight. Like our brothers waited for the right moment to create the lodge."

Mankenz crosses over the hold with broad steps and greets the Templars gathered in the bowels of the *Karl IV*. The vessel looks like a fortress. Crates filled with weapons are piled in the passageways. Men train as well as they can in the confined atmosphere of their cabins. Others, sitting on the ground, dismantle and clean their guns. The tension is tangible. Despite their training and the oath that binds them, these Templars have had enough of waiting inside. Brawls break out almost every day and oblige Mankenz to involve himself personally and calm their spirits. The cord he has handed them may break at any time, he knows, and he prays to Merin when doubt takes over.

He is the sole incarnation of the orphans' sentry, the one the Old Master entrusted to Lorthis. Although he never goes with his believers into the field, Lorthis' shadow blends into the shadows of his adopted sons.

Mankenz is an orphan, a child of the crusades. Most of those who are crowded within the *Karl IV* share this broken past, this confused childhood under the sign of sadness and pride.

Mankenz grew up at the entrance of the Commandery of the East. He remembers his mother well, the one who the Templars called the Golden One for her blond, almost white hair, falling in thick curls to her shoulders. A war widow, widow of Merin, she refused to return to her country, believing that she should bring up her son where her husband had fallen in the name of Light.

Mankenz remembers her silence, her eyes clouded with grief, and especially the sunsets, the moments after supper when she invited him to sit on her knees to read him a passage from the *Codex of Merin* and tell him about his father. She had wanted her son to know who this faceless Templar was, why he came this far with his wife and child to dedicate his strength to the One. Mankenz loved this man he had never known. He loved his faith and courage. He loved reading the pride in his mother's eyes when she spoke of his battle.

Mankenz had wanted to be like this hero. He had wanted to taste a happiness as simple as serving Light. With other children of his age, he learned to fight and recite, eyes closed, the long list of heroes engraved on the church facade.

Everything changed with his mother's endless and agonizing death. Mankenz never spoke of the long months at her bedside, nor of the moonless night when he gave in to the Golden One's pleas and put an end to her pain. He killed her.

Mankenz keeps the rest like a treasure in the depths of his soul. He is fifteen years old, an orphan, and finally joined those who, like him, live with the elderly Lorthis. They are a brotherhood, a true family under this gruff and limping Templar who decided to train and discipline the commandery orphans. An austere and ascetic existence devoted to Light. Mankenz' faith had strengthened under the ashen sky of the commandery and had become his vital force. He asked no questions when, one night, Lorthis chose them, him and a few others, to march to the church and meet the lodge's emissary.

A recruiter, a man with steely eyes, lined them up under the transept before setting half of them aside and inviting the other half to follow him to Carthag Fero.

Mankenz was not surprised, as if he had waited for this moment for a long time, since he had driven the dagger into his own mother's heart without trembling.

The lodge of Hod chose them, Lorthis' orphans. Only a few dignitaries of the Temple know of the lodge's existence. It is a weapon of the shadows, an elite sent where hope is no longer, where discretion and fanaticism work together to triumph over Darkness.

At daybreak, when Mankenz and his orphan brothers left the commandery with the recruiter and Lorthis, they had all sworn an oath to the lodge of Hod.



## CHAPTER VI

*“My dear friend,  
Although they belong to the ancient people, I believe that the ophidians  
sincerely wish to have you with us. While they pretend to mock our ambitions and  
our fragile existence, it is obvious they need your clones and our talents for  
necromancy. Furthermore, this alliance should allow us to prepare better for taking  
control over Cadwallon.*

*Your friend, D.”*

In small swigs, S’Erum drinks a burning liquor, a mix of water, honey and boiled spices. The liquid is a balm to his tired tongue.

S’Ardai is standing still before him. They have taken their places at each extremity of a long boat to isolate themselves at the northern end of the islet of Cults. The master archivist lets his arm dangle over the water. The nail of his index touches the surface with feigned nonchalance. The mist around them is a warm and nebulous screen.

“I don’t like what I saw,” says S’Erum in a muted voice.

A grimace distorts the master archivist’s old scales. The *sydion* hides once again behind his words.

“What did you see?”

“A dead one and his secrets.”

S’Ardai freezes. The points on his hair shirt crackle against his elderly skin. The boat pitches slightly.

“Give me the facts.”

“Not yet. Your cadaver raises many more questions than it settles. What was he working on?”

“I don’t know.”

“A solitary individual who lives alone, who provides the Erratum with its most precious works... And you leave him alone? You aren’t telling me anything, brother. Either you are senile or you are lying.”

“Be careful, *sydion*.”

“Answer me.”

“I trained him. He grew up here, among us. Protected and cared for by his brethren. Four sloughs before discovering our library, becoming one with it,

understanding it and feeling it better than me. I asked too much of him. For too long.”

“*The closed experiment...*” comments S’Erum neutrally. “Is that it?”

The *sydion* knows this utopian and unhealthy project well; it was born in the minds of a handful of Patriarchs. The objective of the closed experiment was to train an elite of thinkers confined in the Erratum, trained only by their own and educated via the thousands of works in the library. A virgin elite, intellectually superior, cut off from the outside.

“No brother can survive without having traveled to the surface,” the master archivist concedes. “But I believed in the closed experiment. The principle of training our children far from the miasmas of humanity was good.”

“A decadent principle. No book can describe humanity. No book can teach what I learned from living in their streets...”

“I know what you went through.”

A vague smile stretches the *sydion*’s jaws.

“I asked for the help of the neuromancers,” S’Ardai continues. “You understand. I wanted to... develop the steward’s imagination so that he would be happy traveling in thought only. I believed that Syhar drugs would help us. The neuromancers were very interested in the experiment, but they didn’t achieve any results. I stopped everything before it was too late. And I probably waited too long. S’Holth reacted poorly. He hid himself on the shores of this islet for many months. He didn’t speak to anyone. He refused all contact. If I came close, he ran away and disappeared for days on end. I did nothing more than have him watched.”

“Why keep him alive?”

“I don’t know. Maybe pride or remorse. I did everything I could to make the experiment a success. I treated him like a son. I hesitated, believe me. A few times, I drafted a note to the attention of the First Watchman to order his execution. I never could sign it.”

The master archivist stops, clears his throat and continues.

“He stayed away for more than a year... I understood much later that he acted knowingly. He stayed away to let his organism assimilate the drugs. He was afraid for us, for the library as well. The neuromancers had made him violent and irascible. Then he came back. At peace. He asked to see me and told me he wanted to become the Erratum’s steward.

“Even though he had never been to the surface...”

“Never.”

“You refused, I suppose.”

“You’re mistaken. I gave him a mission. Like a rite of passage... Rumors were circulating that the incipit of the *Encyclopedias* had been seen in Cadwallon.”

The *Encyclopedias* of Kyllion the Elder. The enormous work of a scholar, a human who had researched the origin of the universe.

"They're not of Kallienne?"

"The *Encyclopedias* are. But a thief managed to steal the incipit. A prestigious treasure and... useless. One page only that I would have liked to have here, however, within our walls."

"And S'Holth found it?"

"He went away for three years. He followed its trail to the edge of the Emerald Forest."

"Three years... S'Holth comes back and you appoint him your steward?"

"He became a disciple of S'Almir, his predecessor."

"I've heard of him. He died on the surface, right?"

"Killed by free leaguers. S'Holth succeeded him almost fifteen years ago."

S'Erum wonders whether the death of this S'Almir is worth investigating. From memory, he knows that the tragedy was purely circumstantial. On the face of it, the story ends there.

"What was S'Holth like during those years?" he asks.

"An unrelenting collector."

"There's nothing in his home."

"The closed experiment affected him more than we know. He saw the universe as virgin space gravitating around the Erratum. Although he did everything to get to the surface, his life, matrix and markers were here, in this library. It was his mother and his sanctuary. He often spoke about our place in history and the destiny of the Alliance. Through our books, he had acquired a biased view of the surface. He was a scholar. Never forget that. With extraordinary culture. He only went to S'Hysme's dinners on rare occasions, but each time, he was so condescending, so scornful of those who ignored the Erratum's treasures, that most of our brothers sought to flee his company."

"Enough to kill him? A brother he may have humiliated?"

"No... Our brothers respected him. He irritated people and sometimes put them ill at ease, but no one would have told him so. Each year, he hardened. His contacts with the surface forced him to become cautious and learn to fight."

"He *really* knew how to fight?"

"Better than some of my watchmen."

S'Erum is skeptical, but prefers not to show it.

"Tell me about the surface," he says. "The way S'Holth proceeded."

"A steward exists through his contacts. His vastly covered Cadwallon. No work escaped his search for long."

"Did you provide him with a list of works?"

"For the most part. He had a margin of maneuvers to acquire books in his name."

"That he kept?"

"No. Definitely not. He worked for the Alliance, the Erratum. His personal interest did not matter."

Did he have a refuge on the surface, perhaps?"

The master archivist's eyebrows arch:

"You're determined to sully his memory... "

"Someone has already done that for me. The murder was premeditated. The assassin did not act out of anger. He came to kill him. In my mind, your steward certainly hid something. The works that you are currently moving, where are they going?"

"For the time being, our slaves are gathering them under the Pillar. They will leave at the least alert."

"Where?"

With a glance, S'Ardai indicates that he does not wish to answer. The *sydion* reflects on the line of conduct to pursue. By law, he can force the master archivist to hand over this information. He finally decides that it is still too early to force this on him.

"Let's talk about S'Holth again," says S'Erum. "His satchel lay at the bottom of the pool."

"Ah... his satchel. It belonged to his former slave, an old scholar who accompanied him for years. He kept the satchel in memory of the human."

"It was empty. S'Ylice interrogated your watchmen. They confirmed that it was full when the steward came home."

"As far as I know, he didn't give our craftsmen anything after his return."

"In other words, he could have been killed for the contents of the satchel?"

"A theft..."

"Too simple."

"Why?"

"If theft was the only motive, the killer could have taken a chance without having to kill S'Holth. I don't believe it, in any event. Constriction is a confession. The assassin came to perform an execution. The content of the satchel may have been his prize or proof to lead us to him. The assassin entered because he was invited in. S'Holth trusted him. I discovered strange marks on the back of his head. A remnant of Light."

The old ophidian starts, causing the boat to pitch.

*Light*, he vibrates, *Light and treason. The Erratum and Clarity cannot meet in space or time.*

"I don't believe in an infiltration. I'm thinking of a weapon. In the form of claws."

*A brother would never have used a weapon of Clarity*, trembles S'Ardai.

"That's correct. The assassin therefore had the help of an accomplice. I've interrogated Maliek, the steward's slave. I question, however, his direct

involvement. The depth of the lesions are signs of exceptional strength..." S'Erum pauses, reflects, and asks, "Do brothers have *syhees* in their service?"

"I think S'Hysme has. As well as the First Watchman."

"A *syhee* could attack in that way."

"I need results to reassure our brothers."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Fire, destruction... forgetting. The Erratum is a treasure for the entire continent. Our themiurgists come here to bathe in the knowledge of our ancestors."

The end of his sentence is lost in a rattling of scales. *Imagine... our vellums licked, gnawed and tortured by flames... Flames cracking our windows, destroying our ivy and dalmenes... Elves running through the hallways of our libraries, pillaging and raping our knowledge... Blinding white Light... painful, filling the shadows, corrupt, revealing... Imagine, sydion, imagine and tremble with me.*

S'Erum imperceptibly nods his head.

"You were the one who wanted the Erratum to play this major role. You were the one who wanted to take the risk of gathering here a large part of the writings handed down by our ancestors. I've told you before I dislike this immense concentration. A sanctuary is worthless when it becomes crucial for others. For once, I share the Patriarchs' point of view. We have survived because of a single order: dispersion. Dispersion throughout the world without ever being at the mercy of one fatal event. A sanctuary falls... another is created. No one can get to us because we are nowhere. Our battle lives within each ophidian. To destroy us, they would have to kill all of us and our enemies haven't understood that yet. They hunt our sanctuaries and throw us into the undergrounds of their cities. Who cares? Our ancestors made the mistake of fighting an unnatural war, faces uncovered. You now resemble them. The Cadwë flame shines, as long as you don't get burned."

S'Ardaï has listened in silence. His body now exudes a spicy odor.

"Dispersion is decadence, my friend. Do you believe that by closing our sanctuaries, knowledge – our knowledge – we'd have the slightest change of enriching it and transmitting it to our sons? You say 'disperse.' I hear 'hiding.' The risk certainly exists. But until now, history have proved us right. I created the Erratum. I have given it everything. It's my life, my child."

S'Erum smiles.

"You admit it. And I don't blame you. You love this library with your heart. I respect that. Except behind that emotion is flesh. I've often seen Vice. Don't weaken."

"Are you threatening me in my home?"

"Your home?" replies the *sydion* with a steady glare.

"Without me, the Erratum ceases to exist. You know that."

"That is the worst thing of all. If you disappear this library could die with you."

"Do you believe the Patriarchs want me to fall?"

“Possibly, but I doubt that they are ready to risk the Erratum only to have you fall. You have become important, someone whose power within the Alliance is not properly measured. Until now, you have been considered an inoffensive scholar. Some may have believed that you might use the library as an instrument, a lever to...”

“For what? Power? I have power already. Our people have survived because of its knowledge. I am the thread that ties the Alliance to its past and its glory. I am the future of the Alliance.”

The two ophidians observe each other for long moments of silence. Both feel they have crossed the threshold of propriety. In this foggy, isolated cocoon, their confidence seems to be an avowal. They understand each other despite their deep disagreement on the best manner to fight the war. In the name of law and knowledge, both see themselves as hands extended between the sanctuaries of the Ophidian Alliance.

## CHAPTER VII

*“The Serpentine is a crucial elite for the Alliance. I draw your attention to its founder, S'Ymirion. Blind from birth, he taught the Serpentine to achieve excellence by training his disciples to use its enemy's vibrations as a target. This technique must be safely treasured and taught to our young brothers.”*

- Excerpt from an anonymous letter addressed to the Patriarchs of the sanctuary of Arionce.

The two ophidians separated with a knowing vibration. The master archivist, S'Ardäi, left S'Erum at the entrance of the Erratum, on the main islet protected by the watchmen.

S'Erdh, the first among them, welcomed the *sydion* in a spartan room located at the top of the highest watchtower. Nine sloughs have not affected the brute force emanating from his body. His rust-colored scales, the sign of rigorous training, overlap like plates of armor. His massive face lacks subtlety and betrays a certain nervousness. A base odor follows him, like the smell of a simple viper.

S'Erum senses that he has to deal with him head on and avoid wasting time with common courtesies. S'Erdh observes him with reserved hostility. S'Erum knows he is not welcome. The *sydion's* authority and skills basically encroach those of a First Watchman.

“I was just going to go on rounds,” he says, picking up a long scimitar and sliding it into its sheath. “Let's talk about it on the way.”

S'Erum accepts and follows him outside. They cross a first bridge and the *sydion* begins to speak.

Tell me about your role in the Erratum.”

“I'm in charge of security for the sanctuary.”

“How many are you?”

“Twenty-one, including six Serpentine watchmen.”

“All marksmen, I suppose.”

“The best,” confirms S'Erdh.

“And the others?”

“Constrictor warriors. Trained by me.”

“If my memory is correct, you are in charge of logistics for the Erratum.”

“Correct. One convoy almost every month. We buy through intermediaries in the sewers. Mostly food for the slaves. And a few orders from S'Hysme for the inn.”

“Did you know S'Holth well?” asks S'Erum, Watching for the First Watchman's reaction.

“He stank,” says S'Erdh, emotionless.

“The smell of the surface?”

“I saw him as rarely as I could manage. In my opinion, he was a danger to the library.”

“Did you follow him up to the surface?”

“At first, yes.”

“Who did he see up there? Regular contacts?”

“I only know one. A certain Antic. I never saw him, but his name came up often. S'Holth met him at the obsidian's tavern.”

“Other names?”

“No. Nobody mixed in his business. Not even S'Ardaï.”

“Does his death make things easier for you?”

“I'm delighted,” he admits without hesitation.

Silence. In front of them, two buildings appear. S'Erdh points to the large one.

“Art. Painting, sculpture, tales, music...”

He points to the other narrower and higher building.

“S'Enkz, our master craftsman, exhibits very valuable instruments there.”

“S'Holth owned a harp. Did it come from this museum?”

The First Watchman's temperature changes significantly.

“I think so. Ask S'Enkz.”

The two ophidians follow their path on the eastern bank of the islet of Arcs.

“How do you explain that a murder was committed under your nose?” S'Erum suddenly demands.

The First Watchman remains unperturbed. No variation in temperature, not even a shiver.

“I am responsible for the inviolability of the Erratum so that our brothers and guests can study in tranquility.”

A programmed response, almost mechanical. S'Erum brushes it aside with a flick of the hand.

“You were watching the steward. Didn't you see anything?”

He was free in his movements and his intimacy. I had him carefully searched when he came back from the surface and I personally interrogated him.”

“I thought that he stank...”

“Interrogations were a necessary evil.”

“Were you the one to interrogate him the last time?”

“I was away. Remember this: S'Holth was a ghost. You were lucky if you saw him once a month. He very rarely wandered in the Erratum. We sometimes saw him



at the inn, but other than that, he was happy at home. He didn't visit other islets."

"Where were you on that night?"

"Hunting. S'Hysme liked me to take our guests."

"Hunting humans?"

"Exclusively. Slaves that are ill or rebel against the enskëm."

The two ophidians leave the islet of Arts behind them and cross a stone bridge side by side heading in a straight line towards the inn.

"Who decided to organize this hunt?" asks S'Erum.

"S'Hysme."

The *sydion* nods his head. He feels the assassin's trail once again leads to the inn.

"When did the hunt start?"

The First Watchman hesitates.

"About one... one thirty in the morning."

"You were heading the hunt... I suppose witnesses will confirm that."

"We were dispersed in the neighborhood of the islet of History. The slave's trail took us to the doors of the main building. I went in alone to flush him out and offer him to our guests."

"Who is in charge of providing slaves to the Erratum?"

"This sanctuary does not follow the same rules as others. Our brothers almost never leave. Our guests give us slaves."

"So you were not there when the steward returned. Who interrogated him?"

S'Irgeï. To my knowledge, he didn't report anything suspicious. He told S'Ylice that the satchel was full. It contained various works, five or six. He can't remember. He didn't bother to write down the titles."

"He must be able to say whether they were valuable works? Books of magic spells? Did he feel any spells, see any glyphs?"

"S'Irgeï belongs to the Serpentine. He lives with his weapon and dreams of the surface."

"Did you train him?"

"Too well. Wanting to keep the very best, I sometimes forget that the library smothers our warriors. The burden of the Erratum takes the edge off their instinct. S'Irgeï can't stand being here anymore, watching and waiting for an enemy that fails to come. He hates books and says they're a sign of weakness."

"The satchel was empty. The books disappeared. S'Ardaï checked with the craftsmen."

"That was useless. S'Holth went straight home."

S'Erum stops. The First Watchman soon does likewise and turns around.

*I saw the steward, he shudders, his exhalation was like a wave on water. I was on a terrace of History. The slave twisted in front of me. I smelled the steward. An atrocious smell. A human one. He went west. On a boat. Alone.*

S'Erum refuses the vibrating dialogue and continues in a neutral tone.

"Where did he go?"

The First Watchman sighs.

"Home. He accosted at the islet of Cults in any event. After that, I don't know. I was taking care of the slave."

"Was he alone? Was anyone following him?"

"No one. When we interrogated S'Irgeï, I compared times. They fit: once the search was over, the steward boarded a boat to go straight home."

"Did the hunt end long afterwards? Back at the inn, did the guests see anything?"

"I took the initiative of asking the question before you arrived. They didn't see anything."

The two ophidians continue their walk together in silence along the eastern side of the inn.

"S'Ylice discovered the body," S'Erum thinks aloud. "Why? What was he doing at the steward's?"

The First Watchman's eyes narrow.

"Taking delivery of the works," says S'Erdh.

"So, he knew that the steward was back? Who told him?"

"S'Irgeï."

"Did he tell you that?"

"No, but its common procedure."

"Fine. In that case, was the murderer lucky? In theory, he couldn't know when S'Irgeï would alert the Pillar and, more importantly, when S'Ylice would decide to visit the steward. Do you see where I'm heading?"

"S'Ylice could have surprised the assassin."

"Unless he is guilty or an accomplice."

"Let me put myself in the place of the assassin. If I'm aware of the procedure, I can be sure that a slave will tell me when S'Ylice leaves the Pillar."

"That's possible, yes. Does S'Ylice have his own slaves?"

"Not that I know of. But anyone could have done it."

"How many slaves are there in the Erratum?"

"In all, about a hundred."

"Too many."

S'Erum slows down and leads the First Watchman under the foliage of a dalmene.

"You're not a scholar," he says. "What are you doing here, S'Erdh?"

The question visibly bothers the First Watchman.

"I wanted to found a sanctuary more than thirty years ago," he whispers.

"You were a Founder..."

"... a renegade. I didn't ask the Patriarchs."

S'Erum stiffens. In his mind, the Foundations Laws played a major role in the controlled development of the Ophidian Alliance. A Founder's responsibility is equal to that of a Patriarch. A Founder is a creative spark, the soul and strength of a future sanctuary. He federates and channels the energy of the brothers gathered in its name. He guides an entire community by abiding by its laws. He imposes a mark, *his* mark, a reflection of his personality and ambitions.

A long time ago, S'Erum fought so that the accusation of renegade Foundation would be considered similar to treason and a sufficient motive to petition for the death penalty. The First Watchmen defies the *sydion* with his eyes.

"I acted in the, interest of the Alliance," he says gravely. "And you didn't understand... You, the *sydions*, didn't, nor did the Patriarchs. The Ophidian Alliance must develop by instinct. You don't realize how impatient our warrior brothers are becoming. I'm too old to follow them now, but I know that their number is growing, that they dream of conquests and blood, and they will soon take up the battle. Your war really isn't a war. An ophidian is meant to fight. He is born in battle, reveals himself in a battle, a real battle... a battle of bodies, venom and blood."

"Instinct corrupts, brother."

"You're like the others, *sydion*, too cowardly to accept our ancestors' heritage. You are turning your back on the very essence of the Alliance."

"Archaic thoughts. A return to animal behavior, a refusal to rise above it... You are regressive, S'Erdh. A traitor."

The tension between the two Serpents is tangible. Intimidation is communicated through a subtle change of temperature, a stormy wave that runs over their scales and brightens their stare. S'Erum notes a combination of pleasure and excitement in the First Watchman. S'Erdh is savoring this moment and the sight of a *sydion* tense with instinct.

*There... vibrates the First Watchman. You can see yourself as you truly are.*

S'Erdh wants a hand-to-hand fight that ends with a winner, but S'Hysme's peremptory vibration puts a brutal end to the confrontation.

*We have the assassin,* declares the innkeeper, coming towards them.

## CHAPTER VIII

*“The psyches’ art is one of reflection. By giving birth to a precise replica of the victim, a psyche can sow the seeds of the Obscure and create chaos in the heart of enemy kingdoms. Lies and manipulation are the cornerstones of our reign. Illusory creatures generated by psyches must become the masters of our future slaves.”*

- Introduction to the *Book of Slavery*. Two copies are available at the Erratum.

Unusual confusion reigns in the inn.

A theft. With the discovery of the steward's murder, the rumor has rapidly spread. Boats arrive from the four corners of the Erratum and appear through the fog off the banks of the islet when the *sydion* sets out behind the venerable S'Hysme.

S'Hysme moves forward with difficulty, his rings packed together, visibly troubled and unhappy to be forced to leave his throne. A slave has paid for the master's irritation with his life and is lying in the hallway, his chest collapsed. S'Erum passes the body and follows S'Hysme into a spacious room. Close to the pool, two guards stand by an ophidian wearing a long toga of black silk.

The Serpent is at least ten sloughs old, as evidenced by the color of his scales and his deep sockets. A tired and crippled creature attempting to maintain his dignity under the glacial glare of the innkeeper. At his feet, in the midst of the remnants of a broken chest, lie six books of spells bound in leather.

“A thief... You were right,” hisses S'Hysme.

The voice is bitter. In the innkeeper's mind, not only has the guest tarnished the inn's reputation but also that of the library. The Erratum's hospitality is a secular tradition, a tacit law known throughout all of the sanctuaries.

S'Erum sees the sparks of anger, the arm ready to strike his face. He raises a firm hand to S'Hysme's.

“You are not in charge. Let me deal with it.”

The innkeeper hisses with rage and moves to a corner of the room. S'Erum rises to the guest's height.

“Your name,” he demands.

The ophidian introduces himself with his thermal name: S'Arayam, a psyche from the sanctuary of Black Dawn.

A psyche. In other words, a spy working behind the scenes, an ophidian who was raised to live and think like his victim so as to reconstruct the slightest details of

his existence, who observed him, noting and penetrating his daily life to make the victim live again through a reflection, an illusion fully created through the magic of typhonism. A psyche lives like a ghost in the traces of his victim until the day he decides to go ahead with the substitution, to eliminate the model and replace it with an illusion.

S'Erum is wary of these psyches who have become puppeteers, especially those who work with humans. He fears the mimicry, the assimilation, the baseness of the antics, the crucial moment when the master of illusions comes to love his creation, when pride conquers duty. He has seen and even executed psyches broken by years of dupery, lies and manipulation. Worse yet, he has observed some of them take delight in their power, intoxicated by the fanaticism of simpletons.

S'Arayam repels him. The odor of humans sticks to his scales. It is obvious that he is no longer used to living among his brothers and that the presence of the two watchmen disturbs him.

"Calm down," says S'Erum.

The guest winces at the order.

*Not guilty...* cries his body. *I am not guilty...*

"I'll be the one to decide."

S'Erum bends over the books of magic spells and recognizes the same odor as the one from S'Holth's satchel.

"Did you kill the steward?" he asks nonchalantly.

The creature tenses. S'Hysme fidgets and shakes. The watchmen, holding the prisoner by his arms, increase their pressure, causing him to let out a slight hiss of pain.

"No, I did not kill him," says the psyche.

S'Erum nods his head.

"How do you explain their presence?" he asks, pointing to the books of spells.

"I can't explain."

The *sydion* turns around and addresses the innkeeper.

"He's not the one."

He then turns to the psyche and motions the two watchmen away. S'Hysme's knits his brows.

"Remove your toga," orders S'Erum.

*Humiliation...* the psyche vibrates.

The *sydion's* resolved expression convinces him to obey, however. With slow and practiced movements, he undoes the fastening of his toga and lets it slide to the floor.

S'Erum feels only slight pity for the broken body. The psyche survived the expert hands of technomancers, the Syhar allies of the ophidians. His scales are riddled with rivets, black and iridescent cankers bordered by brownish crusts. S'Arayam has lived through the worst to move like his brothers, but, in return, the

Dark Principle flows through his blood and devours him from the inside like poison. A simple reprieve. Death that will soon strike in exchange for a fragile freedom to move.

"My spine..." hisses S'Arayam. "Broken by constriction."

S'Erum nods. The psyche could never have killed the steward. The slightest effort or pressure would break the invisible threads of the Dark Principle that run over the surface of his scales.

"A crude diversion," confirms S'Erum, speaking to the innkeeper. "You know it as well as I do... The books of spells have turned up too fast. A simple investigation and here they are, easy to see, in the psyche's chest... What I don't understand, however, is the murderer's intent, I no longer think it was premeditated."

He bends over to pick up the robe and hands it back to the psyche.

"You can dress."

S'Arayam slips into his toga in embarrassed silence. The innkeeper waits for the two watchmen to leave before apologizing to his guest.

"I made a mistake, brother. I was angry."

"Don't worry," exhales the psyche in a low voice.

"Someone entered your room. I can put a watchman in front of your door if you like."

"That would be useless. I'm leaving."

S'Hysme sighs with disappointment. The Erratum's hospitality has been tarnished under his own roof. He is fragile, hurt and humiliated, just like his guest. With heavy undulations, he takes leave of the psyche and exits the room.

"How long have you been here?" asks S'Erum when the door closes.

"Nine days. I am almost never here. I work..."

"What are you studying?"

"*The Illusion of the Shadows* by S'Orobĭn."

"You are going to die soon, right?"

The question, asked in a neutral tone, makes the psyche tremble.

"Yes," he admits.

"How long?"

"Two or three months... I won't live to slough again."

S'Erum does not insist. Before him is a brother imprisoned in a world of pain, a devoted servant of the Alliance, capable of enduring daily torture to achieve that which his brothers have trained him for throughout his existence.

The *sydion* knows *The Illusion of the Shadows* well: a bible, a reference, the only copy of which is found in this library. S'Orobĭn created the first perfect illusion, the art and manner of reconstituting all the parts of a human anatomy through the magic of typhonism. Thanks to him, no one can detect the slightest difference between a real human and a substitute animated by a psyche.

The illusion is fed from its model. When the model dies, it rots in the same manner and maintains the same illusion until its death. Only the greatest psyches can thus kill their creation.

S'Erum does not know the reasons that caused the psyche to want his illusion to die, nor the impact that the premature death of his target will have on the ophidian cause. However, he knows that S'Arayam survives only because of this conviction, this ultimate quest that will cause the death of his masterpiece to coincide with his own.

S'Erum leaves the room, taking the books of spells with him. He feels a need to see Ayane, to restore his spirit in her company. He finds her sleeping and stands quietly on the threshold of the room to gaze at her. He likes to surprise her in these moments of abandonment.

She is lying against a wall, her arms tucked under her face, her legs slightly bene. No ophidian can penetrate a human mind at times like these. The conscience is an inviolable territory, a fantastic space that escapes the *enskēm's* power. S'Erum could act first and crush this freedom. Most of his brothers erect solid barriers in the mind of their *syhees* so that sleeping becomes a vital function only, an organic reflex. He has never come to this, fascinated in spite of himself by this virgin territory where Ayane's consciousness freely flows. She never tells of her dreams. There again, he could force, violate and dig through her memories. He prefers the mystery of a human dream outside of his control.

S'Erum slides over to her, bends and gazes at the scars on her stomach. A sticky, cruel memory, a memory of blood, of raw skin... He remembers her lips blue from cold, the extreme paleness of her face sealed in tragic dignity, her trembling nostrils... Despite her pain, she neither screamed nor cried when he dug through her open belly to remove the infant's body. He vividly remembers the snow, the black umbilical cord and the snowflakes falling on the tiny blue body.

Ayane's eyelids flutter.

"Master..."

When she sits up, he almost feels guilty for interrupting her dreams.

"You were sleeping," he says coldly. "You didn't wait for me."

He slaps her cheek. A slap meant to cause pain, claws open. She vacillates, apologizes. He hits her again, then moves towards the *eyzom* and coils between its branches.

Ayane stands up, wipes the blood flowing down her neck with her fingers, and obeys when he motions her to sit beside him.

"Too many buried secrets," he hisses.

"Master."

"I'm surrounded by lies. I feel a trap... the trail is concealed."

"A plot against you, master?"

“Maybe.”

“Should I read the necropsy to you?”

“No.”

He closes his eyes.

“There are two possibilities,” he says softly. “Two assassins or just one. One who ably kills by constriction, one who hides the books of spells with S'Arayam, hoping to deceive us... And the other: the one who chooses his moment to strike, to mark the steward's slave, who is capable of introducing a weapon of Light into the library and using it in all impunity...”

“S'Ylice has left a list of occupants,” says Ayane, handing him a pile of parchments held together by a silver clip.

S'Erum glances through it. Only the ophidians and guests are listed. The slaves are indicated by a simple number under their master's surname.

S'Ardai, of course, with approximately fifteen archivists. A master craftsman, S'Enkz, and his six disciples. Twenty warriors under the orders of S'Erdh, the First Watchman... S'Hysme, the innkeeper, and his thirty or so slaves...

S'Ylice has noted the *syhee* slaves, four women who all depend on an archivist. At the bottom of the page, S'Ylice confirms that no one passed through the entrance door within the last forty-eight hours.

“Master, do you think that the assassin is still among us?”

“Yes, and maybe some accomplices.”

“Do you have a motive?”

The *sydion*'s rings stiffen.

“A motive... I know almost nothing about the steward. A scholarly misanthropist, with no apparent history...”

“The harp, master. And this isolated house without a single book. You said a misanthropist. If it were me, I would have kept the works at home. Do you know if he visited other islets?”

“The First Watchman says not.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Go to the surface. To meet S'Holth and follow his trail.”

“Am I coming with you?”

“You will stay here.”

His rings slide between the branches. He seeks a more comfortable position and orders the *syhee* to bring him a chest. He wants his flowers. He wants to feel the intoxication of ashes to prepare for his return to Cadwallon.



## CHAPTER IX

*“Cadwallon has affirmed its independence since its creation. Its guilds enter into ambiguous alliances with the peoples who fight each other for control over it. They also oppose adventurers gathered in free leagues whose mission is to protect the Jewel of Lanever.”*

- Report made to King Gorgyn of Alahan.

S'Erum makes his way along the walls of a descending alleyway. Wearing his heavy greatcoat, he advances, bent over, his face hidden in the shadow of his hood.

The shady reputation of the neighborhood led him to remove 18 from its leather holster. He holds the weapon in his left hand. The grip's warmth is reassuring against his palm. He likes feeling its ivory, it's clear and harmonious curves. The barrel is long, twisted and balanced by a mercury pendulum, and brushes against his scales. 18 has never let him down since the precious day S'Erum received it from the hands of an ophidian craftsman.

A supple and solid wire links the underside of the handle to an accessory made of lead, metal and glass, attached to his jaws. S'Erum learned to understand the complex mechanisms that govern the weapon's cycle so that the venom, drawn directly from its source reaches the chamber and flows within the bullets. He is used to the wheels grating between his teeth and the pinch of the two needles, entering his glands to collect the poison as soon as he touches the silver handle. The freshness of the venom is guaranteed, as is the certainty of the bullet liberating an extremely virulent poison that attacks the nerves and shatters the victim in a few seconds.

He thinks back to the first time and the filthy inn in the outskirts of Luishana. In those days, he still wore his old leather muzzle and had to hide in the basement of the inn to remove it. A humid, mossy, cold place. He remembers the barrels piled against the wall and can still smell the pungent odor of plonk that formed small, dark puddles on the cobbled floor. The darkness helped him forget the city and its odors. He removed the muzzle with hesitation, then staggered and crushed a barrel when the cave's miasmas struck his brain like a wave of red blood. It took him a moment to regain his spirits and coordinate the movements of his hand to open the box and remove 18 from its casing.

18... The number represents an ideal temperature, the exact temperature at which venom reaches its maximum effectiveness. The mechanism's genius is based on that number, the manner in which the poison circulates and cools from its extraction from the glands to its arrival in the dedicated compartment within the bullet. A real timepiece based on the magic of Darkness.

The first time, then... and his emotion when he arms the weapon. Feeling a quick, intense and almost exalting pain when the needles enter his glands and pump the precious liquid with surgical precision. Time is counted in heartbeats. The insides of 18 crackle and crunch right to the cord... A dry sound: a bullet has received its portion and slides easily into the chamber. The weapon is armed.

S'Erum chose not to shoot in this cellar. He went out into the free air, wandered through the night and randomly selected his victim among the furtive shadows haunting the quays at daybreak. He entered a house, massacred the family living there and went onto the terrace where, facing the sea, he listened to the vibrations rising from the port. He chose the lively steps of a child, a difficult, moving and unpredictable target. He followed the echo of his sandals and advanced towards him in thought, following in his trail like a shadow. Focused on the child, he could hear his heartbeat and made it his marker, his compass, so as to anticipate the precise moment when his aim would cross the boy's path.

18 gently hissed, like a sigh, when the bullet burst from the gun, passed the quay and struck the child in the center of his chest. S'Erum did not hear the victim's cry. He only saw his arms and legs convulse before the body hit the ground, with an erratic and hopeless flapping in the air... A sublime pantomime. A heart filled with life that suddenly races and, in the same fraction of a second, explodes like a wineskin. Later, he regretted this fleeting pleasure and the certainty at the time that led him to believe that nothing was equal to a life taken and enjoyed as a real luxury. One does not waste future slaves. The ophidian people are responsible for this breeding grounds the bipeds call Aarklash.

For the time being, the gun's wire is attached to his wrist and to the discreet mechanisms that allow it to draw the *sydion's* blood into the bullets, like venom, and to confer upon them the prince of Darkness. Less effective, but sometimes useful to contaminate the servants of Light.

Ophidians' Tavern.

S'Erum stands still and raises his eyes to the sign cracking above an old wooden door. He readjusts his greatcoat and crosses the threshold.

An odor of sweat, cheap tobacco and adulterated liquor. A sordid place where a handful of emaciated thieves are gathered. S'Erum distinguishes a tattoo of the Black Eagle on their naked arms, the emblem of a moribund league of outlaws. A pale man is standing behind a simple counter: a board set on barrels. A greasy lock of hair hides the tavern keeper's forehead.

His skin is chalky and his cheeks are hollow. Through his open shirt, one can see a boney chest, marked by the whip of the ducal militia. He groans and exchanges his dishcloth for a club laden with nails.

The few conversations brutally stop. Hanging from the ceiling, a filthy glass lantern swings in a draught. S'Erum crosses the room to the counter in this tense silence and distinctly sees the tavern keeper's hand tighten on the club's handle. The human's body stinks of fear.

"Antic," S'Erum softly says. "Where is he?"

Behind him, the thieves start moving and bustling in the room reeking of tobacco smoke. The tavern keeper wipes the hair from his forehead.

"Who is asking for *her*?"

"A friend of the steward's."

The man blinks, moistens his lips and glances at the room. The veins on his forehead swell, his breast rises unevenly. S'Erum tenses. The sweat forming at the tavern keepers' temples exhales a scent more complex than he thought. He bends over and flicks his tongue. More than fear, he feels a troubling excitement.

He feels a sword being removed from its sheath behind him... the breathing of a thief slowly advancing.

S'Erum does not turn around. Not yet. His face emerges from the shadows of his hood and makes the tavern keeper move backward.

"Will you be paid to die today?" asks the *sydion*.

Dorko, the tavern master, quivers, his fingers whitened by his grasp on his weapon. He thinks about the reward offered by the other ophidian, a small fortune that would allow him and the remaining followers of the Black Eagle to recreate the league from its ashes and seek the pardon of the ducal authorities. A dream enhanced by alcohol, a desperate dream that destiny puts at his feet.

The past and the future clash in his head. He sees himself as a child, standing proudly on the counter like a lookout under the tender gaze of Lilac, his mother. At supptime, the customers would come in great numbers to the Zephyr Inn. Sitting or standing, a tankard in their hands, they were a true sea of humans that his father pushed through with his shoulders, guided by his son's voice. Danger makes the memories clearer. He sees his life pass by without understanding how he ended up here, in this sinister hovel, while he could be sitting on the rock over there, among the plaintive cliffs, where children of his age met before going out to welcome the fishermen. His father had died. He ran away and took his chance, like so many others, in the immensity of Cadwallon so as to never again see the red eyes of a mother he thought was invincible.

The wine-colored eyes of the ophidian interrogate his soul. He could still motion to his companions to move back. He could let go of the club, unearth the two hundred ducats hidden in his smalt vegetable garden and start his life again to find his mother. But this reward... six thousand ducats, enough to enroll young

recruits, plan one or more important attacks and restore the Black Eagle's former glory. His seven companions have already chosen. Greed and, more significantly, hope, have diluted the fear that distorts their insides. He knows that the battle is unequal, that this room could become the league's coffin.

The ophidian's tongue cracks a centimeter from his face like the tip of a whip. A final warning. As if the creature, in a magnanimous gesture, were offering him a way out.

This dry crack is enough for Torgash, the pillar of the Black Eagle, a colossal and crafty devil embittered by misfortune. Maybe he thought that the ophidian had started to attack or maybe his nerves let go... He plunges forward, his sword brandished in both hands. A war cry escapes from his throat. Two meters separate him from the ophidian's massive body.

Dorko thinks he sees regret in the creature's eyes before he tums in a crinkle of cloth. In a flash, he sees Torgash's sword suspended in the air, his mouth open, grasping, his neck swollen by his efforts.

The ophidian lets the attack happen and awaits the very last minute before turning from the sword's path. Torgash can do nothing when the scaly arms emerge from the depths of the cloth. It all happens too quickly for Dorko to see the impact. He feels a warm liquid spray over his chest before the beheaded body, thrown by the impact, pounds against the counter and wipes it clean with a crash.

Silence settles. A final glass shakes and crashes on the ground. The Black Eagle thieves stay still.

S'Erum remains immobile as well. Blood still flows on his arm. His right hand, open like a bird's claw, brandishes Torgash's head.

Stunned and horrified in the midst of the mess on the counter, Dorko pushes aside the body stranded at his feet and feels around him for his club. He finally finds it between two boards and stands up as best he can. Blood is flowing abundantly from his thigh riddled with splinters.

He has seen the worst in this lowly city, but nothing compares to the decapitated head of a friend whose eyelids are still fluttering.

At that precise moment, he understands the absurdity and madness of this battle even though he knows these creatures from the beginning of time. He had known the one they call the steward for almost fifteen years. He had welcomed him in fear, attentive to his smallest desires, and took advantage of his generosity. Without him, without the ducats he spent carelessly, this tavern would have closed a long time ago. Who came on that night with the promise of a reward? Why wasn't it the steward, but another he had never seen before?

Tist, Torgash's younger brother, is standing, his eyes moist and lips trembling. A dagger in each hand, he has reached the end, gnawed at by contradictory

emotions. Rage, fear and sadness alternate on his young face devastated by pox. His friends observe him in silence as they move towards the entrance.

"I'm going... I'm going to make you bleed!" he shouts.

He stutters and stops. A sob shakes his shoulders and ends in a nervous snicker. The *sydion* turns away and looks at the tavern keeper.

"Where can I find Antic?" he says in a metallic voice.

"Turn around!" shouts Tist.

Dorko is paralyzed, his arms dangling. He feels like his club weighs a ton and finally drops it. He wants to smile at the creature, but can only grimace.

"Up there," he murmurs, pointing to the ceiling. "In the attic."

"Who paid?"

"An ophidian..."

"Describe him."

Tist loses patience, enraged by the creature's indifference. He moves forward one step and looks downward, surprised by the rattling of scales. The ophidian has not moved, but his tail has reached him and is oscillating between his feet. He looks up and meets Dorko's gaze. Sincere surprise distorts his face when the tail rises up to meet his neck. His last gasp never escapes his lips. The vise suddenly tightens. His cervical vertebrae give in with a crack.

Dorko bites his lips until they bleed and feels a sticky liquid flow between his thighs. The urine drops onto his old shoes. My goodness, I'm peeing on myself, he thinks, when vermilion froth floods over Tist's chin.

The ophidian's tail is still holding his victim upright. The heads impossible angle gets the better of the survivors. All, excepting Dorko, run to the door and disappear in a wave of pure panic.

S'Erum pays not attention to them. He has neither the strength nor the desire to follow them, although this means taking a useless risk. The escapees could warn the free leaguers and start a hunt that could force him to retreat.

He abandons the boy's body and throws his big brother's bloody head as far as he can.

"Like you..." says the tavern keeper. "Larger still. In a fur coat. I don't know. I didn't see his face..."

"I don't *smell* his odor. When was he here?"

"Last night. Just after midnight."

"What did he say?"

"That an ophidian would come. Not the steward. Another one. You... He told me about your greatcoat. Six thousand ducats... quite a sum, right?"

The human's voice breaks. S'Erum asks himself about this person. The ambush once again looks like a clumsy attempt. Why not expose him to the free leaguers, a more radical and more certain way to getting rid of him? Did the murderer risk leaving the library in person to come here? Was it an accomplice?

Dorko, in any event, can say no more.  
“Take me to Antic,” orders S’Erum.

## CHAPTER X

*“The existence of Vortiris, the reptile god of the ophidians, follows a cycle. He is born in the form of a destructive dragon that sets fire to Creation. Then, satisfied with the massacre, he becomes the wise serpent with multiple features. Finally, he discovers Truth and turns into a solar salamander. He illuminates creation before dying, exhausted. A new cycle can then begin.”*

- Excerpt from Major Ophidian Legends, by Arenh-Zaan, a syhar True Born.

The wooden staircase leading to the upper floors barely holds his weight and creaks with each step. Dorko walks up first, his legs shaking, a candle held at eye level. He stops at the last landing and points to a trapdoor in the ceiling.

“There it is,” he murmurs.

“Wait for me here. If someone comes, call out.”

The tavern keeper nods his head a few times with a servile and grateful smile. S'Erum stretches out and, in a fluid movement, brutally breaks the trapdoor and pulls himself through. The attic is dark. A vast rectangular room with sloped walls, sheltering dusty shambles of uncertain proportions. S'Erum isolates the glowing specters of small rodents frightened by his presence. The rats squeal and run away.

A shadow moves in the darkness. Cramped under the low roof, S'Erum quivers.

An Akkyshan. Draped in a cape of dark velvet, the elf's face is emaciated, her arms and legs are scrawny and her hands are covered in downy, white fur. The spider-elves rarely venture beyond the edge of the Forest of Webs. S'Erum brushes the trigger of 18. He has seen the spider, a tarantula, blotted against the Akkyshan's bald head. Behind the spider, he notes crystalline threads of a web disappearing into the depths of the attic.

Antic cannot be more than twenty years of age. An adolescent, almost a child, with two slate-colored marbles as eyes gazing at him with curiosity.

“You're bothering us ...” she murmurs.

Her voice is hoarse. The sound is unpleasant, like the crunching of a grindstone. The spider slides from her head to her cheek and continues down to rest on her shoulder.

“Did the steward forget us?” she asks with a strange smile.

“He's dead.”

“Are you replacing him?”

"I'm looking for his killer."

She slides over to an old leather armchair and delicately sits down.

"You'll have to repair the trapdoor," she says, brushing the spider off her shoulders. "Aleth. My best friend. Do you like her?"

"She suits you..." replies the *sydion*.

He wants to be careful. The atmosphere of the attic is intimidating and makes him nervous.

"He's dead... the steward is dead..." she says, with a sinister smile.

She suddenly stands up to meet his height.

"The steward was good to us. You have to find his assassin."

"He came here last night."

S'Erum sees the hairs bristle on the Akkyshan's hands.

"I didn't see him. Nor hear him," she says. "I'm not here at night. I walk through the city."

"A few days ago, the steward came to see you..."

Antic's face freezes. She suddenly turns her back and takes the spider in her hands.

"Antic," he says softly. "I need your help."

The Akkyshan pretends not to hear and continues to pet the spider's abdomen.

S'Erum moves forward and struggles to move his face above her shoulder. Antic tenses but does not move. He prudently flickers his tongue and joins the elf's caresses.

"She likes that," whispers Antic.

Three, maybe four minutes pass by before the *sydion* dares to stop his caresses. He cannot tell whether the Akkyshan sees his gesture as a necessary offering, but she seems to relax slowly.

"S'Holth came," she finally says. "He was hungry... so hungry. His eyes were sparkling."

"He was hungry?"

"He always needed more. Old ones... used, cracked, dusty. Inhabited..."

"Books?"

S'Erum shivers. He notices a glimmer of disdain shining in the Akkyshan's eyes.

"Yes, books," she murmurs. "He will never be hungry again."

She sighs and returns to the armchair.

"I wandered around a lot for him. He took everything but it was never enough. All those that had been touched, all those that had lived. Old books of magic spells, yes, he touched them like a lover's body."

Her eyelids descend like a curtain. The hairs on her hands quiver under an invisible breeze.

"I liked to see his desire for the books of magic spells. His eyes shone..."



S'Erum feels his heartbeat accelerate. An intuition starts taking form in his mind.

"His eyes shone," he repeats. "And his tongue?"

"Sinuous. With reflections. It vibrated and danced above the books of magic spells."

She shakes her shoulders and sighs.

"Sometimes he lost his sense of time. He stayed here waiting for his chest."

"Did he have a satchel?"

She smiles.

"He reserved his satchel for the works on the list."

His master's list. The other books of spells, those he preferred, he put away in his chests."

"Are his chests here?"

"No, he took them with him. One by one."

The *sydion* nods his head. He has one more question to ask to make sure he is correct.

"Antic, did his eyes change color?"

Despite the darkness, he thinks the Akkyshan's pale cheeks redden.

"We loved his eyes," she whispers. "They changed almost every time."

S'Erum slowly inhales.

Vice.

The symptoms never lie. As soon as the Dark Principle filtered by the ophidian cornea becomes unstable, the *depths of the eye* generate a real prismatic chaos. Eye colors change from one night to another, forcing the Tainted One to use typhonic illusions to escape his brothers' attention.

S'Erum feels dirty. He would like to slide into a pool with Ayane. He has touched the body of a Tainted One. He was not careful...

Evil, however, is not contagious. It lies dormant in each ophidian, like a sleeping beast. No one can say how the beast awakens, the moment when one's conscience sways into unknown territory to give in to the call of Vice.

Twenty years ago, S'Erum came to the Erratum to read the old books of magic spells with their scent of days gone by. Like herbariums, the works contained the memories of the people's ancestors, the Patriarchs and the greatest mnemosians.

Dead languages. They tell of the past and how History has never stopped pursuing the serpent people despite research conducted over centuries to prevent evil. S'Erum goes back twenty years, moved and fragile in the presence of the thick volumes in front of him set out by a silent archivist. An instant of gravity as he goes through the hick pages and smells their scent of years gone by. The dead languages surviving on vellum resemble twigs. They carry an intoxicating odor that invades his consciousness... A sharp dream, a trance, no matter the name it carries: he sees, feels, hears...

His perception is blinded by visions from the depths of the past.

For a brief instant he floats through the tales of a mnemosian in the trace of six original dragons emerging from the Void. A fugitive and powerful scene reducing him to anguish. Ophidians have died under the hold of these visions. He resists and fights to remain conscious on the threshold of these origins and contemplates the protective flight of the dragons. Their majestic wings flap to deliver a message as if the wind whispered their desire: they disperse within the Elemental Realms after capturing their creator, the god Desire.

S'Erum remembers having swooned and grabbing the edges of the desk to keep his balance under the archivist's wary gaze.

Another page... another dead language. Breathtaking perceptions, confused and deafening thoughts. He dives into a universe of divine resonance. Only the mnemonic filter protects him from madness. Following the trail of the dragons, he realizes that giving up freedom to Desire could destroy Creation and that they must become guardians of its sanctuary, the jail keepers of its prison.

Then, a dazzling sensation in the midst of this chaos. He almost faints. The archivist orders him to rest for a night before continuing the experiment. S'Erum obviously obeys without imagining that his catalepsy will last four days and that the master archivist himself will come to wake him from his dreamless slumber. He continues reading, ready now to confront the chaos. He bends but does not submit to Vortiris' frigid anger, the only dragon that continues to seek his creator's freedom and escapes to create an empire on another continent, Belgron.

Finally, the Alliance, the origins and the conception of a people. The dead languages remind him of the oath of a dragon and a lord-magi, Celebdel, whose enchantment provides Vortiris with the means of bearing a child alone, giving birth to primitive offspring, the first ophidians, who became his heirs.

The word of a demigod and decadent magician. Vice was born in this womb. Vice had grown with failures and unfruitful attempts from all of the monsters that cross the historical paths of Vortiris' firstborn.

Vice. An untamable force, invisible and sly magic that can capture your soul and tear it into pieces at any time. It invades you, transcends you and condemns you.

S'Erum remembers having cried, his hands grasping the desk. Bitter tears over dead languages, angry tears over a limp people chained to the unforeseeable whims of its origins.

"The Akkyshan's hand caresses his face.

"The steward was a Tainted One," he says.

She clenches her teeth.

"He was worried," she whispers. "He was afraid."

The day will soon break. A vague flicker of light penetrates through the roof. Shadows move. He cannot wait any longer.

“Afraid of who?”

She removes her hand as if it were burned and moves back into the shadows.

“Afraid of the other one. The one who knew.”

“Who? Speak!”

The spider climbs onto Antic's head and nervously turns around on itself.

“I don't know,” the Akkyshan spits out, taking another step back.

Anger wrinkles her face, making her ugly.

“You killed him,” she screams. “He was mine!” S'Erum does not insist. Antic is becoming dangerous. On her filmy skin, large drops of sweat start forming. A defense mechanism, a secretion similar to that of silk pearls. The situation is degenerating. He picks 18 up and holds the Akkyshan at a distance while he slides through the trapdoor.

Dorko is plastered against a wall, terror gleaming in his eyes. The urine has dried on his panes and infests the confined air of the stairwell. His nerves raw, S'Erum points his gun at the human's temple. The tavern keeper curls up and holds the gun with both hands. His squealing can be heard in the stairwells.

“Lord ophidian...” he trembles.

The dry and gentle hiss of a bullet.

At point-blank range, the bullet takes with it the upper half of the face in a spray of splinters and pinkish mucous.

The execution cairns the *sydion*. He wipes the tip of the gun and presses down, making sure that a new bullet has moved into the chamber.

The day is breaking when he leaves the Obsidians' tavern.

## CHAPTER XI

*“The eye is not only an organ, but a receptacle. Between the hands of a necropsist, it reveals a life, uncovers memories and sometimes reconstitutes the most significant stages of the existence of a deceased one. Truth lies forever in the depths of the eye.”*

- Excerpt from *An Eye for An Eye*, a reference book for necropsy disciples.

S’Erin, the necropsist, lives in an ancient hall, a large building whose construction he supervised and turned into his workshop. He had spent a long time searching for a suitable structure with a large workspace and an open area bathed in light.

This hall is located in the heart of the lower city of Cadwallon in a tortuous and miserable neighborhood. The authorities had decided to forgo this neighborhood and confine it behind imposing watchtowers to abandon it to its fate. It can be entered easily, but one leaves at one’s peril, at least on the surface. Below the cobblestones, old sewers discharge their lot of poor beings and thieves seeking their chances in more privileged neighborhoods.

S’Erin likes this defeated and filthy humanity, this gathering of tattered beings who venerate him like a king and provide an impenetrable gang to protect his lair.

The hall is rectangular, forty meters long and ten meters wide. The poor engrave prayers to their god on its walls. When he leaves, at times S’Erin grants these requests to keep the legend strong.

To penetrate into his domain, one must first take an alley infested with beggars, locate the carriage entrance, cross the threshold and narrow garden, pick up the stone slab that hides an ancient well and descend a circular ramp that penetrates underground into an old clearing gallery, the walls of which have been shored up and consolidated. At the end of this gallery, a heavy bronze door is the last barrier before the workshop.

The interior contrasts with its surroundings. The walls are whitewashed. The floor is covered in marble tiles. S’Erin shivers. This place is cold and too clean to feel at ease.

He finally sets his eyes on the framework. He hears the soft steps of children. The roof belongs to the Needle’s orphans, boys and girls between the ages of five

and ten. Night and day, they alone watch over this territory and keep it clean. They have exclusive responsibility for it. Armed with long needles, these young acrobats dominate the heights of the neighborhood alone. For more than forty years, S'Erin has seen many generations and has never found fault with his young protégés. Their loyalty moves him more than it should. It is not really a belief. The children respect him, fear him, but none would die for him. He has never really understood that loyalty could be devoted to something other than a cause. His loyalty is devoted to the Ophidian Alliance and the conquering principles of its people. However, the emotion is real when he speaks of his roof children. He has become their father, a tutelary figure who organizes a sumptuous feast almost every year to celebrate the departure of the eldest. A Little Needle may not be older than ten. S'Erin does not know the origin of this strange law that everyone follows. It has existed since the beginning and tolerates no exceptions. On the fateful day, each one handles the forced departure as best he can.

The workshop.

Four hundred square meters devoted to S'Erin's craft. On the right, over the entire length of the building, hang the crystalline sloughs of his brothers. Mirrors into the past, mirrors of a people. They are all placed in black rectangular frames that hang from metal bars. The necropsist currently owns two hundred and one and knows each one of them in its most minute details. When night falls and light diminishes, making work impossible, a deep nostalgia regularly leads S'Erin towards the middle of this labyrinth to contemplate his work by the light of a lantern. A ritual marked by the creaking of the frames running on their rails. A viral ritual.

Facing the gallery and to the left is the workshop itself. Large stalls of white marble covered in a hotchpotch of stills, jars, brushes and magnifying glasses, dominated by an intoxicating smell of herbs and concoctions. His life is all here. Hours, months, years bent over these tables to serve the ophidian cause and that of its allies.

But the essential raw material of his art is located at the northern tip of the building inside the wall. Twenty cavities where he keeps precious organs, twenty cavities where he safeguards with obsessive care the eyeballs provided to him by his brothers.

S'Erin is an accomplished artist, an ophidian able to see in the *depths of the eye* where the instant prior to death is concealed. The last image, the last vision that death engraves forever in the eyes of the dead one. A retinal reminiscence that magic and alchemy combined can engrave on a material, in this case, on the dead skin of his brothers.

There is no other known material. Magical in essence, the slough is the only "material" available to the necropsist to make the *depths of the eye* visible and to keep them in a perfect state of preservation. For this reason, S'Erin insists on

choosing his skins himself. Each of them tells a story before becoming a screen. He can feel their strengths and weaknesses by touch and can tell whether an old injury will affect the revelation process, whether the presence, even minute, of a Light impurity can jeopardize the final result... He had many problems before acquiring solid experience and perfect judgment. For ten years now, he has never failed and is supplied by warriors in their third or fourth sloughing cycle. Their dead skin is of exceptional quality. Supple and resistant: the best material possible.

S'Erin regrets his brothers' lack of understanding. No one sees the efforts he makes so that the work delivers an emotion close to the original, so that the scene represented is as sincere as possible. He does not remember when he became an artist rather than a craftsman. In any event, he is the only one who cares. The ophidian people are at total war. What importance can an artist's state of mind have in this context? Art channels his instincts, as he has recently learned. And this frightens him. He knows that, sooner or later, they will wonder if, despite the services he has rendered, he still deserves to be a brother of the Alliance, whether he has been contaminated by human miasmas... The Patriarchs believe that art is a decadent luxury, the first step towards insidious capitulation. The judgment of his fathers is of little importance to him, however. Fear feeds on regrets. If he disappears, his works will be dispersed or even destroyed or simply relegated to a humid cave far away.

This threat affects his work. He tries to push it into a corner of his mind, but it keeps coming back like a haunting murmur. Since last night, not only does it murmur, it shouts: a *sydion* is coming.

Six thirty in the morning. S'Erum knocks three times on the bronze door of the workshop.

The necropsist opens the door. The two ophidians look at each other in silence, masking their scent. According to ophidian etiquette, greetings are very important. S'Erin goes first to show his sense of hospitality. The wave of warmth brushes S'Erum's face. The tension he felt moments ago disappears.

The *sydion* has heard of the necropsist's reputation. Numerous rumors circulate about him. The Patriarchs have demonstrated their concern with him in alarming terms: "Too close to human. Proven kindness to children. We recommend increasing surveillance. Indulgence required because of the quality of his work. Beware."

S'Erum has come with no preconceived notions, intending to form his own opinion today. However, he feels confident. Rare are those who go against the Patriarchs' authority to achieve and serve the high goals of the Alliance.

The light inundating the workshop surprises him.

"Do you have a pool where we could talk?" he asks.

"No, I tried but the water is not pure. It's impossible to have it brought here properly."

S'Erum rattles irritably.

"The journey here was very unpleasant."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You live in a strange place, necropsist. In the midst of humans," says the *sydion*, raising his eyebrows. "They even walk over your roof. You should be careful."

"They are with me."

"Indeed..."

S'Erum wanders through the workshop, his tongue flicking. The human scent bothers him.

"Do you have slaves?"

"No, I don't see why I should."

"But you are a master of the *enskēm*."

"Precisely," says he ironically. "I have a talent. I don't want it harmed."

S'Erum acquiesces and stands still before a stall.

"I feel your fear, brother. Don't worry. They did not send me."

S'Erin sighs in relief.

"I thought that they'd had enough..."

"If you are meant to die, that will be my decision and not theirs," replies S'Erum in a glacial voice.

"So did you come for a canvas?"

The *sydion* shows him a small box.

"The eyes of a slave. He was bewitched, but there is something else. A counter-trace. I want to know who is responsible."

"When did the slave die?"

"He is alive."

S'Erin turns away, disturbed.

"I don't know if I'm able to find a counter-trace... It's been a long time since I've tried. I only work on dead ones now."

"I know. I'm just asking you to try."

"It will take time."

"I'll give you five hours."

"Impossible... I need at least twice that much."

"Five hours."

"I may damage the eyes and lose everything."

"I'll take that risk."

The *sydion's* glare tells S'Erin not to insist. With resignation, he takes the small box and places it on a stall, then opens it delicately.

At first, the necropsist simply looks at the eyeballs without touching them. This is an exacting task that isolates him and progressively erases his surroundings.

He is armed with various magnifying glasses, each one different but all containing the same black lenses, gems of Darkness cut on demand to trace the ophidian scent.

He finds a first sign, the most obvious one. The *neoma* has been renewed a few times and always with care so that it embraces the previous one. The master was visibly careful not to damage the *depths of the eye* and preserve his slave's personality.

After an hour, S'Erin decides to stop for a moment.

"I've isolated and followed the first trace to the end. The one who did it cared for his slave."

"Possibly..."

"An interesting detail: he did not touch the body."

"Be more precise."

"The slave was master of his movements. No prohibitions. In theory, he could go wherever he wanted. What was his role?"

"Nothing really defined."

"No specific task?"

"One, maybe: he played an instrument. A harp."

"That must be it. So, he could play without being hindered."

"Strange..."

"I'm going to try to isolate the counter-trace."

The necropsist immediately returns to his work. This time, his task is more complex and he uses typhonism to break through the invisible mysteries of the counter-trace.

His tongue bustles restlessly and strikes against his palate. His body starts moving to a hypnotic rhythm. Vibrations run through his scales. The trance has worked, drawing strength from the gems of Darkness set in a circle around the two eyeballs. A first surge of energy arises and causes a chain reaction. In a few seconds, the circle of gems gives off onyx sparks that tremble, cross each other and form a dark archway over Maliek's dead eyes.

Guided by the necropsist, the Dark Principle starts its search and dives into the *depths of the eye*. S'Erin is blinded. His entire body quivers, channeling the typhonic currents. Fugitive visions run into each other in his mind: Maliek, a child of five or six in a palace courtyard, joyfully laughing with boys of his age. The same Maliek, sprawled out over straw, his face sweating and his hands grasping the waist of an adolescent sitting on top of him. They pant and whisper with pleasure until the moaning turns into strident cries... The adolescent disappears. An ophidian holds Maliek by the neck and drags him to a cave. S'Erin swoons under the waves of pure terror arising from the young man. His screams slow down and progressively



become notes of crystal. Maliek plays the harp, fervently looking at the pool where his master is bathing.

The necropsist slowly starts controlling the uninterrupted flow of the slave's past. He must discipline this flow to see more clearly and create a coherent path to rapidly relive Maliek's history and uncover the counter-trace. The exercise is perilous. It requires extreme concentration and physical strength. Thousands of hours of walking, running through the woods, and efforts of all types condense, infiltrate his consciousness and flow through his body. No human could resist this pressure. S'Erin resists it as best he can. He feels his body stiffen as the life unwinds before him. He feels his heart race. Although he is certain that the counter-trace is located in the most recent years or weeks, he has to see everything, to live everything, to be totally submerged in the existence of this human. The past cannot be broken. It must unwind and reveal its secret.

Almost two hours pass before the Dark Principle reveals the form of a counter-trace. S'Erin is exhausted. Pressured by the *sydion's* deadline, he has used all of his strength. Over the stall, the crackling archway of Darkness has lost its intensity, the typhonic magic slowly fades.

The counter-trace fascinates him. A marvel. An almost perfect creation. Hidden in the original trail of the steward's trace, it looks like a black glyph of jet engraved in the *depths of the eye*.

"I have it..." whispers the necropsist to S'Erum.

S'Erum comes close to observe the two eyeballs through the dark archway. S'Erin starts describing aloud what he sees.

"A composition... an unknown variant of a memory glyph."

"An erased memory?"

"I think so, yes. I... I don't know. I can break the glyph, but I might lose everything. Nothing would be left."

"Do it."

S'Erin thinks about his works for a brief moment. Maybe the glyph is trapped. He has no way of being sure, not with this tight deadline. He starts, feeling that he is playing his life like a pair of dice.

He chooses a frontal attack, as if he were throwing himself against a door to break in. The Dark Principle serves as a ram and violently strikes the iridescent surface of the protective seal. Nothing indicates the spell has been defeated. The glyph pales and faints. The Truth: the scene as Maliek really lived it and the one the author of the counter-trace wanted to hide is right behind.

Excited with his discovery of the memory, the necropsist describes his vision in a muted voice.

"The slave has just woken up... There is a room. A human room. His, I imagine."

“What is he doing?”

“He is sitting on the edge of the bed, intrigued by a noise... no, a conversation.”

“Verbal?”

“Vibrations. He’s used to it. He hears lapping.”

The steward in his pool, S’Erüm thinks.

“He gets up,” the necropsist continues. “There is a curtain right in front of him.”

“Concentrate on the conversation. Two or three participants? There must be the steward and assassin at least. Anyone else?”

S’Erin’s face tenses.

“I don’t know... I hear what he hears... and he doesn’t understand the vibrations.”

S’Erüm sighs with disappointment.

“I... I think there are only two of them,” the necropsist suggests.

“Are you sure?”

“Almost sure.”

“Fine. Go back to Maliek.”

“He has raised his hand to pull back the curtain. He hesitates. He is afraid. I think he feels that his master is angry. The other one too, as a matter of fact. The voices get louder. He releases the curtain and steps back towards the bed.”

“No,” groans the *sydion*.

“He is terrorized and...”

S’Erin trembles on his tail and keeps his balance by holding on to the edge of the stall.

“There’s fighting...” he whispers. “Fighting behind the curtain.”

“Maliek. What does Maliek do?”

He’s looking for a weapon, I think. He has just removed a torch. Unlit. He holds it like a club.”

The sparks that tie the gems of Darkness together scare losing their power. One thrusts forward and breaks in mid-fight.

“I’m... I’m going to lose it,” murmurs S’Erin.

Fatigue and the slave’s emotions overwhelm him. Maliek’s mind is frozen, torn between his survival instinct and obedience to his master. Behind the curtain, an angry scream resounds. Then groans and the sound of a body struggling in water. The necropsist distinctly hears a call viciously hitting the surface.

The magic circle formed by the gems of Darkness is in agony. S’Erin is too tired to slow the erosion of the spell. The walls undulate like paper when Maliek passes the curtain and erupts into the master’s room.

A bloody, red pool. Maliek screams and runs to the ophidian’s body.

On the table, the final sparks have turned to black, shiny dust.

The necropsist feels the full impact of the slave's despair as he kneels before his master's corpse. The scene is about to disappear. Maliek jumps up and turns around. In the frame of a large open door in the rock, he glimpses the murderer's shadow.

A huge shape. Maliek has never seen an ophidian of this size. He grabs his makeshift club and slowly rises.

The walls disappear.

The necropsist collapses in S'Erum's arms.

## CHAPTER XII

*“Cadwallon is known to have been founded by mercenaries seeking adventure and treasures. Today, diplomats flatter the aristocrats to achieve their end in the upper city, while misery leads to violence in the lower city. For this reason, the Cadwës will not notice our presence in their city’s underground.”*

- Masselius

Walking towards the ship’s hold, Mankenz stops in the middle of a passageway, far from the others, short of breath. He does not tell his men that when he goes to his cabin to pray, when he kneels and closes his eyes, the past comes to him and turns him away from Merin. This expectation provokes dangerous nostalgia. Nothing, or almost nothing, can replace the complicity that reigned in his commandery. He misses Lorthis. His strength, serenity and visions. Their friendship grew with the missions organized by the lodge, especially the three years in the hell of Flaming Mercy. Mankenz misses the tales he told by the fire when he slumbered at his knees, lulled by his warm voice.

His fist violently strikes a wall.

“Merin, I need you,” he murmurs.

The Mother is fifteen meters long and occupies most of the length of the hold. Her prison has no bars, but cables, metal tentacles, attached to her scales. She had suffered in the beginning. She hardly feels anything now.

The cables run along the floor towards a strange machine, a seemingly chaotic assembly of reservoirs and quivering nozzles. Heavy valves regularly open to release sprays of steam. She has learned to like this noise. It punctuates her day and serves as a marker to count each day that distances her further from her family and sanctuary.

A cable suddenly twists on the floor, the sign of another injection. She pays no attention to it any more. Drugs have finally suppressed any sensation; her body has become a dead weight. Her horizon is a door and small barrels of drinking water that her jailers bring to her, then remove. Her muscles are atrophied and her nerves numbed by drugs; she can no longer even move her head. Raising her eyelids requires a fastidious and exhausting effort. Sometimes she counts twenty-two of the machine’s breaths before she can manage to open an eye.

She knows each jailer by name. Some ignore her. Others come to observe her in silence and pray; they do not try to do anything to her. But there is a giant, a sadist with a child's face, who often comes to torture her. His power excites him and he enjoys seeing her body jump when he manipulates the machine to inject into her veins the only poison that still affects her: Light. The Dark Principle always reacts to that of Clarity. An unmovable reaction, a true antagonism. The sadist knows this.

However, he does not know that she uses this pain to strengthen the body they have tried to destroy. In her suffering, she exists. She restores the physical strength that prevents her from definitively succumbing to madness. She fights an oppressive desire to finish with it all. She cannot die. They have made this impossible. But she could slowly slide towards oblivion, withdraw into her consciousness, commence a self-destructive lethargy that would slowly eat at her intelligence and instincts and turn her into a vague organic principle.

This battle lifts the fog invading her mind and opens up memories of the past. She dreams of immense cathedrals of stone laden with fugitive shadows. She dreams of the yellow reflection of her eggs aligned under the archway. She dreams of the exaltation of their first movements when life awakens within the egg. She dreams of nights when cracking announces a birth.

She was born to be a Mother. She was raised to this end. Each breath and sigh of her childhood was dedicated to procreation as soon as the Patriarchs became convinced that the blood of Vortiris flowed through her veins. The female heirs of the dragon incarnate the Alliance's future. Only they can bear children. Only they can create a new generation and ensure the perpetuity of the Serpent people.

She never said or even thought that all this was of little importance to her when she was with the masters of the sanctuary. Long before the sadist had watched her suffer, she cared only about her children and ignored the feverish speeches of the Patriarchs hailing over the Alliance's great plans.

She can still hear today the rustling of the eggs in her trail, the muffled vibrations escaping from the eggs when the little ones sensed her presence. A warm communion, precious moments she stores in her heart like a promise of salvation.

The sound of familiar footsteps brings her back to reality. She recognizes the light steps of her confidant and starts making efforts to open her eyes.

Mankenz slides behind the machine for a summary check. He does not like dealing with this technology and nonchalantly taps on the misty dials to ensure that the indicators are reliable. Everything is working. He steps over a cable with a frown, grasps the back of a chair and sits a few centimeters from the ophidian's face.

He has learned to conquer his repulsion of this creature. For a long time, he had been nauseous just being in the same room. Becoming used to her presence and her odor required many years of self-denial. Various feelings would run through him as he slowly adapted.

At first, his curiosity had been unhealthy. His father had conquered his reticence and convinced him to accept the mission entrusted to him by the Old Master. In his opinion, the unexpected capture of the ophidian provided countless perspectives. One, the most important to him, consisted in *seducing* the creature, being accepted by her without worrying about how long the process would take.

“You are going to live with Evil,” Masselius said quietly. “You will have to accept it and look at it straight in its face. Your entire body will want to resist, but your mind must remain an inviolable fortress. The ophidian will always remember that you are the enemy, but her instinct will weaken if you move towards her. Don’t refuse Evil. Define for yourself the ultimate boundaries of your soul, those the creature must never trespass and, above all, look at her with your heart. If you look at her with your eyes, you won’t manage it. Your eyes will only see a threat, the monster, Evil incarnate. Try to forger appearances. Try to imagine her as a woman you loved. Perhaps your mother? Or a sister, a friend? Your father is convinced you can succeed. The task is thankless, as you know. I will free you from all your responsibilities within the lodge until you have provided me with proof that she confides in you and that you have remained pure. Starting today, the destiny of the orphans is in your hands. I have made a difficult decision and deprived myself of your services for months and maybe years to come. This ophidian is a sign that the One has sent us in His infinite mercy. Are you aware of that? He has honored us with this gift. You must use it wisely. She can teach us a lot; a lot more than we could ever dream. She may help us bring a fatal blow to this cursed people. Let us give a hundred times more than Merin has given us by putting her in our pathway. That is your role, Mankenz.”

Three years, three long years of penitence, before the ophidian, numbed by drugs, started to lose her mind, confused dreams and reality, and imagined that Mankenz had become a sort of confidant, an attentive ear, someone she could trust to make her solitude less cruel. Three years in the depths of the Flaming Mercy, the Old Master’s stronghold, hidden behind heavy metal doors under the strict supervision of his personal guard. Masselius had never wanted to take a risk and treated the orphans as pariahs throughout the experiment. A few companions, Templars of great value, did not last until the end. No one could blame them. They could not handle the isolation and could not resist the terrible confinement, the confrontation with their enemy night and day, obliging them to live an unnatural promiscuity behind the walls of a prison guarded by their own brothers. Mankenz does not know what has become of them. Even his father, Lorthis, did not want to tell him of their destiny. Those who remained led them in prayer, with no illusions.

Three years later, only twenty-nine Templars remained of the forty-four voluntarily imprisoned with the creature. They had all been deeply affected by this trial, starting with Mankenz.

Although the experiment has somewhat fortified him, he now better understands the complexity of his struggle and, more importantly, the immense contribution of the lodge of Hod to the Rag’Narok, a lodge that the Old Master created as a divine weapon to accomplish the worst and strike at the heart of Darkness. While the Akkylannian Church battles on the surface, the lodge, for its part, attacks the cause of evil and does not hesitate to corrupt its own to better serve Light.

No inquisitor could stand three years with a Serpent. None would have accepted cleaning her, sliding a hand over her scales, opening her jaws to care for her teeth, removing her excrement... in short, keeping her alive and taking care of her.

Mankenz has spent entire nights on a rickety table transcribing the evolution of her physical and mental state and compiling observations of the men who took over from each other at the Mother’s side.

This writing rapidly became an exclusive refuge where, for his adopted father, he would have even accepted listing the deviant behavior of his brothers so that the Old Master could have a general idea of the daily atmosphere within the watch.

“The contribution of the orphans to the war effort is invaluable. The creature now belongs to you. We will finally be able to take over the Erratum.”

Masselius’ statement sealed the destiny of the twenty-nine survivors. For close to six months, they restored their health under the tender care of the Old Master and Lorthis, living in comfortable rooms within the Flaming Mercy, free to come and go, wander in the streets, wash and scrub their skin to the bone to erase the creature’s smell.

Six months earlier... the Old Master called them to explain his plan. A master plan, a gamble of incredible daring, the tale of which overwhelmed the orphans of Hod.

That night, Mankenz realized the crucial role the lodge plays in the Rag’Narok. The Inquisition would never have allowed an ophidian to be captured for study or servants of Light being required to enter a dangerous intimacy with the Darkness.

The Old Master spoke at length about the Erratum and its ungodly works, the vain attempts over decades to locate the library in the depths of the City of Thieves or to capture an ophidian that could lead the Templars to the doors of the library.

During the evening, the venerable one brandished the blackened parchments with Mankenz’ writings a few times. He said that between the lines of the report written by the orphan, he had found the master idea for his plan.

“The Mother will be our bait.” No orphan could forget this sentence. The Old Master believed that Evil had to be forced out of its lair. The psychic link between the Mother and her children is unique and indissociable from the sparse information the Templars have on the Alliance. Almost everything points to an invisible umbilical cord binding the mother to her child after birth. It is this link

that the lodge will use to turn her into bait and attract an ophidian from the Erratum to the surface.

The venerable one spoke of the subtlety, but also the uncertainties, of their mission and the importance of improvisation in watching the Mother and preventing her from using the psychic link to set off an alarm.

That night, the orphans did not realize to what extent the Old Master was correct in recommending improvisation. At no time could Mankenz and his brothers have imagined how destiny would work in their favor. They had all imagined a trap, the capturing of one of the Mother's children attracted by her call, and the torture and thousand and one ways of making this exceptional prisoner lead them to the Erratum...

The orphans left with the Mother to go to Cadwallon. They discreetly left the port of Carthag Fero on a merchant ship and crossed the Sea of Migol. They disembarked at the Commandery of the North to increase their numbers and set up a caravan to reach the mouth of the Gulf of Syrlinh.

There, thanks to the lodge's endless resources, Mankenz easily purchased an old ship, renamed it the *Karl IV*, and rearranged the holds for the ophidian. A week later, the *Karl IV* entered Cadwë waters.

Since then, five months have passed, and despite all expectations, the bait has finally fulfilled the Old Master's ambitions. Destiny has smiled upon Light and its servants.

Destiny has given them a traitor.



## CHAPTER XIII

*“Vibrations incarnate movement.  
Vibrations incarnate life.  
Vibrations incarnate chaos.  
The Rag’Narok is chaos.  
He who masters vibrations, masters the Rag’Narok.”*

*- Vibration Credo, the Erratum library.*

Ayane has jumped onto the pier to tie the mooring rope and, her hand on her sheath, now watches her master slide out of the boat. She can feel his fatigue. He needs a bath, her caresses and oblivion within the ashen flowers.

Thirty minutes ago, she had been halfheartedly eating in the inn’s main room when he entered like a devil, grabbed her by the arm and ordered her to go with him to the islet of Cults. She obeyed in silence under the innkeeper’s questioning stare, who exceptionally left his throne to watch them leave.

The master knows something. She feels his impatience. He struck her on the way, irritated as she slowly pushed the boat toward the islet. She follows him closely and enters S’Holth’s residence. The watchman at the entrance did not think it wise to question their intent. One does not cross the path of a determined *sydion*.

Nothing has moved inside. The cadaver’s scent still floats in the air, although it has been transported to the depths of the Pillar on S’Ardäi’s orders.

S’Erum walks across the hallway and almost tears the silk curtain that opens onto the steward’s vast living room. Ayane remembers this scent of dried flowers and moves faster. Trembling, she closes her hold firmly on the pommel of her sword. In her hurry, she has forgotten a lantern or torch and has to find her way in the darkness.

The master uses vibrations to feel his spatial surroundings and moves without difficulty in closed areas. He stands still before the imposing stone disk that separates the living room from S’Holth’s bedroom and waits a moment.

Ayane does not move. Her hands are moist. She does not understand what is troubling her master and the danger that may emerge from the shadows of this silent house.

S'Erum enters the bedroom. At the same time, muted sounds are heard coming from outside. Ayane jumps, her hand grasping her weapon. A vague ray of light filters in through the entrance hallway.

S'Ylice, the archivist, hisses between his teeth when he sees the *syhee* posted before the bedroom. He obeyed the *sydion*'s order without arguing and met him, at his request, with Maliek, the steward's slave. The human carries a covered lantern and slowly moves forward, the ophidian's hand on his shoulder. A brownish bandage protects his empty sockets.

S'Ylice guides the slave through the living room and motions the *syhee* away as he enters the bedroom.

S'Erum rises facing the northern wall. His tongue brushes the rocky wall as if he were looking for a due on its surface.

*I have come with the slave*, vibrates S'Ylice.

The *sydion* turns around and through his narrow slits watches the slave with his bandaged eyes. He slides around the pool and brings his face less than five centimeters from the human's face.

"You played on that night," he murmurs.

The ointment filling the sockets releases a soft and intoxicating scent. S'Erum licks the face of the slave with his tongue.

"I didn't ask the right questions when we met. You were playing so as to open a passageway, correct?"

The human's face trembles. His mouth opens and closes.

"Answer!" hisses the *sydion*.

"I was playing for the master."

"For his library as well, correct? It's there, just behind," he says, pointing to the wall. The slave starts trembling. The trace of S'Holth had finally disappeared from his consciousness; only rare fragments remain. Residual magic still attempts to block out the words stuck in his throat. Troubled by his internal torment, he swoons. S'Ylice tightens his grip to keep him upright.

"You must answer me," S'Erum insists.

The clear voice of the *sydion* dismantles the final resistance in Maliek's mind.

"Never play in the presence of another... Make sure the wall is clean... Each morning, scrub the grooves with a gem to eliminate smells... Play the score with no mistakes... The master says that vibrations are keys... Each note is a key... Never speak of the library... Keep the secret until death... Kill myself if necessary."

The slave suddenly stops speaking and swoons in a state of shock.

"I want him to open this passage," growls S'Erum, grabbing the slave from S'Ylice to push him brutally to the alcove with the instrument. He makes him sit down and orders him to play.

Maliek's tense hands feel the contours of the harp.

"Master," interrupts Ayane. "He cannot play in this state."

S'Erum's jaws dench. In an instant, 18 emerges in his hand, the gun pointed at the *syhee*. He would like to pull the trigger if only to calm his nerves. His finger tightens around the trigger, but releases the pressure at the last moment. The needle's prick dissipates the red cloud in his skull. He moans, sighs, and puts his weapon clown.

Petrified, Ayane observes the slave's pathetic movements. Blind and traumatized, Maliek pinches the strings, but the sounds are smothered. The discordant notes make S'Erum grimace. He is ill at ease and feels the situation escaping his control. At the least disappointment, he may decapitate Maliek.

"Ayane," he says, leaving the alcove, "take care of him. Do what you must."

He turns his back on her, eyes closed, scales quivering. She approaches the slave.

"Maliek, let go of it," she says in a soft voice, removing the instrument from him.

The slave lets her help him. She tenderly readjusts the bandage over his eyes and starts to comb his sweaty hair. Her fingers feel the curve of his skull and bring his face to her breasts. Maliek's shoulders sag. She massages his scalp and whispers that everything will be fine. This woman's affection brings back buried memories. He can no longer hold back his sobs. He feels the magic confining his mind giving way through his tears. The past comes back in confused patches and tramples on the final remnants of the ophidian's trace.

Ayane has closed her hands around his neck and rests her chin on the top of his head. S'Ylice is the only one who can make out the *syhee*'s glacial look when the slave collapses in her arms.

"You must play," she says. "To open the passage. Then you will be free. You have my word."

Maliek smiles warily.

"Do you trust me?" asks Ayane.

"I think so, yes."

"Please play," she whispers.

Maliek sighs and shakes his head. With pinched lips, Ayane stands up, the slave's hand in hers. She kneels before him and stares at him intensely.

"Do you know S'Hysme? He is the one you will meet if you refuse to play. He will see the bandage over your eyes, and do you know what he will say? That you are worthless. That your life is worthless here. Worth nothing. He will simply reach out to you and slit your throat. Just like that. Without thinking for a second about what you lived through before you became a slave here. Is that what you want?"

The slave's sweaty hand disturbs her. She wants this over with and raises his chin with two fingers.

"You are already free," she whispers in his ear. "All you have to do is play. I will take you to the surface. Personally. I promise."

The slave places his hand on the instrument, then removes it as if he cannot go through with it. Ayane motions slightly to the *sydion* and takes three steps backwards.

"I'll try," mutters Maliek.

He slowly wipes his hands on his tunic and sets the harp between his knees. A first note sounds and resonates in the room. S'Erum turns around, his stare impenetrable. A second note, then a third. The slave's fingers start to pinch the strings, creating limpid sounds. The harp vibrates between his knees.

A crack sounds inside the stone wall and S'Erum realizes that he underestimated the steward. Only a small elite can cast a magic spell on rock, themiurgists hidden in their sanctuary and, according to the Patriarchs, able to hear the mineral forces governing Aarklash.

Fine particles of dust escape from the wall as it cracks open to show on its surface the silhouette of a diagonally ribbed door. Head leaning backwards, the slave seems transfigured and concludes with an ecstatic smile.

Ayane feels lighter. S'Erum has drawn near and caresses her lips with the tip of his nail. A tender movement, like a "thank you".

The slave releases his harp and slowly rises, his hands dangling. Ayane seizes him by the wrist and takes him away from the alcove.

"Will the passage remain open?" she asks.

"As long as I don't play another melody," confirms Maliek.

A ferocious glimmer shines from the pupils of the *syhee*. She has put herself in danger to get what she wanted. She feels that she can still choose and respect her oath to the slave and have him saved. But to go against the master is above her strength. She belongs to him. She is the instrument of his treachery.

S'Erum turns around, glances at his *syhee*'s belly, then turns his back to her and moves towards S'Ylice. Ayane shivers and instinctively covers her scars with her hands. She has loved him, given her body and soul to a lover who has humiliated her and condemned her son to die in the snow between the master's claws. The gratitude radiating from Maliek's face is a mirror and a distorted reflection of the past. Like him, she was blind. Her love was like his bandage, preventing her from seeing the true nature of Evil.

She grabs the slave by his hair and makes him kneel.

"Stop smiling," she screeches with unusual violence.

She sees her master look at her again. She wants to please him like no other. She has found the one she can admire, the one who soothes her regrets, the one to whom she submits in order to forget.

The slave twists violently at her feet to escape. He falls back, rises as best he can, and walks backwards, waving his arms before him.

"I have your word!" he cries.

At the sound of a sword being removed from its sheath, he stands paralyzed. Ayane walks towards him with broad steps and strikes him in insane anger. The sword finds his shoulder and cuts deeply. Blood flows and sprays over his arms. She strikes again uncontrollably, feeling that she is closing an open wound in her dried-up heart.

The butchery ceases. S'Erum draws Ayane far away from the body and wipes the blood on her cheeks with his tongue.

"I am going to go in with S'Ylice. Stay here."

"I'm sorry, Master."

"We will see about that later," he replies coldly.

The two ophidians meet at the entrance to the passageway and disappear within. Ayane sits at the edge of the pool and contemplates the stagnant water with troubled eyes.

## CHAPTER XIV

*“Mother, guide me.  
Hear the vibrations of my heart and inspire them.  
Mother, our bodies are separated, but our souls are one.  
Hear my soul’s cry, Mother.  
Hear your son.”*

- Mother’s prayer invoked by the Tainted Ones.

Mankenz snaps his fingers three times to make sure the ophidian is listening. In the hold, the pungent odor of her flesh stinks, but he no longer pays any attention.

“Can you hear me?” he whispers.

An eyelid quivers in response.

“I am sorry about Lysander. He came to... bother you again.”

The excuse grates the Mother’s consciousness like the tip of a knife. She cannot abide his condescendence and his hiding behind the sadist to destabilize her. She manages to partially open her left eye and makes out the silhouette of her jailer. He is bent towards her, elbows on his thighs, hands crossed in front of his face.

“How do you feel?” he asks.

Each time he comes, she hopes she will wake up to discover that this is only a nightmare, that she is not lying here in the stench of this ship’s hold at the mercy of an Akkylannian Templar who inquires after her health after having tortured and interrogated her for almost four years.

“Sleep,” she manages to mutter with painful effort.

“Would you prefer I let you sleep?”

I would rather you die, she thinks. I’d rather tear off your head, open it and gobble your brain to feel it melt in my mouth.

He has undoubtedly seen the spark of hatred in her eye. He instinctively stands up and crosses his arms on his chest.

“You’re angry,” he whispers. “Very angry. Because of him?”

She screams to herself and attempts to master the hatred flooding her thoughts. Don’t let it show. Play the role he expects and flatter his compassion.

“He will pray with me tonight. Everything will be fine. I promise.”

Your prayers are like the squealing of cowards; she thinks with disdain. Vortiris doesn't demand words, but offerings. She feels unable to have a conversation with the Templar. Not this time. The Light injected in her veins has left traces she wants to look into and follow, like a hunter cracking his game. The spasms pinching her nerves and making her cry out silently are signs of a body that lives, exists, and this gives her hope. She closes her eyelid and concentrates on the particles of Clarity that disperse throughout her insides like rays of light.

The Akkylannian's face clouds over. He does not like her silence and unhappily chews on his lip.

"You should be happy," he says, with some meanness in his voice. "Thanks to you, the Erratum is going to disappear forever."

His words hurt her. For almost six months, she believed that her state would prevent her body from shining through the streets of Cadwallon, that the bond between the ophidian mother and her child would dissolve in the drugs. She was secretly happy to see the Templars despair and slowly lose hope, listening to them debate for hours over the machine and its adjustments.

For the past four days, since the ophidian's visit, guilt gnaws at her like poison. She does know, however, that she is not really a traitor, that only her magic nature is the cause. Ophidian lineage transcends all distinctions. Each child becomes aware of the intangible link binding him to his mother. An emotion, a glance, a trauma... it may reveal itself in various forms. Some say that it happens during sloughing, that the body grows as the maternal bond strengthens. She believes that it is useless to seek explanations, that the mystery of life suffices and that only Vortiris could shed light on this subject.

S'Iris has given birth to a hundred and sixty-two children. Long ago, one hundred and sixty-two pulses followed the beats of her own heart until Vice suffocated them under a lead caver. A throbbing rhythm, a real chant. Like all of her sisters, she had learned to cope with the sudden death of a pulse. Nothing can prepare a Mother for the first silence, the echo that suddenly stops beating and announces that somewhere on the surface of Aarklash, a son has fallen on the front of the Rag'Narok.

Her Vice had taken hold of her soul after a silence like this one. Why this one and not another? Why her and not another? She has never heard a reply. She has felt her body change and become thinner, her muscles firmer, her scales harder. As if Vice sought to compensate its grasp on her soul by strengthening her. She did not believe it until she slept with a Father.

Those who have been chosen by their sanctuary to offer their seed see this opportunity as an honor. S'Iris has had all sorts of lovers. Evil ones, tender ones, timid ones... all aware of the privilege of lying in a Mother's arms. Pleasure exists, even if it is a means to procreate. Ophidian individuality is based on war. A Mother must bear children to support the war effort and offer her life and the lives of her

children to the Alliance. Only Vice can alter the radical choice to which ophidians consent on principle.

She killed the Father. At the beginning, she felt nothing specific. He penetrated her without preamble and, guided by her, left his mark. She was surprised by the almost shameful pleasure of abandoning herself so rapidly to the voluptuous feeling. A Mother learns to control desire, to conceal it in the background in order to concentrate on the male and draw all of his seeds. But the pleasure increased despite her efforts to bury it.

Lust burned throughout her body. She suffocated the Father, crushed him between her rings and continued to stir when he was already dead.

This memory is a black spot on her conscience, although Vice, imprisoned by Akkylannian drugs, has hidden and remains only a weak pulse in her heart.

A shiver runs through her scales. She is convinced her brothers will thwart the Akkylannians' plan and that the Erratum will once again avoid the threat and protect her people's knowledge. And what if... what if the Templars entered the library? She refuses to envisage this scenario. She refuses to imagine that she could be responsible for this catastrophe, the consequences of which would spread well beyond the Cadwë neighborhoods and compromise the future of her people.

She is prepared to attempt the impossible. She no longer has any illusions on the result of the confrontation, but she is ready.

She has lived through the worst for this moment. She has been tried to the breaking point with the glacial flow of Light running through her veins. She has used torture so that Clarity could help her find the space and sensations of her own body.

But she needs Vice. Only Vice causes a sufficiently powerful shock to let her feel again. She does not know if it will be enough, whether it will take a few moments or entire days.

She just wants to try and does so each time the sadist enters the hold and bends over her to use his power. He contents himself with simply looking at her and does not mistrust her pained eyelids. The *depths of the eye* have spoken. Magic, filtered through this gaze, has entered his mind and created a woman, a human, that S'Iris has baptized Sylene. This sublime creature, born of the sadist's fantasies, will help her provoke an awakening of Lust.

To live pleasure by proxy, taking advantage of the weaknesses of the human soul, faults that prick at the sadist's conscience. Lysander is a Templar with unsatisfied fantasies, a boy haunted by the memory of a lecherous father. Through the child's eyes, S'Iris has entered through a door to see an old man in a red toga, a cardinal respected throughout Akkylannie, abusing a young servant. She has seen the boy's emotions, his fear of discovery, the shiver of the forbidden, his fascination with the white open thighs of the young girl and the reddened face of his father laboring over her.



S'Iris has delved deeper to reveal the muted anger of the adolescent faced with the realization that his father does not love him, has never loved him, that he looks after him and his education out of guilt, convinced he will win redemption by protecting the fruit of his sins.

Lysander has never forgotten the servant's slight moans, the quivering of her milky breasts. An ungodly vision, a vision he had locked behind the doors of his faith until S'Iris pushed them deeper, bringing Sylene to the surface.

Sylene looks like this young servant in every way and reveals herself a little more each night. She has already allowed him to come close to her once, raise her skirt and lick her ankles. On another occasion, she lay over him, raised his shirt and bit his nipples... Desire consumes the Templar. With artful calculation, S'Iris maintains the promise of a liberating orgasm.

She feels the Akkylannian coming closer to the edge of madness, torn apart by desire. Delving in his memories, she sees him praying feverishly every morning to forget his moist dreams. She enjoys his suffering and hopes that the next evening, or even the following one, will see him abandon himself to Sylene's arms, that his pleasure will be a grinding wave, a massive tidal wave allowing S'Iris to enter his body and awaken Lust lying within.

Mankenz stands up, frowning with disdain. He has less and less patience for his prisoner's silence. He looks over the creature's enormous mass and is truly disappointed that they will separate after all these years. When the divine flames burn the Erratum, the ophidian will no longer matter. Her people will not be duped by her aura. The bait will have survived and the Old Master will no doubt demand a summary execution to turn this page of history. Mankenz does not know if he will manage to kill her with his own hands, and this doubt makes him uneasy.

## CHAPTER XV

*“Our Sphinx enemies were only dreaming spirits led adrift by their passion for the abstract. How can one hope to achieve perfection in the name of Good? Evolution emerges from corruption, error, Evil and death!”*

- S'Arayana, First Watchman of Naherys.

S'Erum moves forward slowly, tongue flicking. The gallery is dug out of the rock and gently descends over ten or so meters. Touching and smelling, the *sydion* notes that the stone is old and shiny from effluvia.

The steward's cave is lit by a chandelier of ghostly moonstones. A peaceful place, a retreat where books occupy three quarters of the space, piled on shaky shelves and even on the floor. S'Erum's impression is very clear: this place has remained untouched since the night of the murder. Even if the slave's vision prove that the murderer came to this place, or at least to the gallery, the *sydion* sees no visible sign of pillage or vandalism.

Although the steward is a Tainted One, S'Erum is moved by his ability to brush against *his* truth, to penetrate into *his* kingdom. He no longer doubts: the real S'Holth lived right here.

The *sydion's* eyes rest on the tormented raised design of a metal *eyzom*. Most ophidians despise using this metal which, by its cold and memory-free nature, fails to convince. S'Erum remembers an attempt of the same type in a sanctuary up north. To honor his host, he consented to coil around its frozen branches. His memory of the experience is painful. Unlike wood, metal does not bend. It does not crack. It does not wear, or not enough, under the scraping of scales, and refuses to bear the trace of its owner. And, most of all, there is the silence, the feeling of sliding one's rings over a surface that stands inert and soulless.

S'Erum immediately understands that the steward's *eyzom* is an exception. How it managed to get here, he does not know, but the object fascinates him. The craftsman, maybe S'Holth himself, wanted to impress a deliberate movement on the branches. They all point in the same direction: south. Anchored to a base that replicates the curves of a knotty trunk, they look like the hair of a giant blown by a squall. True harmony emanates from the scene, especially the odor oozing through the branches, the smell of slumber, scales resting, rings lethargically extended.

His eyes turn towards the western side of the cave, where a fountain discreetly trickles. There, the floor rises and creates a wall around a natural basin of clear water. The mouth of the source is located two meters further up. S'Holth had attached a bronze leaf to the end of a tap so the water could drip in a regular flow. S'Erum is once again surprised by the peaceful atmosphere emanating from the pool. He feels the need to dive in and be cradled in the gentle lullaby of the fountain.

His tongue has not stopped tracing the odors and he again smells a peaceful fragrance. The *sydion* notices the form of a headrest on the wall, smooth like a polished stone, where the steward probably rested his head. S'Erum wants to slide his tongue over the indentation but desists at the last minute. The ghost of Vice floats around like an invisible threat.

Paintings, an unusual refinement for a brother, are hanging on the wall. Mediocre works and rough country scenes probably bought from wandering artists. Nostalgia or visions of the world? In any event, proof that the steward's soul never ceased being torn between the Erratum and Cadwallon, between this intimate and snug refuge and the tortuous streets of the surface.

The *sydion's* tongue vibrates around the paintings, but detects nothing specific other than the floral scent of the pigment.

He believes he has finished when he turns around the *eyzom* and discovers behind it a sword lying against the wall. Straight and lodged in its sheath, nothing appears to distinguish it from the others. However, S'Erum has already seen similar sword and finds it difficult to believe that S'Holth had owned such a rare weapon.

A vorpal sword.

Only the most powerful warriors of the Alliance are allowed to own and use these swords known to have sliced the head of the enigmatic Sphinxes many years ago.

Laden with gems of Darkness, the sword is shaped like a dragon with wings stretched out to form a protective cover. The handle is made of a gem, a real treasure, its multiple facets reflecting the white light of the moonstones.

His heart in his throat, S'Erum approaches his hand with precaution, slides his fingers under the wings and closes them around the handle.

The weapon is tepid, almost warm. It welcomes him like a friend and blows a wave of warmth over his insides, like a caress. The *sydion* trembles and feels S'Ylice at his side.

"Impossible," murmurs the archivist.

S'Erum removes the sword from its sheath, causing a hiss like music of old, similar to the vibration that resonated for eons in the depths of the world, spreading fear and doubt in the heart of the Utopia of the Sphinx, the great enemy of the Ophidian Alliance.

He smiles and raises the sword to the vault. The balance of the blade speaks highly of the ironworker's skills. The *sydion* makes a few simple movements and feels the air itself submitting to the sword, facilitating its trajectory.

Bent and wide at its tip, the weapon bears the traditional form of the scimitar used by the Alliance. S'Erum has no difficulty imagining the stone Pilgrims gathered around it, their whispers speaking to the metal to enchant it and incarnate the vorpal soul. Typhonic magic has survived throughout the centuries via these symbols engraved on both sides of the blade. S'Erum easily recognizes these marks although he is unable to decipher them. They are a language somewhere between the alphabet and musical notes, a language conceived to kill.

Subtle ferociousness emanates from the sword. S'Erum does not doubt that the centuries have in no way altered its determination and that it is still able to track the minute vibrations of vocal cords. That is its vocation, the objective of the ironworkers who created it in the hope of eliminating the Sphinxes. The vorpal soul seeks its adversary's neck and is completely dedicated to the art of decapitation. It is tuned by the sound of a voice, a breath, and may, in the hands of an accomplished warrior, become a fearful blade.

S'Erum knows he could submit to its influence, be impregnated by its spite, but this type of sword is not aware of time passing by. Some brothers would understand it in a few days. Others would understand its secret only after a few months or years. It is not just a weapon but also, and more importantly, a mineral soul that must be tamed, understood and somewhat loved to achieve perfect devotion.

S'Erum slides it into its sheath with a tinge of regret and asks himself who allowed the steward to acquire it. No Patriarch would have tolerated a vorpal sword being relegated to the background and not serve the interest of the Alliance on the front, on the surface. S'Erum smells S'Holth's scent on the pommel. The weapon belonged to him, there is no doubt.

"I must alert my master," says S'Ylice, pointing to the sword with his finger. "Its very presence here is high treason... and this hiding place... all these books stolen under the nose of the Alliance. The one who killed him was right," he concludes, sententiously.

S'Erum nods in approval. He basically shares the archivist's opinion: S'Holth had become an enemy of the Alliance. However, this is a murder, the assassination of a brother despite ophidian laws. No matter the victim's character, the act in itself cannot remain unpunished or the law will seem obsolete.

"I want to smell this room," says S'Erum. "Leave me alone and go tell S'Ardaï."

The *sydion* waits for S'Ylice to disappear in the gallery, then closes his eyes in isolation. To understand a room through the sense of smell requires journeying into the past. The scents floating around him are pearls forming a necklace he tries to

reconstruct, the necklace signifying a life that reveals itself in patches and slowly paints the portrait of a different steward.

This steward is an ophidian who came here to satisfy his Vice, who enjoyed his secret and treated it like a gift. S'Erum smells the stench of the past, precise moments when S'Holth gave in to his disease and let his instincts flow freely. The *sydion* can imagine the efforts he must have made to leave the cave and show himself to his people behind a typhonic mask. Magic suffocated Vice's miasmas. Magic allowed him to wander through the Erratum night after night without raising suspicions while he built his secret library.

Eyes closed, S'Erum tenses. S'Holth's intoxication under the stranglehold of Vice is so sincere that he swoons and almost falls. The exalted smell inhabiting each nook of the cave disgusts him. But the disease does not explain it all. The *sydion* suddenly knows why: the closed experiment perverted the mind of the young S'Holth. Brought up in confinement of a locked universe, with the archivist holding the only keys, the steward substituted one prison for another.

The intimate odor emanating from the works tells the story of an ophidian shocked by the surface, overwhelmed by a world he thought ended at the walls of the Erratum. He traveled to the Emerald Forest, hoping that the cord binding him to his father would break, that distance would deaden his fears and regrets. S'Erum surprises himself by feeling sorry for the destiny of this brother trapped by Vice. It is not surprising that this disease fed on the fears gnawing away at him, that it gave him the ideal pretext to create his own world and relive the closed experiment.

S'Erum lets out a long sigh, conscious that the master archivist gave his disciple up to Vice without even knowing it.

He turns around and tries to forget the scent of the disease to feel other subtler scents that intrigue him and require his concentration.

Light. Again. Barely perceptible, like dust hanging in the air. The trace of the assassin... because it is truly him. S'Erum is convinced. The Principle of Clarity has crossed the threshold of the gallery to come to this place. Was it, as he continues to believe, a weapon that the murderer managed to introduce into the Erratum? Or a spell capable of leaving deep marks, like claws?

S'Erum is frustrated with the lack of answers and feels his concentration diminishing. The fatigue and tension accumulated over the past hour prevent him from continuing. His eyes start to open, the smells disappear.

He cannot wait much longer. The ashen flowers haunt the boundaries of his mind. He wants to have a precise idea of the nature of the library, though. Very rapidly, he notes that the works are all of very different origins. He discovers orc herbariums, copper books of magic spells from the mountains of the dwarves, parchments with their corners turned up under the heat of the desert sun, pharmacopeias with ripped covers seized during the Akkylannian Inquisition, fine

grilled bark by Wolfen, plate engravings of an incredible finesse signed by alchemist scribes...

Only one point in common: the sheen of time. All these works have lived through decades, even centuries, before landing on the steward's shelves. Antic's confused revelations confirm it. Vice was fed these precious works - the rarest and the most expensive. This collection is worth a fortune and probably equal in quality to the greatest rooms of the Erratum.

S'Erum selects a few volumes at random and rapidly leafs through them. He looks for a theme, an echo that can tell him of the potential research S'Holth had started. Barhan almanacs sit by Kelt tales of battles; a thesis on magic approved by the seal of the Order of the Chimera, lies beside naïf engravings produced by Scorpion clones to honor the Basyleüs, the alchemist emperor.

No flagrant recurrence, other than a marked interest for magic, which is not surprising. The *sydion* admits that the steward's scope of interest had largely exceeded the deceiving framework of his profession. S'Holth was not simply a scholar, but also a brother able to use a vorpal sword and hide the alterations of his vitiated body through typhonism.

S'Erum is disappointed and feels his discouragement despite the unhopd-for discovery of this secret room. Although he now has a clear image of the victim, the murderer remains in the shadow. S'Ylice may be basically right, but details do not correspond to the hypothesis of a solitary law enforcer. The assassin could have simply denounced him and the result would have been the same. Not to mention the act of constriction, a death too intimate for someone whose hatred of Vice would have pushed him to murder.

The *sydion* draws near the metal *eyzom*. Did the steward trust the assassin enough to open the doors to his world and let him mingle amongst the branches? The scenes recreated by the slave's eyes prove that the murderer passed through the gallery. Was it the first time? Did he threaten, then finally kill, S'Holth, to get into the cave and take a specific book, but neglect the luxury of a vorpal sword?

S'Erum is in a hurry to leave the confined atmosphere of the cave, but cannot leave the *eyzom*, detained in spite of himself by an undetermined intuition. He waits, impatient to have it done with, and notices a detail as he attempts to enter the thorny foliage.

The pale light of the moonstones, distorting perspectives, has led him to commit an error. His gaze narrows and he now sees the three distinct parts that form the *eyzom*. The base is attached to the floor and acts as a counterweight. It disperses its thick and wide branches where S'Holth took refuge. Up until now, nothing unusual. But then, the branches form a strange mass and close in together, making it impossible to slide within. With a frown, S'Erum glides into the accessible section

and almost immediately feels a mineral resonance. As he tightens his rings, the *eyzom* vibrates like a vorpal soul.

The *sydion* feels guilty that he did not notice this earlier. The metal is not here by chance: the steward put it here to keep his journal safe with the complicity of minerals and vibrations.

The branches slowly start to speak.

## CHAPTER XVI

*“Many boats moor at the port of the Ondine, built on ancient quays. An increasing number of notables pass through here so as to avoid the cutthroats in the lower city. The militia has little interest in this neighborhood deemed calm.”*

- Note written by the steward.

Lysander is dreaming.

Once again, he has walked around the garden to enter through the presbytery's hidden door. Old Dendreas opened the door in silence and, with menacing eyes, gave him the key to the upper room.

He moves forward, heart racing, legs quaking, and cautiously climbs the old wooden staircase to the attic.

A wave of heat invades him when he reaches the landing. Heat flows through his stomach and pubis, a feeling of power that Dendreas' sermons claim are the work of Darkness. For many years, though, the old curate has been an accomplice to the unspeakable and tolerates His Eminence's prohibited passions within his presbytery.

The adolescent does not like to see regret in the curate's eyes. Dendreas wanted to educate him and free him from his father's influence, prevent the cardinal's visits from becoming an opportunity for his protégé to enjoy insolent freedom and forger the rules of the Church.

The boy is fascinated by this father robed in red, with his haughty chin and ashen eyes sometimes arriving in the middle of the night with almost ten thallion horsemen as escorts. They all wear dark capes and hide their faces under their hoods. Lysander had wanted to be like them and have the same assurance as they lead their horses to the neighboring paddock and disperse in the darkness to guard over the presbytery.

He had felt power and experienced a father who incarnates absolute authority and can capture anything he likes in the name of the only god. The boy finds this both terrifying and captivating. He realizes Evil is behind this ridiculous morality, but wonders if morality still makes sense to Merin. Dendreas says yes, but Dendreas is old, disenchanted and unable to explain why one should believe in a god upholding justice while allowing a prelate to abuse a girl younger than his own son.

The boy remembers the first time his father entered the kitchen with the curate. His Eminence simply asked: “Is that him?” and Dendreas nodded. Then, this



father who had appeared from nowhere, with his gray eyes seemingly reading into his soul, smiled. The first and the last, a smile that the boy has never forgotten. Everything changed after that. Dendreas as well. An abyss formed, a distance that the boy took a long time to understand, that he felt over months, then years, slowly taking the better of his tutor.

For the time being, the adolescent has forgotten Dendreas and his hunched shoulders as he invests the narrow and dark hallway leading to the room. The fire in his stomach grows with each step taking him closer to the muted sounds filtering through the door at the end of the hallway.

His hands tremble. His eyes shine. He slides the key into the lock, opens the door, and enters the corridor adjacent to the room.

The noise increases. The adolescent approaches a curtain and looks through the opening.

His father is there, back turned, robe held to the top of his thighs. From each side of his waist, Tinia's legs emerge. The adolescent's throat is dry and he bites his lips until they bleed. Tinia moans little cries, like a bird. Her white legs tremble. Lysander cannot see her face, but knows she is lying on a large oak table where he so often has laid and closed his eyes to smell the musky and troubling odor of sex.

His penis has hardened and hurts him. He breathes with difficulty and feels the end nearing. He will let the curtain drop and run away, like always.

Breathing slowly, his calves straining with the effort, his father works Tinia with an almost mechanical will.

In his unmade bed in a cabin on the *Karl IV*, Lysander struggles in his sleep, his eyelids quivering. The dream that usually ends seems to insist and gnaw at the ramparts of his faith.

His father has turned around.

"Come here, son. Come and take your pleasure," he softly says.

Lysander can no longer breathe. His breath is stuck in his lower stomach where his penis continues to grow as an extension of his desire.

His father is inviting him, the orphan, the adolescent recognized belatedly and hidden in a country presbytery. A hand extended, touching him, moving him, causing him to forget Tinia whose legs are coiled under her breasts, watching him and waiting.

He knows he can still refuse to open the curtain, that he can turn around, close the door and return the key to Dendreas. But his father's extended hand is more than a promise. It gives him the key to another realm, the realm of adults, their power and their torments.

Pride overwhelms him. He crosses the threshold and moves forward, cheeks burning, towards Tinia, her fragile and milky body quivering to maintain a balance at the edge of the large oak table.

"She's yours," his father says. "[ust for you. I give her to you."

Lysander stands still, petrified by the abyss opening between Tinia's legs. Time stands still and floats outside of his awareness. When he finally looks upwards, the young girl's face has changed.

Sylene.

It is she that her father has pointed to, and her golden eyes. Lysander blushes. He can only see a promising mouth, moist lips, and her pink tongue.

In his twisted sheets, Lysander moans and hugs the small statue of the Old Master. The Mother's dream fractures the locks to his soul one by one and dives into spaces that faith cannot fill.

A vague pleasure floods the adolescent when his fingers slide under Sylene's buttocks and firmly grab them. She sighs and leans backward, elbows on the table. Her black hair is a dark puddle in which he would like to drown. Her eyelashes quiver in the shadows. Everything is perfect for the Templar. Everything is as he dreamed. Sylene brings her thighs together and draws him to her.

He enters her, eyes rolled upwards, and cries out. A shout of enjoyment shattering the muted silence of the attic and blowing on his father's image like the flame of a candle.

In the hold of the *Karl IV*, Vice has awakened in the Mother's body.

She had almost fainted in an attempt to maintain her hold on the Templar's dreams and used most of her strength to pierce through the wooden separations to reach the sadist's cabin and offer him a handmade fantasy, providing Lust with its vital impulse.

Lysander's pleasure has reached her like backfire and accomplished what she expected: to bring Vice back from its torpor.

Heavy jets of steam shake the machine. Its cables are twisted under the pressure of the drugs it massively injects to stem the flow of evil.

S'Iris guides Vice with her organs, using the sharp memories of the sadist's torture. Scars of Clarity are paths to rebirth. She feels her muscles tremble and her nerves strengthen with each second. The layer of drugs melts, and Vice emerges.

A first jolt shakes her entire body. The machine accelerates and the cables tense. One breaks with a squeal and twists, vomiting hot air.

The Mother shakes.

The noise resonating in the holds of the *Karl IV* awakens Adrius from his torpor. The ophidian's guard, the Templar opens an eye and closes the prayer book lying on his knees. He stands up, frowning. A sound he fails to recognize coming from behind the door. A heavy and worrying rustle.

Adrius had been in the first battles, the long march by the orphans tracked by the Inquisition, the watch over the buttress of the Akkylahn Mountains. His

maturity and excellent skills as a warrior have gained Mankenz' confidence, and therefore the Old Master's. In the confined quarters of the Flaming Mercy, his reserved temperament and serenity have marveled. Adrius feels no fear and has never believed that life is as important as one might believe. He does not care about dying as long as his time has come. He likes his life, but the next one with Merin seems more promising. In the meantime, he does his best and wanders with a detachment that causes the envy of his brethren.

A long sword emerges in his left hand. With a stern look, he approaches the bottom of the stairs and calls the watchman posted on the upper bridge.

"Tarante?"

The boy, crouched against a chest of munitions, has visibly not heard a thing and jumps, eyelids heavy, before leaning into the stairwell and groaning.

"What?" he asks in a gruff voice.

"The ophidian has freed herself," Adrius announces calmly. "Tell Mankenz and give the alert."

Incredulity passes over the boy's face. A long crack resonates from the hold.

"Merin is protecting us..." breathes Tarante.

"I'll try to slow her down," concludes Adrius. "Try to hurry..."

The Mother's tail lashes in anger within the hold. A beam, pulverized by the impact, sends thousands of splinters across the room. Strengthened by Vice's energy, S'Iris takes her revenge over three years of solitude and pain. She wants to destroy everything, erase this prison from her memory and make sure that no ophidian submits again, like her, to the works of a machine.

The cables finally break one after the other and sweep the floor like a mad hydra. The steam thickens and affects her vision.

S'Iris sees a Templar enter and hesitate for a second before this apocalyptic spectacle. Steam flows through the open door and starts invading the vessel.

Armed with a lantern, Adrius enters the hold, certain he will die. In the weak light, he makes out the fugitive sparks of scales in movement and hears the machine grate and belch. A cable suddenly moves before him and strikes a flank of the hull. The next one surprises him, bouncing off his chest and cutting his breathing, burning his cheek with its steam.

The pain raises a shout that disappears in the confusion. The noise is deafening, echoed by the ringing of a bell in the distance. The frenetic rush of the Templars resonates throughout the *Karl IV* while the ophidian struggles like a trapped animal.

Her rings clang against the four corners of the hold and rattle the ship. On the upper deck, a young disciple watches with horror as the floor cracks, rises and finally brutally collapses at his feet. Sucked in, he screams before being crushed by the creature and thrown around the hold like a broken puppet.

Adrius would have liked to fight. He wants to go forward and strike the ophidian with his sword, but his arm no longer obeys. Nor his legs, which suddenly bend underneath him as if they no longer were his...

He falls backwards and drops his weapon, unable to keep a hold of its pommel. He has no strength left in his fingers and his hands dangle, unable to impose their will on their own wrists. He would like to warn his companions, alert them that the poison injected in the veins of their prisoner is now spreading throughout the ship. The massive doses spewed by the machine to slow the progression of Vice have turned into foggy waves seeping under doors into the cabins.

Muscles tense, Adrius already senses his body working in slow motion; his heartbeats space out and slow down. With incredible effort, he manages to raise a hand to bring the lantern towards him and he hugs it against him. He wants to take this light with him; he does not really know why, but he is convinced Merin will appreciate this gift, this small, dying flame.

He dies without pain the instant the Mother's confused movements cause a first invasion of water. The rupture is located at the waterline and rapidly turns into a geyser. S'Iris distrusts the glacial water running into the hold but has no choice.

At the bow of the *Karl IV*, Mankenz realizes the ship is lost. A greasy, orange smoke rises from the hatches, attracting many night owls wandering nearby on the quays, over there. He has seen lights in the windows of the captaincy. It is time to leave.

Cold rage freezes the lines of his face. He should never have trusted the machine and its so-called infallible elixirs. The machine is currently killing his men more efficiently than a regiment of zombies.

His soul deadened, he orders immediate evacuation and sends young disciples to their death to remove materials and round up the best warriors battling in the depths of the ship. He must save that which can be saved. He must ensure that the orphans survive this unplanned episode, that the lodge heals its wounds and prepares to conquer the Erratum.

The *Karl IV* shudders and starts leaning starboard. Mankenz grabs the helm and guides the maneuvers with his voice to put the lifeboats to water before it is too late.

The Mother widens the opening and fears drowning. The water level keeps rising. It has already invaded half of the hold. S'Iris waits for the last breath of the machine and the final cracks of the cables to leave her prison and dive into the black waters of the port of Cadwallon.

For his part, Mankenz has waited until the end. A few crates have been put on board the three boats below. About twenty men, maybe less, have managed to escape and board in silence. Less than three hundred meters away, the quay is a mass

of armed men and inquisitive passersby watching the ship sink. They will soon see the short sparks of a gun signaling the departure. Without any guilt, and not wanting to have any witness fall into the hands of the ducal militia, Mankenz moves towards the five disciples who made it to the bridge. Asphyxiated and partially paralyzed, they did not move when he whispered a brief absolution in their ears before killing them one by one with a bullet through their heads.

Then, with Lysander's help, he boards a boat and orders the two others to disperse and melt into the hundreds of boats crisscrossing through the port's waters, some attempting to help the failing ship.

It is three o'clock in the morning when the *Karl IV* sinks in a cloud of steam.

## CHAPTER XVII

*“Syd led the troops from the fortress of Kaiber to victory, then declined the title of Commander of the Alliance of Light. He then went to Wyde before reaching the banks of the Belgorn to obtain information on the ophidians and their enemies. We believe he should appear before you.”*

- Secret report sent to the Guide of the Cynwäll elves.

The steward had kept a journal and engraved it in the branches of the *eyzom*. He had played with the minute vibrations of the metal and mineral language to write his story, anchor it in matter and ensure its survival. S’Erum does not control anything and discovers it by small bits according to the movements he impresses on the branches. Excerpts are revealed like notes. Some are inaudible and only let out a strident creak. Others, however, are strangely limp as if, on that day, S’Holth had wanted to speak to an imaginary person.

*I hate what Vice has made of me. It has changed me. It runs through my body, my thoughts and now my dreams (a rustling S’Erum interprets, with no certainty, as an exclamation of vexation or anger). I’ve tried everything. I’ve fought against it. Nothing stops it. Poison? Vice gives and takes away. It balances itself within your soul Balance? Maybe. Never give in. I never gave in. I am hiding. Typhonism is my disguise, my coat, my hood. Without magic, I would be dead.*

The excerpt then becomes muddled. The *sydion* grasps the echo of a lie that comes back two or three times, then silence. He moves a ring on a branch and feels the *eyzom* quiver. A new excerpt appears from nowhere:

*I am not ashamed of lying. They all lied to me. He did, and so did the others. Especially him. The master. I love him and I would like to kill him. I would have liked him to succeed. To see the library as a universe. Travel through the mind. Travel and think by proxy. Analyze the work of others and forge an objective opinion. A neutral opinion, far from the surface, to advise the Patriarchs. To succumb to no influence. Filter creation to better understand it. Objectivity. Be objective in everything. Live to think? (A snicker punctuates this last question. S’Erum cannot determine whether it is ironic or bitter.) Killing the master would serve no purpose. I am afraid of disappointing him. He gave me everything. He taught me everything. He created*

*me. Why the failure? Why not be content with the library? The call of the world. The call of the surface. (The steward's mood turns for the worse. The next part takes on signs of a telluric upheaval, as if the steward were preaching to an audience.) I dream and you all dream of Vortiris' wings. Our spirit functions with each sigh to enter our memory and find the trace of his wings. We are amputees. We should be able to fly in the sky. All of our lift, we have sought invisible wings. To see beyond? To use Vice to find the path leading to the truth of our ascendance. Vice designed to allow us to fly? And if I gave in? If I let the disease overwhelm me and possess me, maybe I would feel wings growing in my back? An instinctive reaction to the closed experiment, a fantasy about freedom? But why did Vortiris make us crawling creatures, beings that hide underground? Are we to reign forever in the depths of Aarklash? I'm afraid. Much too afraid to accept the idea that we are the cursed mob of a divine experiment that failed. Fear...*

The last word ends with strident cacophony, making the *sydion* change positions. He looks for another clue and feels a few excerpts escaping before the branches cairn down and harmonize their undulations to form a coherent tale.

The following excerpt is radically different in tone. The color of the confession has changed. It is better controlled, less chaotic, as if the steward were more confident.

*The seventh sloughing. Relief my old skin took with it my fears. It will rot, disappear and consecrate me, the Tainted One. I was mistaken. Vice is a step, a transition. I am calmer and can read six or seven days in a row without losing my concentration, thanks to Vice. I'm looking for roots, proof, testimonials, tales of experiments, engravings. I am diving into our history.*

*I have the strong conviction that our primitive tradition is the right one. Without knowing it or wanting to admit it, we have begun the era of metamorphosis. The cycle is coming to an end. Now, I understand why the Tainted Ones feel they are searching and wandering in a hostile world. We live the Serpent Cycle. The cycle of calm after rage, anger and the wind that sets the universal garden ablaze. Vortiris gave birth to a world with his breath. Then he started an initiatory quest in the form of a Serpent. I ran against the meaning given to this stage of the cycle. I finally understood that this ophidian form has multiple faces. It is the people. Its people. We incarnate Its cycle. We perpetuate Its cycle. The ancient ones tell us It wanders through the universal garden seeking knowledge and wisdom. We are the extension of Its will the wheels of a cycle to come. I've found many allusions to the notion of achievement. various Patriarchs speak of a meeting between the "internal inferno" and the "wisdom of the mind": According to them, by combining the two, we could become solar salamanders. The internal inferno. Vice. Combine Vice with*

*spirituality, then go to the surface to find our place under the suns. The vital source of reptiles. We must...*

S'Erum loses the thread of the excerpt. The vibrations are so intense with emotion that he cannot decipher them. It takes him more than ten minutes to find another audible passage:

*A dinner, yesterday, at S'Hysme's. Strange enjoyment wearing the mask in their presence. I feel distanced from them. Their worries remind me of wilted neomas floating in a pond of stagnant water. They are aged. They do not understand the prophetic essence of Vice. They refuse to accept that the mind bends to the will of Vice in the hope of guiding us towards a metamorphosis. S'Enkz gave a laudatory speech on the sanctuaries. The others approved. Are they blind?*

*Vice is a call. It invites us to go beyond the political contingencies governing our sanctuaries. To belong to one's self only. Vice is an energy that frees, motions us to leave, to undertake our initiatory quest. To leave behind patriarchal authority. To go to the surface to feel the changes happening. S'Erdh spoke of instinct. I often meet his warriors. I've felt they were sensitive to the primitive tradition. They want to go to the surface to fight. They don't yet understand that Vice speaks in their stead. I doubt that our generation will see the cycle end. It will take decades before Vice becomes a standard. I would have liked to have seen the sanctuaries disintegrate and lose their warriors. To hear the victorious clamor of these warriors in the streets of Wyde. To know that the roads and paths of Aarklash belong to the Tainted Ones.*

*I want to stay at a distance. To satisfy my Gluttony in its most abject forms. Read. Never stop reading and learning. Perhaps to grow from the works I assemble and, who knows, start a metamorphosis. To isolate the mutation principle, for Gluttony means developing an appetite that cannot be satisfied. I must venture further and further and for longer and longer within Cadwallon.*

*The surface is changing. The Rag'Narok is gaining strength. The second battle of Kaiber is tangible proof. We spoke of the Cynwälls. The elves feel that the era of metamorphoses is approaching. The Cynwälls are afraid. They are looking to the past and the artifacts of yesterday.*

*There were signs in Kaiber. The master like the idea that the psyches living in the entourage of the Almighty Crâne use Acheron's defeat to their end. Today, the Cynwälls will play the role of apprentice sorcerers and burn their fingers. According to the master, only a few years will pass before we take over the streets of Wyde to kill the fast survivors. I remained silent. I could have told him that our psyches were mistaken. The manipulation of our allies is a trap. We must serve Vortiris under the suns of Aarklash. Using Acheron means persuading our young warriors that the Alliance will never play its role.*



*A new race will be born. Lies and illusions will become useless. Only our bold strength in battle will count, under the hold of Vice.*

*He's mad. What is he thinking? I'm not helping him. I'm using him. I am using him to hide Vice and broaden my library. He knows my secret. He is the only one I allow to come down here with me. He came last night to tell me about his dreams. I listened to him carefully. His symptoms are different but abide by the same rules as mine. His dreams resemble each other and all start in the same way. He speaks of a woman. A Cynwäll elf. She has honey-colored hair. This is strange. He tells me he has never tasted or seen honey but the comparison seems obvious to him. I should bring him some back from my next journey. I've already tasted honey. I don't like it.*

*The elf is sitting. She wears a smooth mask. She has a crossbow hanging across her back. A nice weapon, he says. He has come to kill her. He doesn't know why, but knows his life depends on it. She is an obstacle between him and the shadow. Until now, the Shadow was a recurring being. He tried to approach it a few times, but it always disappeared into the darkness. Last night, he killed the female. He slid behind her and ripped her head off. You could call it a positive evolution. That's what I told him. Furthermore, the shadow has a name now: Syd de Kaïber.*

*We spoke about Syd almost all night long. The Cynwäll elf became known during the second battle of Kaïber. The Erratum received a copy of a message addressed to the Patriarchs by one of our psyches in Acheron. I read the message. The so-called Syd is powerful and owns an artifact called the Echyron, an object animated by Light that replaces his right arm.*

*He is convinced that he must kill Syd to heal. Nothing can confirm this. I assume he is ready to undertake anything to try. He wants to prepare his departure. Leave the Erratum, find Syd de Kaïber, and kill him to prevent the disease from progressing, or maybe even finally defeat it. I don't encourage him in this. He is too useful to me, although he is less and less sensitive to my arguments. I am going to have to go to the surface with him, take him away from the Erratum to scare him. I'm convinced that he won't like the experience and will give up his project. The most important thing is to keep him under control as long as the disease makes him useful I must...*

*A sharp pain suddenly interrupts the excerpt.*

*The eyzom becomes alive. S'Erum needs only a fraction of a second to realize the danger of the slight movement animating the branches. One of them has already attacked. Bent like a claw, it struck at his heart but did not reach it, stopped by his scales. The trap is closing in. The branches now form a sharp and distorted bush, preventing his escape. With a sigh, the sydion determines the trajectory of his rings and a possible escape. He must move rapidly. The extremities of the branches twist and scrape his scales to harpoon him. The mineral force animating this bush is*

greater than the ophidian's. S'Erum must compensate by his agility and avoid panicking. Blood flows. Tips scratch him. Others stick and rip pieces of skin.

The *eyzom* defends itself, protecting its integrity and its master's memory. Its branches convulse and twist with ferociousness. "An iron hydra," thinks the *sydion*, as his tail, covered in blood and hooked to various branches, manages to rip itself away to freedom.

The *eyzom* calms down as soon as it has attacked. Its crimson foliage is impressive under the white rays of light shining from the moonstones.

S'Erum retreats to the entrance of the gallery, leaving a bloody trail on the ground. Pain soars through his body and blurs his judgment. He almost loses consciousness and looks forward to the help of the *syhee* coming towards him. She supports him, encourages him and guides him through the steward's home. He gives in to her and her soft voice. She helps him into the boat and, with a vigorous push, leads the boat to the inn.

## CHAPTER XVIII

*“In its dark nobility, the ophidian species carries within the Vices of its creators. Like Vortiris, it is confident of its strength and angers easily. Like Celebdel the emperor-magi of Algandie, it is decadent and does not abide vexation. Power has a price: Vice.”*

- Selith Tanit

Ayane has undressed to follow her master into the clear water of the pool in their room. She had carefully laid out candlesticks beforehand. The vacillating light of the small Hames cairns the *sydion*, his heart now beating more slowly. His arms supporting him on the pool's edge, he takes pleasure in the *syhee's* care and the caresses of the *neomas* floating around them. These ancient lilies have healing powers that ophidians have learned to use. Their large leaves quiver and slowly turn brown. S'Erum feels them trying to turn the pool into a healing elixir, cradling his scarred body. *neomas* work and die for him.

Ayane is up to her waist in the water reddened by her master's blood. With a cloth, she delicately cleans a deeper wound less than five centimeters from his face. The metal has left a very clear cut that needs stitching.

“My eternal one,” she whispers, “may I?”

S'Erum accepts with a slight movement of his eyelids. Ayane exchanges her cloth for a needle and arachnid thread, silver in color, slightly sticky, rolled around a crystal bobbin, a small stick laden with a gem of Darkness at each extremity that protects the quality of the fiber. She had bought it from mercenaries, Sessair women known as “threaders,” who venture to the edge of the Akkyshan forests.

Ayane dries her hands, unrolls the thread with care, slides it through the eye of the needle and pricks the master's skin. S'Erum quivers. The fiber contains toxins that cause marginal pain, the feeling of being over there in the most complete darkness, his chest oppressed by the rustling of trees. Secreted by a spider, the thread brings to light his visions as Ayane unrolls it to stitch together the sides of the wound. Macabre images invade the *sydion's* mind. He is walking in the heart of a forest dominated by onyx trunks laden with bones. He sees ashy sap moisten the bark like blood, covering its victims' skeletons...

Ayane completes her work and cuts the thread with her teeth. S'Erum feels better. The pain subsides. Soon, she will be just a screen between him and the ashen

flowers. He will open a chest and submit to their scent.

Loud pounds hit the door.

“Enter, S’Ardäi.”

After a moment of hesitation at the door, the master archivist crosses the room and stands facing the *sydion* from the other side of the pool. S’Erum thanks him for coming with a slight nod of his face. S’Ardäi remains silent and observes his wounds. His gaze passes to the fading *neomas*. He grimaces.

“You could have died.”

A smile stretches over the *sydion*’s jowls.

“I could have, yes,” he says, opening his eyes.

Ayane has moved back to a distant corner of the pool and crosses her arms over her breasts.

“The Erratum is rotting from within,” says S’Erum. “After what I’ve seen, I could order immediate evacuation.”

“S’Ylice told me. S’Holth dared to steal books from the Alliance. Deprive us of knowledge. How many years could we have lost because of him? How many unexplained secrets and truths? The Alliance has...”

“S’Ylice didn’t see a thing,” S’Erum interrupts firmly. “I entered and almost died. Your kingdom is rotting, S’Ardäi. Your kingdom deserves to go up in flames.”

The master archivist’s temperature suddenly burns throughout his body at this threat. S’Erum feels a warm breeze brush over him like a warning.

“The steward was a Tainted One,” declares the *sydion*. “The worst the Alliance can produce. You imprisoned him in his Vice with your experiments. You turned him into a traitor whose ambitions should be sealed in the cave, believe me.”

“Have you found the assassin?”

“Maybe. But before, I want you to really be aware of what is going on. I found major works in the cave, works collected over the years by the steward without anyone, including yourself, noticing anything at all. Where is the fault, S’Ardäi? When did your softness and pride blind you to the point that this creature was able act so freely?”

S’Erum stretches out to cross the pool towards the master archivist.

“The steward extolled the rise of Vice. The very idea, the very concept, is a heresy that freezes my blood. Until now, Tainted Ones were considered exiled... beings gnawed by guilt and destined to die under the stranglehold of Vice. The steward visibly controlled evil, using it not only as an instrument but also as a vocation to question patriarchal authority, encouraging the abandonment of sanctuaries and the fragmentation of the Alliance, a broken Alliance, chaotic, that would throw us onto the surface of Aarklash like a handful of seeds.”

“He’s dead,” retorts S’Ardäi. “The heresy you’re speaking about no longer exists.”

“He said that Vice is an internal inferno. A means of shedding skin like never before. To become a solar salamander and perpetuate Vortiris’ cycle.”

“A primitive vision...”

“Precisely. A concise vision, able to gather around it all the Tainted Ones dispersed throughout the world. It’s a hope, S’Ardai. The steward offered the Tainted Ones a quest. He offered them the right to exist, divine legitimacy.”

“You think he wasn’t the only one? That he could have talked about it?”

“Could you even risk thinking that he didn’t say a thing? Can we be satisfied with his death and close our eyes? Not me. I have no proof to the contrary. No proof that he didn’t spread his ideas to all those he met on the surface. I’m afraid, S’Ardai. A visceral fear that his words resonate today, even in our sanctuaries, that Tainted Ones, whether hunted or masked, see a glimmer of hope and start to assemble.”

“What makes you so afraid, really?”

“Decadence. The loss of our free will, the most simple and perfected form of freedom being the ability to choose... Choose weapons, in this case. It’s taken us centuries to rebuild, to heal our wounds and recreate the basis of our civilization. The Rag’Narok augurs the time of another conquest. I’ve been working towards this goal since the day I accepted to live and wear a leather muzzle, when I accepted the principle of all of these sufferings to serve the Alliance. I don’t want to see madmen destroy us by dividing us, by turning us into savage beasts submitted to Vice’s instinct.”

“Me neither, *sydion*, me neither.”

“Our enemies see us as servile creatures, brainless zealots barely able to incarnate the Dark Principle, even though we are using it to change Aarklash. We are colonizing shadows and silence. We are the force that will create the world in our image.”

His face turns towards the *syhee* with a cruel grin.

“Look at her. Really look at her. How can a world belong to that biped and her brethren? Their cities will soon become the strength behind our reign. Light vacillates in the winds of the Rag’Narok. Winds that others blow for us, on which we have imprinted our will. All of them, Acheronians, Drones and even our Syhar companions, will become our guards and soldiers, the strings of a single instrument, and we will be its musicians. Only then will we conquer the unfinished Realms. You and me, we believe in a world on that scale. Aarklash has lived ages as we live sloughs, to achieve mature thought as desired and constructed by us.”

“You’re a lot closer to the Patriarchs than you think.”

“Except that I will make no concessions.”

“To laws that were thought up and written many centuries ago...” sighs S’Ardai, with a touch of irony.

“An era when the last mnemosians saw Vortiris and Celebdel with their own eyes,” the *sydion* adds. “Our creators, S’Ardai. They spoke with them. I think they

were in a good position to design these laws.”

“Have you seen where they have taken us?”

The *sydion*’s tone hardens.

“I’m going to forget what you just said.”

“Do you like power?”

“I use it.”

“But you can’t live without those you killed. You are losing yourself, *sydion*. Maybe you are doubting. You talk of freedom, but you would go mad without your ashen flowers. How great is their influence over you? Your brothers should perhaps look into this more closely. You relieve your conscience in dreaming of assassins and the Tainted Ones. Where does perversion start, *sydion*, tell me... You are the one who criticizes me for making the sanctuary a necessity for the Alliance, right? You are also the one who rejoices at each sanctuary being independent - should destruction strike one, it can’t touch the other.”

The master archivist stops, searching for words.

“And if the steward was right?” he asks in a muted voice. “And if the Alliance grew by being incarnated into each one of us, leaving us on our own, abandoning us in this world to better precipitate chaos?”

“Reign over our ruins? The Alliance deserves much better.”

S’Erum exits the pool and for a brief instant looks at the wounds covering his body. The *neoma* balm has its effects. He only feels a slight burning where the iron branches were the cruelest. He brings his face less than ten centimeters from the master archivist.

“We must act now. Save what can be saved. Your archivists should take an inventory of the books in the cave as soon as possible. Are the others safe?”

“The Erratum is now an empty shell. All the books of spells that matter have been protected and stored in chests under the Pillar. They will leave the library as soon as I give the order.”

“Where and how?”

“You don’t need to know,” says S’Ardai, flicking his tongue.

“Do you want me to go to the Patriarchs? I don’t want to more than you do. If the patriarchal council intervenes, the future of the Erratum will escape from our hands. Yours and mine.”

“You will fall with me.”

“Probably, but unlike you, I am ready to stay to the bitter end,” says the *sydion*.

“Sacrifice yourself for them?”

“Not for them.”

“For the Alliance?”

“Amongst others.”

“Who else?”

S’Erum hesitates for a second, then points to Ayane.

“Her...”

“This biped?”

“Remember the closed experiment. We exist in the eyes of the other. We exist in confrontation. We exist by putting ourselves in danger at the surface. It’s the same thing. Sometimes I live better through her eyes.”

“I don’t understand you.”

S’Erum motions impatiently.

“Where, S’Ardäi? Where will all the crates go?” The master archivist studies Ayane and answers in vibrations.

*The passage leads to the Cynwäll ruins.*

*Have the watchmen ensured that the passage is clear?*

*Of course. But who is really threatening us?*

S’Erum sniffs and stares at the master archivist.

*A dragon, my brother. He lives here, in the Erratum.*

## CHAPTER XIX

*“The Underground, the Other City, the Cadwë Shadow... All names of a sewer that descends into the depths of the earth, mixing the strata of yesteryears to those of the guilds. There is the known and the unknown, marked and unmarked paths, and paths better left unknown here the sound of scales resonates.”*

- Excerpt from *Memories of the Underground*, by Songe-de-Jais.

S'Iris is cold and hungry.

Hunger eats at her. In perfecting the art of enchantment, Mothers had also perfected culinary arts. A long time ago, she had always personally met the herbalists who came to sell their best aromas and took pleasure in composing for her and her sisters refined dishes they shared over many evenings under the light of torches.

The memory is bitter. For years, the machine has suffocated her appetite and fed her body with substitute toxins. Now, she seeks real food. Dishes that can be bitten, chewed, swallowed. Dishes with unique smells and tastes. As her body awakens, her stomach burns and she cries out in pain.

S'Iris is cold, too. Her prisons in the depths of the Flaming Mercy and even in the hold, were lethargic cocoons erasing the feared temperatures of the surface.

In the first few instants, as she slid under the hulls of the ships moving towards the *Karl IV*, the cold, had been her ally and kept her conscious. Very rapidly, however, she remembered the instinctive terror each ophidian feels when winter arrives and turns nature into a hostile territory.

The quays and their promise of a hypothetical access to the sewers are no longer far away when her strength starts to waver. The glacial ice numbs her reflexes and closes around her like a mantel of snow over her scales. S'Iris fights with the energy of despair and directs herself as best she can to the center of Cadwallon.

She has closed her eyes. The water is too dirty and the darkness too harrowing. She trusts the vibrations of the hulls and their crews to show her the way.

Finally, rock. The quay rises above her. S'Iris brushes against it and feels the blunt movements of the city, the regular steps of the onlookers who gather along the quay to watch the vessel sink.

The Mother must move fast and find an opening to the sewers before the cold breaks down her last resistance. For a brief moment, she fights an intense feeling of



panic. She sees herself slowly sinking to the bottom, beaten by numbness, although she has just escaped the drugs, the machine and her executioners.

She bites her tongue and scrapes her sides on the rough rock to conquer the cold through pain. Her panic subsides. She murmurs determination in her head like a prayer: sink into the sewers, track the magic waves of typhonism to find the Erratum's sanctuary and warn her brothers. A quest as a pardon. She has suffered so much to escape from her jailers and does not want her people to be victims as well on the pretext that Vice has a hold over her. She truly believes she is innocent. They will care for her, give her rightful place back to her and, who knows, maybe she will hear her eggs murmur tomorrow.

The grill, worn and sawed in two places to let a human slip through, gives in easily under the pressure of her rings. S'Iris hits the ground before her with the tip of her tail, probing for a precise feel of what awaits her at the end of this passageway just large enough to let her through.

The horrid stench remains a sizeable obstacle. The discharged waters end their flow in this gallery and have worn away the mineral force of the old rock whose vital breath the Mother cannot discern. The city is an injury for her, a wound on the surface of Aarklash, sewers for sanies.

She moves forward, her consciousness sealed so as to avoid madness. Her sides scrape the rock and remove sediment that sticks to her scales. S'Iris almost turns back a few times when the narrowest passageways make her twist and struggle. She feels the gallery closing around her, trapping her like the machine's cables.

But she continues to advance and reaches a first cave an hour later. A narrow path leads around its edge a meter above the water level. S'Iris raises her eyelids and waits patiently until her eyes can focus in the shadowy light. A pale ray of the full moon enters through a crack in the ceiling. The Mother sees pipes on the wall forming an inextricable labyrinth leading to thick lead doors.

Lysander had told of the friendships the orphans had forged in the Sewer Workers guild. The possibility of a chase in the depths of Cadwallon had forced the Templars, to the sadist's great displeasure, to seduce and corrupt the guild's emissaries. Lysander's disgust, when in the presence of these pale and skeletal sewer workers who run from sunlight and all wear the same copper monocles, amused the Mother. They haunted the sadist's dreams and the Mother surprised herself with a strange feeling of brotherhood with this little people who had created a kingdom in the depths.

A noise from behind. A gate has just ground open and a single man bearing a lantern enters. Tall and thin, he wears black leather leggings and a long, filthy vest. Over his shoulder, he holds a long steel pole sharpened like a spear with two tips. He looks taciturn and starts walking along the passageway.

S'Iris sees the spot of light moving above the water. She needs this man. He could become her guide.

She slowly emerges from the center of the pool in the hope she will not scare him. The man freezes as soon as the Mother appears. He neither jumps nor tries to escape. He sets the lantern before him and grabs the pole by both hands in the middle.

Sagoth celebrated his thirty-second birthday last month. His equals already consider him an elder and treat him with great respect. A native of Cadwallon, he grew up like many other children among the stripped shipwrecks of the port where he simply tried to survive from one day to the next with his sister, giving no thought to the future. His sister, Thymete, forged his destiny. Sagoth had protected her for fifteen years. He had provided her with food and a refuge every evening under the great mast.

Fifteen years in the shadow of this pillar planted in the sand like a vengeful finger, this mast, given by the Guild of Ferryman to the forgotten children and which had become, by the force of things, an improbable rower, a shaky beehive riddled with barrels, planks and all the leftovers from the wrecks.

Sagoth dedicated a few years to improving these four-square meters perched twelve meters high, a nest where his sister lived like a queen. He found each nail himself and each piece of wood he used to build it. He even risked his life tearing the silk curtains from a moving sedan to attach them to their refuge's sole window. Fifteen years of small victories over life. Fifteen years of incomparable devotion...

Thymete had wanted even more. Much more than the simple roof and the shaky walls of a refuge that each storm threatened to blow away. When Sagoth returned from his expeditions, he always found her sitting in front of the window, a hand caressing the silk of the curtain, eyes turned towards the upper city. He was not there when she left. The young vigils of the mast told her that an old man had come, that he had waited for Thymete at the foot of the mast with his two militiamen, that he had welcomed her with a strange smile and that he had covered her in a heavy cape of red velvet before disappearing with her and his escort in a heavy carriage.

Sagoth never saw his sister again. He has kept a little plank from their home where, not knowing how to write, she had engraved a heart with a small tear just above it. He gave up the refuge the next day at dawn in exchange for a name, that of a sewer worker who was looking for a disciple and could offer him room and board.

Sagoth joined the Guild of Sewer Workers and swore to never again put his feet on the surface. He forgot Thymete with the same dedication he used to protect her, and dedicated the rest of his life to the guild.

He loves his work. He loves the idea of being a link in a chain, the master of a realm that carries the pus of Cadwallon. He loves the long hours of walking and the echo of his steps. He loves the wheels and noise of the gates that free the used waters of the city. But he cannot abide intruders and even less these ophidians who are a permanent threat to his people. The guild's history is filled with bodies

crushed or torn by these creatures rising from the depths of the earth. There is a limit not to be exceeded, a border marked by the ducal seal and the gems of Light incusted in the walls of the gates. Only the eldest, like himself, can wander on the edge of prohibited realms and check whether the Principle of Clarity has been damaged by these monsters.

He weighs the stick between his fingers, assessing his chances of confronting the creature. She is enormous compared to the ophidian he had met two years ago. Open wounds cover her sides, purulent holes probably caused by the bullets of a gun. Sagoth ignores what could happen to him and in what circumstances she managed to reach this place, but he is sure the ophidian is sick, judging from the color of her scales and hallucinated stare.

Sagoth looks at the door from which he entered and the distance separating them: ten or eleven meters. Too much despite his adversary's pitiful state.

The sewer worker turns his pole in his hands and moves slightly to the right, back to the gate he may have to use in an emergency.

S'Iris undulates indecisively. The human's intent may be obvious but she cannot face another battle. Normally, it would be easy to get rid of him, but she is not sure she has the upper hand now. Injured, exhausted and overwhelmed with painful nausea, she simply wants help.

"I... I mean... you no harm," mutters the Mother with difficulty.

The fact of having spoken puts her tongue in direct contact with the stench. She swoons as if slapped by an invisible hand, and vomits yellowish bile under the sewer worker's surprised glance.

"I'm going to fight you to death," he says.

Bent over the water, the Mother feels the room spinning but cannot capitulate. Her entire body pleads for unconsciousness. She still wants to believe in the whimsical destiny that has provided her this freedom at such a high price. She slides into the water to approach the human. He crouches, weapon in hand. She gets no farther than a meter before she vomits again, a sticky, bloody liquid.

When her head emerges, she detects a slight hesitation in the human's eyes. If he had wanted to attack, now would have been the time. S'Iris sees her chances and uses all of her strength to dive to the *depths of the eye*.

Sagoth wavers, his soul brushed by typhonism. He does not know that the ophidian magic is already delving into his most profound emotions to alter them and submit them to the Mother's service. The mental manipulation takes only a few seconds and overwhelms his awareness. His feelings towards the creature soften. He now knows that the Serpent is a female, an ophidian and an accomplished mother. He also knows she needs protection and will not betray him. With a sigh, he briefly sees his sister's melancholy face.

The Mother has fought her last battle. The cold, hunger, lost blood and Hod's toxins have conquered her will. Sagoth sees her back arch and her arms tense. Her tongue flickers like a final call. She falls back and crashes on the surface of the pool.

## CHAPTER XX

*“Brothers, the Goldenevil is not an evil like the others. It bears the face of our end, our disappearance, and maybe even that of all of Darkness. If, one day, we all give in to the golden pest and become dragons of Light, then the Obscure may fall with us. I implore you, my brothers, to immediately execute those who are suspected of carrying evil within them. Even if it means we commit errors. I prefer the death of an innocent brother to that of a people...”*

- Speech of the *sydion* S'Ehrvir before the Patriarchs of the sanctuary of Onyrum.

Silence.

The master archivist's despair is tangible. His rings twist and rattle his hair shirt.

*A dragon?* he repeats, with a loud vibration.

Ayane holds still, feeling the tension in the room. In the light of the candles arranged around the pool, the two ophidians observe each other, face to face.

*You've gone mad, sydion... you've lost your head in your ashen dreams.*

S'Erum glances at the *syhee* and answers the master archivist aloud.

“Believe me, I would have liked to be wrong. But the truth has been here since the beginning, right in front of us. The steward knew his murderer. He knew him even better than most of you. He used him and protected him until the night of the murder...”

“Who?”

S'Erum ignores the interruption.

“A mirror of the past... a ghost. We will never finish paying for our origins, the crucial moment when Vortiris decided to go against the laws of nature. He sentenced us to err on the edge of the imperfect, the edge of Vice, and that, perhaps, is what makes me bitter. The idea that the blood flowing through our veins is the result of aborted experiments and searching... Do you think we are guinea-pigs? Maybe even similar to the clones designed by our allied alchemists?

“The mark on S'Holth's neck... do you remember its shape? Like a scratch, three deep cuts... No *syhee* and certainly no human could have struck so violently. And the scoria, the frozen traces of Clarity. We didn't have enough imagination to see beyond appearances and the weapon of Light being manipulated by a brother. To

be honest, we weren't far from the truth. We were hovering around it without accepting the fact that a brother could be capable of deliberately manipulating Light.

"Everything, or almost everything, became very clear in the cave when I heard the steward. Another vision... a way of understanding why Maliek was so impressed by the assassin's size. I don't know why he was spared, but he saw him for a few seconds near the gallery leading to the cave. And he did feel that the one entering the gallery was not like the others, despite the light and despite his emotions... The *depths of the eye* have spoken.

"Everything is clear. The two faces of the assassin. The one who advances blindly, who tries to channel his rage and intelligence. And the other, more cynical, less impulsive one, who manages to erase his trail. Two ophidians? No, two facets of a single brother."

S'Erum lets the silence fall again. His pupils sparkle savagely. The intoxication of the hunt. Finally feeling the shadows unravel to reveal the murderer. Unmasking the assassin and applying the law. The sentence as a release, a thorough cleansing, purging all of the miasmas accumulated in the library rotting from the inside and headed towards destruction. The murderer is not the one he thought. No one could have imagined that ophidian history would repeat itself like this.

"The Lazarium," murmurs the *sydion*. "Do you remember the Lazarium and the disease they treated there?"

The master archivist tenses, a glimmer of incredulity in his eyes. Then amazement distorts his features.

"No, not here."

"Oh, yes. Here. Under your nose. I don't know why or how, but the assassin caught the Goldenevil. Since when? We will soon know. The steward knew."

"This disease no longer exists. It's been eradicated."

"Offspring. We're just offspring, S'Ardaï. Why deny it? The mnemosians spoke about it with extreme caution... They touched a supreme taboo, the very the essence of our people. Until now, I had never asked the question. I never asked about the finality of this disease. Is it Clarity and Obscurity cohabiting in our memory and blood? Is it an eternal battle tearing apart our conscience without us knowing? You're right: it's been centuries since Goldenevil disappeared and we thought we had controlled it and imprisoned it in the walls of the Lazarium. But all the monsters and deformed brothers contaminated by Light have left something. And this 'something' is wandering around the Erratum.

"More proof of our being too soft. Why would they be studied? Why did we not simply kill them? It was the only possible solution. But our ancestors had to understand. Understand Light? Why bother..."

The *sydion's* jaws grate. His eyes light up.

“Why bother saving a brother turned into a dragon of Light!” he screams into the master archivist’s face. “Answer!”

His nervousness rekindles the pain of his wounds.

“Let’s evacuate. Now,” says S’Ardäi.

S’Erum pulls him closer.

“This place must be purified. It must be given back its virginity,” he whispers.

“Let’s evacuate. It’s the only solution.”

S’Erum leans back and shakes his head from left to right.

“Too late. You are all guilty. You and all those you entered here. You have been *exposed*... The only solution would be to kill you and track down all those who have entered here since the assassin struck.”

“You too, then.”

“Of course. Me, the innkeeper, your watchmen, your craftsmen, your guests... The Alliance may be condemned in the short or long term. For the time being, we are the only ones in the know. Before killing him, I must know more... know if the disease can be transmitted, whether he thinks he has contaminated other brothers. You will call all your archivists and ask them to look for anything they can find on the topic.”

“It’s complicated. All the books of spells from this era are meant to leave. They are inaccessible, stored in crates under the Pillar.”

“Who is it? Tell me.”

“The one the steward had every interest in manipulating. The one whose role within the Erratum could serve his trade and allow him to secretly add to his library. The one who, with eyes closed, guaranteed him unequal impunity.”

“Who? A watchman?”

“The first one of them, yes. The most powerful warrior of the Erratum.”

“The master archivist moves back towards the door. The scent of fear spreads over the surface of his body. S’Erum knows that this brother is aware that his work, this world of knowledge and magic that has taken him years to build, is splintering from within and may come crashing down.”

“He spoke about the sovereignty of instinct,” whispers S’Erum. “No doubt, he wanted to put me on the trail. No doubt he secretly wants to be delivered, unmasked and released from his suffering. He sought the steward’s help. He even spoke of the hope of a cure through the Shadow, his Shadow. Syd de Käiber.”

“The Cynwäll? But what? An attempt to poison?”

“I don’t think so. If the Cynwäll elves had found the way to spread Goldenevil, we would already know. Maybe an attempt. I believe it’s a series of coincidences, a basic truth about this so-called Syd. Our psyches speculate about his potential incarnation during the battle of Käiber.”

“A dispersion of the Essences...” says S’Ardäi. “I see where you’re heading. The elf is incarnated. His soul disperses and a fragment falls here, in the spirit of

S'Erdh."

"I don't see any other explanation. He alleged that by killing his Shadow, he could contain Goldenevil. He had recurring dreams."

"There's no precedent."

"No. Until now, we've been lucky he hasn't tried to escape. When I met him, he seemed... normal. He was looking for a confrontation and I thought I could explain this violence as being a quest for the 'instinct' of which he was so proud. He provoked me... I'm convinced that he is seeking redemption. He killed the steward. Nothing else keeps him here, in theory. Maybe he is already up there, on the surface, in the traces of Syd de Kaiber."

"But he stayed..."

"Yes, he stayed. He wants to be delivered. You will take all necessary steps to control the watchmen. I'm afraid of their reaction."

"I know them better than you... They have sworn an oath in the name of this sanctuary and not in the name of their chief. They will accept your sentence."

"I hope so. You must also formally order the destruction of S'Holth's *eyzom* and seal the access to the cave once the books of spells are safely stored away."

"That will be done."

"I insist on your archivists doing research on the Lazarium. Try to learn as much as you can. It will be useful when I try to convince the Patriarchs."

"You want to call them here?"

"I'll have to. For the time being, we have to be careful."

S'Erum lowers his eyes to the hair shirt that covers the master archivist's body. Rivulets of blood escape through the scales and drip on the floor. S'Ardaï notices his glance.

"Don't worry. I'm just nervous..."

"In the best-case scenario, I will be alone with S'Erdh, make him talk and kill him. Then, we will see."

"You sound very sure of yourself. I'd like to scare the evacuation right now."

"Don't insist. Nothing and no one leaves the Erratum before I meet the First Watchman. I have one priority only: to prevent Goldenevil from spreading. I want assurances and guarantees. The destiny of the Erratum depends on it. Now, leave me alone. I'll come to pick you up at the Pillar."

The caress of the ashen flowers calms his spirit. Short-lived relief. A feeling too furtive to calm him thoroughly, but enough to prepare him for his confrontation with the First Watchman. Ayane is worried and comes closer, lips tightly pressed, while he slides under his greatcoat.

"It's him, isn't it?" she asks.

"It is."



He does not want her compassion and looks at her in disdain. She knows how much he dislikes having to choose his victim since the last execution. He had been wrong and could have lost everything.

## CHAPTER XXI

*“Our greatest Mother, S’Yithia the Generous, had two hundred and thirty-seven sons. The psychic link binding her to her children was never altered by numbers or distances. Mothers must dedicate their entire lives to procreation so that the Alliance can grow. They tire our future and our strength. Each brother must be ready for the ultimate sacrifice to save a Mother in peril.”*

- Excerpt from the *Charter of Mothers*, the Erratum Library.

There are only fifteen of them left, fifteen Templars of Hod, packed together in the confined space of an attic, faces tense. It was not enough for them to have to grow up in the shadow of the Church. They again have to silently tolerate the presence of Evil, touch with disgust the sticky threads of the web and wait, continue to wait, in this closed and dusty universe.

Night has fallen over Cadwallon. The ocean wind has strengthened. It rhythmically shakes the beam, isolating the Templars in their solitude. The day has dragged on oppressively. All those who managed to escape the *Karl IV* were able to disembark and make their way to the Obsidian Tavern before daybreak without calling attention to themselves. Despite the militias seals on the front door, they have entered and, as agreed, gathered in the attic under the Akkyshan’s watchful eye.

Antic has not said a word since the first orphan entered her lair. She has retired into the darkness with the spider on her shoulder.

Mankenz, with his vest unbuttoned and his sword resting on his knees, has not moved for almost two hours. Isolated in his thoughts, he seeks an explanation and finds none to satisfy him. He believes he was betrayed by a machine and feels no guilt, although the Old Master entrusted him with a mission which, in theory, he should have mastered in all of its aspects, including that one. He is nevertheless convinced that the Templars’ objective is to reap souls and raise or lower them before Merin and that, to this end, nothing really justifies entrusting an ophidian to a machine instead of a flesh and bone jailer.

In the fringes of his mind, a feeling meanders that he prefers to ignore, a prohibited and confused emotion that he shuts away as best he can when the memory of S’Iris becomes too heavy. Does he miss her? To be truthful, he feels

betrayed. He feels abandoned by the one whose trust he thought he had won. Was she play acting for all of these years? Did she often pretend to sleep while posing the tip of her face on his shoulder? He thought the evil had been converted by their friendship, a bond between the executioner and his victim. A thread of Light that he hoped to seal into the ophidian's soul. An anchor, yes. That's the idea that for a long time led him to believe he could convert her and save her soul.

Mankenz has decided not to change the original plan despite the Mother's escape. It's a risk he accepts taking responsibility for. He knows it is double or nothing. But he does not believe she has enough strength to reach the Erratum and give the alert before the assault commences. The drugs, cold water, sewers... as many obstacles as the One will put in the way of the ophidian to make sure she does not reach her destination.

Mankenz does not allow uncertainty and doubt to break his determination. He holds onto the images arising from his imagination. He sees and hears the red and raging flames devour the ungodly books of spells. He has fantasized about them and sculpted them in his dreams to transform them into the greatest inferno that Merin could ever have contemplated. A fire of joy, light and hope. He must not tremble. Not before these men that Antic's presence keeps alert.

He has a meeting right here with the traitor and at no price does he want to miss the rendezvous that will lead him to his inferno. The sacrifices he has made so far will soon take on a new meaning, a greater significance for the future of the faith and of Light.

For the first time, his eyes fall on the soldiers and examine their faces. Yes, they have been touched by the wreckage, but the event has not affected their convictions. Mankenz knows they are ready.

A murmur in the ranks brings him from his thoughts. He did not see the entrance of the one whose sight alone brings men to their feet.

The Old Master. Hesitation is not allowed and Mankenz, as moved as his brothers in arms, respectfully bows before the master of the lodge of Hod.

Masselius wears a simple homespun robe held at the waist by a thin cord. The puffy material cannot hide his imposing build, large shoulders and imperious chest. His black eyes, set under thick eyebrows, look like an abyss no Templar can penetrate. The Venerable One slightly bows his bald head to salute his soldiers and motions them to rise.

Mankenz has thrown himself at the master's feet to kiss the jet ring on his index finger.

"Master, "he whispers, "you came..."

"I was forced to."

Masselius' hand appears and grasps the orphan's shoulder.

"Can you tell me how she escaped?"

The question makes Mankenz tremble. He answers, eyes lowered, his shoulder crushed under the Old Master's knotty fingers.

"The machine betrayed us," he says as a justification.

The pressure becomes intolerable and he winces in pain.

"The machine is what one makes of it," murmurs Masselius. "You've dishonored the lodge."

"Forgive me..."

Mankenz has no reason to hope for forgiveness. A knot in his throat, he closes his eyes, convinced that the Old Master has come in person to execute the sentence. However, his fingers release their grasp and free his shoulder.

"Stand up, orphan, and listen."

Mankenz obeys and steps back under his master's hermetic gaze.

"I want to believe that I was not mistaken," declares Masselius. "I want to believe that you are not small minds incapable of imagining what our future will be. I have spent time on your training and determination. I have turned you into repositories for the knowledge of the lodge, its experience and its objectives.

"I am tired, orphans. You are a weapon that I have cherished and I don't want to be disappointed like today. Nothing can forgive your negligence. The ophidian may compromise our attack on the Erratum. I will not envisage failure. I will not *even think* about it."

His voice, controlled to this point, breaks and ends in a violent coughing fit. The Old Master turns around and wipes his mouth on the robe.

"Our cause has Merin's approval. And, until now, you had mine. Merin will forgive but requires the best. For the first time, we have a unique chance to bring Light to the heart of Evil. We have a chance to strike a fatal blow to the Ophidian Alliance. To deprive it of its knowledge is to deprive it of a future. Did I overestimate your strength? I don't want to come back here to this sordid attic to make sure you are worthy of confidence. I want to be over there, at home, waiting with certainty for the one who will bring me the keys to the Erratum. You are the elite and, as such, I want you to deliver the library to me intact."

A murmur of surprise runs through the Templars. The Old Master interrupts with a dry gesture.

"You have been trained to stand up to evil, to see your life as a gift, a sacrifice on the altar of our faith. I am asking for keys and not for a fire. I want you to invade the Erratum, to chase Evil away and to become its guardians."

Deep silence falls over the room. The lodge of orphans trembles as if one body, paralyzed by the Venerable One's demands.

Mankenz holds back tears of rage. He has so often dreamed of a fire that would consume the ungodly library.

"Master," he says, "you cannot..."

“Silence,” the old man interrupts softly. “Don’t forget why you were conceived. Your soul is a reed that the Obscure can bend but never break.”

A second coughing fit takes hold of the Old Master. He leans on Mankenz.

“My days are counted, orphans. Your beloved Ambrosius will soon succeed me and turn you into the guarantors of an oath I would like to seal myself.”

Masselius straightens up, haggard.

“On your knees.”

The Templars immediately obey, causing the floor to shake.

“With me, orphans! Be joyful in your sacrifice...”

In a single voice, the Templars echo the Old Master dictating his oath, slowly walking through the ranks, his hand open against their bowed necks.

“Be joyful in your duty. May your heart be happy in watching over Clarity. Walk according to the promises of your soul and the look in your eyes, respecting the banned knowledge of the Erratum. Know that Merin will take your promise into account in his judgment...”

As Masselius retires his litany, the orphan’s repetition sounds like a confession. They have erred before Merin and seek forgiveness, even if it means forgetting the auto-da-fe brandished by the lodge over many years as the ultimate reward.

The oath appeases them. They all needed to seal this desire of revenge that has haunted them since their trials in the underground of Carthag Fero. There, they believed in this trophy to overcome their fears and confront the presence of Evil at their side day after day. They have already spoken about this, already spent entire evenings using their imagination to describe the spectacle of the library in flames. The mission entrusted by the Old Master petrifies them, yet slowly gives them confidence as it relies on their faith and values. Not only will they become masters of the Erratum, but they will stay there, fortify it and maybe live there for months, even years.

The Old Master knows that he has achieved the most difficult part. For a brief instant, Mankenz’s reaction casts a doubt. That a loyal one like him would oppose his authority demonstrates how the orphans have reached their breaking point. He is now convinced that only a victory will prevent them from falling and will save them from damnation.

Masselius salutes them gravely, feeling the tenderness of their devotion and the hope alit on their faces.

“Soldiers of Merin... I will pray for you,” he concludes before disappearing in the shadows.

Time goes by slowly, adding to their anxiety. Confined in the attic, the Templars gather together. Their hands, moist and fragile in waiting, have finally joined. No one knows who was the first to whisper a prayer, but the others, thankful

for the broken silence, join in with fervor. Together in adversity, these men relax and give way to their emotions. A few cry. Others bite their lips until they draw blood. Neither shame nor masks exist. Only their caring faith.

The traitor arrives three hours later and enters Antic's lair with a nervous hiss. Hiding under a heavy coat of leather and fur, he observes the circle of Templars praying for a brief moment, then speaks directly to Mankenz.

"The antidote."

His firm voice breaks the spell uniting the orphans of Hod.

The time has come.

Mankenz removes from his vest a copper flask sealed with a wax cork and gives it to the ophidian. The traitor grabs it and slips it into his coat.

"Nothing new?" he demands.

Mankenz shakes his head from left to right. "No, nothing," he thinks cynically. It would be useless to lie, in any event. The antidote was never anything more than a cog in the trap designed by the Old Master, a quick and efficient way of controlling the ophidian and making him believe that Goldenevil could eventually be treated. The antidote stabilized the disease. It channeled it so that the traitor could live among his own and control the increasingly frequent attacks. The irony of the situation does not escape Mankenz. Since the Mother guided her child to them, he has supplied this ophidian with a means to fight the Principle of Clarity and prevent his body from mutating. A complex trap. A trap whose ramifications weigh heavily on him. He so wanted a confrontation, a battle to death, and to become master of the library.

The ophidian does not show whether he is disappointed or tired of the absence of results. For the time being, the antidote is enough.

"I think that the time has come," he says firmly.

"So, the Mother has not warned them..."

The traitor stiffens. Under the hood of his coat, his tongue quivers.

"She escaped us," says Mankenz. "Last night."

"That changes everything..."

"It changes nothing," says the Templar, seeking to be as firm as possible. "Lead us to the Erratum."

The traitor remains silent. His breaths are short hisses.

"Maybe they already know..." he then asks in a whisper. "Maybe they have followed me here?"

"The Mother ignores your existence. At worst, we have lost the effect of surprise."

## CHAPTER XXII

*"I swear before Merin that I saw Vice at work. Vice is a new force inhabiting our enemies. It flows in their veins like an elixir, making them fearless and increasing their strength. We must fear the Tainted One today. He has become one of the worst predators born in Darkness."*

- Templar Merenphis

Sagoth has saved the Mother from certain death. Three hours earlier, when she fell backwards and started sinking in the filthy water, the sewer worker reacted immediately. Well aware that he could not help her with his arms alone, he ran in the direction of the valves controlling the pool's mechanisms and rapidly emptied the water.

S'Iris now lies moaning at the bottom of the pool. Sweating, his arms sore, Sagoth has cleared a vital space by using an old shovel to remove the muddy layer covering the bottom of the pool. The stench arising from this work is atrocious, even for a man with years of experience of the musty smells of the underground.

His pale and angular face colors with the effort. He looks at the ophidian's body and brushes his hand cautiously along her side. He has never seen such a creature up close and is enthralled by the feel of her scales. The ophidian breathes weakly, but life is still flowing through her veins. In the palm of his hand, the sewer worker feels the muted rhythm of the lethargic heart. He has no idea of the care this kind of organism needs. Lacking any reference, he reverts to basic gestures and finds a means to wash her injuries as a first step.

A vague feeling of guilt follows him when he makes his decision. The water should be pure and, in theory, only the master sewer workers can grant this written order under the guild's seal. The risk does not hinder his resolution. He climbs the curved walls of the pool to the walkway to reach a discreet valve set between two copper pipes.

The water dates back to the city's foundation and its history is that of the traditions of their guild, in particular the one sentencing young disciples to a solitary journey in the depths of the sewers. At the end of his initiation, Sagoth was allowed to penetrate into the Cynwäll reservoir. He warmly remembers the shimmering lake, its bridges in oxidized copper and especially the silent guards, a

mob of statues, petrified by rust and adored by the sewer workers like benevolent divinities.

Since its discovery, the reservoir has been a major asset to the guild. The Duke signed a twenty-two year concession. The guild intends to use these years to exploit this precious liquid. It is supposed to have every virtue and, although Sagoth is not entirely convinced, its success within the Cadwë society has never wavered.

A pipe opens and suddenly frees a thin flow of water in the upper part of the pool. Sagoth watches it descend with a shiver. A bluish vein now flows to the bottom of the pool, forming a shiny puddle under the ophidian's body.

Sagoth approaches her, tears a piece of his shirt and, kneeling, starts to clean the injuries of his protégé.

Three or four hours later, the sewer worker has still not raised his head, fully focused on his task. Despite her origins, he does not withhold water from the ophidian. The blood flowing from her injuries has disappeared, sucked into the puddle. Sagoth knows that by using the reservoir water, he has dilapidated an exceptional resource. In other words, he may be risking his job, if not his life. He does not care anymore. He has taken a step forward with no possible return.

S'Iris regains consciousness and sees the sewer worker bent before her. The compassion she reads in his eyes is reassuring. It is strange that a human can have this effect on her and give her the impression that she is safe. She raises her head to look at her mutilated body.

"How did you do it, human?" she whispers when she discovers her injuries are clean and sealed by a fragile membrane.

"Regeneration," answers Sagoth in a posed voice. "Cynwäll water."

The ophidian shivers and looks away. The violation is certain, but she cannot stop herself from feeling disgust at the idea that her blood is mixed with the glacial water around her.

"I have to leave," she says.

"To go where?"

"The library... the Erratum. You must take me there."

"Does it truly exist?"

"Yes."

"I can't help you."

"You can guide me through the sewers. Take me to the doors of the cloacae where the bipeds never venture.

"I could do that, yes."

With a violent effort, S'Iris manages to stand above the human.

"Thank you," she says.



Sagoth nods and takes his stick. He accepts her request, although his instinct tells him not to. He does not really understand his attraction to this creature, why a worker like him feels this way about the ophidian's destiny. He wants to protect her, but he also does not want to be abandoned a second time.

The sewers are laid out in an inextricable labyrinth. S'Iris concentrates on the thin ray of light radiating from the sewer worker. Her guide has covered the lantern and moves forward slowly, not wanting to alert his underground brothers.

They start into a long, dry hallway when Sagoth raises his arm and shuts his lantern.

"Rats," he whispers in total darkness.

His suspicions are confirmed. Since he has been walking with the ophidian, her presence alone has prevented the rodents from approaching and has sent most of them back. Those who run between Sagoth's legs and along the walls are escaping something else, something in front of them, something that gives them the courage to brush against a Serpent.

Ragmen.

The sewer worker has come to hate these goblins who, by virtue of a ducal agreement, lawfully use the sewer system to hunt vermin. Incidents never cease to oppose the guild members to these creatures who take advantage of their rite of passage to pillage and take as ransom all those who have a good reason to venture throughout the sewers. Sagoth has already beaten a few and almost killed one in a violent confrontation. The goblins do not respect the sewers and even less the guild's pipe work. They dismantle the pipes, valves and even bridges to sell them on the surface, without worrying for an instant about the fragility of the installations. Six days earlier, a supposedly watertight door gave way, causing serious infiltration on the surface and a stench throughout an entire neighborhood. Sagoth himself saw proof of pillage on the faulty door.

Shoulders tensed; he turns towards the ophidian.

"Goblins."

"So what?" says S'Iris with surprise.

"These ones are aggressive and stupid. Ragmen."

"I know. My brothers say they are easy prey."

A pallid glimmer appears at the end of the hallway, moving towards them. Noise as well. Laughs, furtive steps...

"Retreat," orders the sewer worker.

"There are ten or twelve of them."

"You are too weak."

"They will be afraid..."

"Not these ones. Not these ones."

The laughs suddenly stop.

“Who goes there?” cries a shrill voice.

S’Iris is surprised by the human’s fear. He steps back, puts the lantern down and holds his stick in two hands, his heart pounding.

The goblins suddenly accelerate and trot up to them without the slightest movement from S’Iris.

The smell of alcohol, dubious scents of mushrooms.

There are eleven goblins, all clothed in rags. Some hide their face under rough leather masks and strange, unpolished glasses. Others wear long hats or leather leggings and stare at the couple through their bloodshot eyes. They all bear the same weapon, bellows attached to a cask worn on their back.

“Blowers...” comments Sagoth with resignation. S’Iris remains silent. She feels the goblins’ excitement filtering through the steam of the pipes attached to their lips. Drugged, nervous and visibly surprised to see a sewer worker with an ophidian, the creatures wonder how they should behave, running around and into each other with suffocated cries.

The one who appears to be their chief motions them to silence and takes a step forward. His greenish face, infested with pustules and scarred on the left cheek, scowls. He extends his nose, smells, taps his chest and begins to mutter unsteadily.

“Let me introduce myself: the Marquis of the Channel and Count of the Northern Locks. Who are you and what are you doing on my land?”

Sagoth’s jaws tense at the ragman’s insolence. S’Iris, surprised by the goblin’s boldness, rises on her rings and flicks her tongue.

“Let us by,” she says.

The ragman jumps, arches and throws his head back.

“Rat, did you hear me?”

His companions giggle and gather together. With a frown, the marquis slides the blower over his back, puts his hands on his hips and looks at S’Iris.

“On my land, I am the only one who decides who goes by and who doesn’t go by. I...”

“Beware, ragman. You are insulting the guild...” says Sagoth.

The goblin rumples his brow and his smile turns into a grimace.

“The privilege of the marquis. Your guild can stick my bellows up its arse,” he motions with a blower’s gesture. “And I will send you gas so that all the chalky faces like yours will dance for me with their guts on fire.”

He looks upwards and smiles at S’Iris in contrition.

“See. Every time I cross a chalk-face, I lose control. Let’s start again. I was saying that it is I, Krups the Second, Marquis of the Channel and Count of the Northern Locks, who decides whether you can continue on your path.”

He turns towards his companions and whispers so that they all hear.

“And something tells me that I don’t feel like it at all.”

The group giggles and rustles around. Krups turns and dramatically points his finger at the sewer worker.

“Chalk-face, you’re mixing with reptiles. That’s not good... not *normal*. I have a gift: I can recognize perverts like you a mile away. What did the reptile promise you? Or has she cast a spell on you... you have nothing but air in your head, I bet. Black, old air, instead of a brain. She’s blinded you, the reptile...”

A goblin, quickly inhaling from his bellows, skips towards Krups with wild eyes.

“Should we kill them?”

“Shut up!” shouts the ragman-marquis, pushing his companion back.

“Let us through,” S’Iris absently insists.

“What? Let us through,” repeats Krups mockingly.

“Aren’t you tired of telling me what to do? And, reptile, look at yourself more closely. You really look awful.”

He stretches on his feet, rolls his pipe from right to left and blows into S’Iris’ face.

“I’ll tell you... there has to be something in it for me. Your brothers usually scare me. I’m not kidding. You really scare me with your twisted faces and hissing. But you’re not like the others. You’re enormous, for one thing! I’ve never seen one like you. And then... wait a second.” He breathes in deeply, leans backwards and scratches his head.

“I can’t believe it... a *reptile*.”

Sagoth’s eyes dart between the ophidian and the goblins. He does not understand why she allows this goblin to scoff at her without reacting. She seems indifferent, as if none of this mattered.

Krups calls to his companions.

“A reptile. Can you believe it? A Mother!”

A murmur of surprise runs through the group.

They gather behind their chief to better see the ophidian.

An avid sparkle lights up Krups’ eyes.

“Tell me... you wouldn’t be pregnant, would you? Because eggs sell well.”

“No,” replies S’Iris.

Krups’ smile disappears and he grabs his blower.

“Do you know what? I was only six when my father taught me a golden rule: the word of an ophidian is worthless.”

He raises his arms like a preacher.

“Oh, Rat, is the reptile lying to your servant?”

Silence. A few goblins look upwards.

“Maybe he doesn’t know?” one of them asks timidly.

Krups glares at him and returns to focus on S’Iris.

"I'm going to have to check. It may hurt a bit. We may injure you, but it's for a good cause, okay. There may be a hundred or even two hundred ducats in this if we're careful not to damage the goods. But I have a feeling that chalk-face doesn't agree."

He points his blower at Sagoth.

"You're even worse than her. You're also really ugly. You're skinny, all... yeah, you look like a... a poorly dressed skeleton."

The deep guffaws from behind obviously please him.

In normal circumstances, Krups would not have defied an ophidian. Under the influence of drugs and impure alcohol, he has forgotten the terror that a rattling of scales would have sent through him only two weeks ago. Since then, he has had an interview with the Captain, the ragmen's living legend. He had been trying to enter his personal guard for the past ten years. He had worked hard to have the right to compete for his place after five failures in a row. He managed to kill his adversary of the day. He broke the necks of sixty cats in a row with his teeth. He even resisted a smoky cave for more than seven minutes and succeeded in finding the exit. Then there was the last test.

Tears of rage fill his eyes. How could he have thought of it? No one warned him, not even the winners of the prior year who snickered when he seized with trembling hands the parchment handed to him by the Captain. Krups painfully remembers his feelings when his eyes saw the strange signs covering the parchment. A steep fall, until he managed to mutter a sincere and pathetic answer: "I don't know how to read, Captain." The captain sighed with disdain and spat, "Then you shouldn't be here. Leave. Next!"

The shame. The laughter of past winners still rings in his head. The end of a dream. Then, drugs. His savings disappeared to pay for a full night in the mushroom farm where he tasted everything without limitation. He hardly remembers what happened afterwards. The routine orders turned into a sentence. He left with the full intention of finishing with it. He recruited the weakest, stupidest ones and dove into the sewers to seek a rapid death.

Unbalanced by the goblins' peculiar attitude, S'Iris has taken refuge elsewhere, in the space provided by her pain, the only true emotion that remains familiar. Her fragile freedom has not prepared her for a confrontation with this brutal and sordid violence, this hateful wall rising between her and her brothers. She wants to forget and rest. She wants love, to feel the tongue of a serpent kiss her forehead. She wants to find the familiar circle of Mothers and their endless talk. She wants to set her eyes on the curves of an egg. She wants silence...

Krups' cries and movements sink into a reddish fog. His acolytes form an indistinct spot in the background. She only has one vision: the jumble of cables that tie their blowers to the barrels hanging on their backs. The image is too clear, too

similar to the machine and its tentacles that deprived her of nature, her body, her life and her hundred and sixty-two children.

Anger takes hold of her heart and requires a cathartic massacre to retrieve the original link that binds her to her people, to exchange the violence of the goblins with her own and re-establish a balance, returning her to life.

S'Iris attacks so suddenly that the ragman has no time to react. A heartbeat separates the absent-looking ophidian from the wild animal lurching forward to impose death.

Vermilion blood spurts over the walls of the hallway. Sagoth slowly crouches on the floor, his ears ringing from the screams and squeals of the torn flesh. Unable to face this spectacle, he trembles and recites in a trembling voice the guild's prayer.

S'Iris is exultant. Her tail suffocates and grinds with an enormous appetite. Her nails work with delectation. While the companions unsuccessfully attempt to flee, Krups thinks back to the Captain. The marquis has fallen to his knees, his hands clasped below his stomach to collect the steaming flow of his intestines. Despite the pain reverberating in his head, he cannot stop laughing and cursing his hero's name.

Three ragmen still remain, standing shoulder to shoulder, their blowers painting at the ophidian. Draped in blood, S'Iris spreads a pestilential stench and coldly stares at the survivors. The death of their companions is sobering. The three ragmen retreat slowly, centimeter by centimeter.

Unsatisfied, the ophidian brutally approaches them. Their bellows crash to the ground. Sagoth, his face hidden in the palms of his hands, only hears the hurried running of the rats, their squeals, then muted sounds, suffocated cries and then silence.

When the sewer worker raises his head, S'Iris has already come back and observes him through the slits of her eyelids. For a brief moment, Sagoth realizes she could kill him as well. She waves before him like a predator, her whole body governed by instinct.

Time stands still. The sewer worker no longer moves, a knot closing his throat. A starving rat, emboldened by the presence of dead bodies, approaches them and tries to bypass the ophidian. Her tail sweeps the floor, sending the rodent against a wall. Broken by the impact, the animal resembles a reddish spot slowly sliding to the floor.

The ophidian's features relax. The savage spark in her eyes disappears.

"I feel better," she says.

She extends her arm to help the sewer worker rise. He can hardly stand and tries to control his nausea.

"Take me to the doors of the sewers," says the Mother.

## CHAPTER XXIII

*“Your Majesty,  
The war against the rebels of Acheron has taken a historic turn. I saw with my  
own eyes the presence of ophidian contingents on the side of the Obscure. Those  
who, until today, were considered relics of a distant past are entering the  
Rag’Narok.  
May the Light be with you.”*

- Letter from Kyllion the Paladin, Commander of Kaïber, to King Gorgyn of Alahan.

S’Erum meets the First Watchman on the bridge, in the principal crossway of the guardian islet. Draped in a leather and fur coat, the ophidian is not really surprised by his visit, nor deceived by his intent. His face reveals deep and sincere resignation. S’Erum is holding the butt of 18.

“This is strange,” says S’Erdh. “I was just about to leave.”

The *sydion* does not reply and motions him with a glance to start walking.

“No, not this way,” says the First Watchman with a touch of nostalgia. “Not at my place. Not in front of them. The library, over there. It will be quieter.”

The two ophidians sit in a circular study hall close to a chimney and its flaming logs. Ayane has remained standing and leans against a desk.

“The truth,” says S’Erum. “Just the truth.”

The First Watchman does not seek to escape or even to make an attempt to protest. He readjusts his coat and says, “What do you want to know?”

“Everything. Start at the beginning.”

“The beginning... It was when we returned from patrol. With time, I realized that destiny often takes strange turns. I... I wasn’t really paying attention at the time. Just a tear.”

His nail touches the low edge of his left eye.

“Right there,” he continues, “right here. I had a sort of... sort of vertigo or absence. I can’t really explain it. I mostly remember a feeling of intense cold... Yes, really intense. As if a gust of wind had hit me with full strength. I realized that something was happening.”

His nail traces a line in the hollow of his cheek and stops at the corner of his lip.

"It slid down to here and then I swallowed it. A simple flick of the tongue... a reflex, but I still wonder today what would have happened if I had not tasted... do you think you would be here, in front of me?"

"Go on."

"I was tired. The patrol took more than ten hours. We had reached the ragmen's domain. S'Anak, a Serpent, wanted to hunt and I accepted. I finally gave a ragman's head to each warrior. Six heads in all. We hunted and took our trophies. Then we came back. The tear appeared when I climbed the stairs. After the fact, I wondered if the ragmen had given me one of their diseases. Then, I forgot about it and didn't think of it again."

"You're telling me that the disease came with this tear. How can you be sure?"

"Wait. Three days went by. I didn't feel very good and thought I had another infection of the cloacae. A few things made me suspicious."

"Like what?"

"I dreamed."

"Of Syd?"

The First Watchman does not even attempt to hide his surprise.

"No, not of Syd," he says. "Not right away. I rarely become lethargic. I'm not used to dreaming. But after the last patrol, I often had to rest. Oh, not for long... An hour here, an hour there. Each time, I dreamt of the sky. I wandered among the clouds. I felt the wind on my face. The world was far below, very far... inaccessible. I was happy up there. On the third day, I had a final dream. Different. More oppressive. I woke up in a flash. I was sitting on my *eyzom*. When I opened my eyes... I felt them."

He stops. S'Erum invites him to continue with his eyes.

"The wings, *sydion*."

The First Watchman loses his calm. His face shows profound distress and his voice, controlled until now, cracks with a hollow hiss.

S'Erum does not want to provoke an attack and wants to keep control over the situation.

"Calm down," he says, reassuringly. "We're not in a hurry. I want to understand what happened. It's over. You don't have to hide any more. Tell me: you woke up and felt – that's the word, isn't it? You felt wings..."

S'Erdh puts his hands to the back of his head and lowers his eyes.

"Wings," he murmurs. "I would have liked them to be real, but it was even worse. It was... an attempt, a first incursion... Clarity boils in my blood, *sydion*. It expresses itself as it can. There were warts, horrible things, like torn membranes ... Not very large. A meter, not more."

He stops and vigorously rubs his hands together.

"To see them, to feel them... that wasn't the hardest. I was there, stuck to my *eyzom*, petrified and... they started to move."

A grimace distorts his jaws.

"You can't imagine what I felt at that moment," he says. "To see these... things attach themselves to my body, trying to move and struggle with pathetic effort. I thought I'd go mad. I thought of cutting them off, ripping them away..."

Cold rage shines in his eyes.

"I couldn't. Light's vocation is not to self-destruct, nor is it to mutilate. It wants to expand, be fed, spread... and become a substitute to the Dark Principle. It wants to achieve a vital balance. It's a force that feeds itself, making itself infinitely powerful. And it chose my body."

The First Watchman's despair is so tangible that S'Erum must keep himself from grabbing 18 and shooting a bullet through his head. To finally draw an end to this harrowing story.

"Did you suffer?" he asks.

"At first, no. The pain worsened bit by bit. It became unlivable when the wings started to retract."

"How?"

"I don't know... Mutation acts in depth and changes one's morphology. After the first attack, I changed from the inside. Over the following days, I was overwhelmed by atrocious cramps. I felt my muscles paralyze..."

"And then?"

"I understood what was going on. I knew the history of the Lazarium and I delved into my books to see if there was a cure. That was all I could think about, *sydion*. Finding a cure. I was riddled with shame and a feeling of injustice. Had I committed an error that could have justified this suffering? Why did this tear on my cheek lead to this nightmare?"

"Before killing you, I need a few answers to my questions."

A snicker escapes from the First Watchman.

"Answers? You are going to be disappointed. The Lazarium justified our ignorance. Our brethren were imprisoned so they wouldn't see Goldenevil gnaw at them and turn them into counterfeit monsters, atrophied dragons... I read the tale and, believe me, they suffered from the most abject torture. They were imprisoned. Holes were dug, narrow cells to keep them alive and give the mnemosians enough time to study the evolution of the disease. You can imagine what that meant for our brothers. Held within four walls, your body distorts and your veins freeze in the fluids of Light... Nature, *sydion*. Nature takes her revenge. She has never accepted Vortiris having raped her to conceive us and ensure our survival. She is taking back what she had to give up."

"You're interpreting things."



“Oh, no. You’re mistaken. I’m living the same thing as them. And, like them, I’ll die without knowing. Dragons and ophidians are bound together. The Cynwäll and their dragon-knights are enemy brothers. One day, we will have to solve this enigma and discover who we really are.”

“A tear. Do you know what it represented?”

“A fragment of Essence. I never stopped dreaming of Syd de Kaiber. I’m obsessed with him. He haunts me. The gods incarnated him during the last battle of Kaiber and they fragmented his Essence. And me, I inherited a portion that contaminated me.”

“You became his Shadow.”

“Without a doubt. Unless he is mine...”

“What happened afterwards?”

“After the first attack? I began to hide. And to get cold. Everything is linked. Light, cold, lethargy, dreams... Clarity is winter to my veins. When I am not having an attack, it uses cold to numb me and make me dream.”

“Why did you tell the steward about it?”

“I was alone, *sydion*. Alone to confront shame. Alone to fight the disease. I cracked.”

“Why did you stay at the Erratum?”

“For my brothers. My brothers in arms. They are all my companions. Their friendship was like warmth to me. I was afraid that in leaving, I would drown in the sewers, frozen, at the mercy of the first ragman to come by, I was afraid, *sydion*. Terribly afraid. I thought that the steward would help me. He knew the surface and I knew that nothing would stop him, not even Light. He mixed with those who could get him the books he was looking for: he didn’t care whether they were Akkylannians or Cynwälls as long as he could buy them or corrupt them to achieve his objective. I trusted him. He helped me. And in exchange, I found out about his little trafficking.”

“There’s a detail that escapes me. He alleged that you wanted to kill Syd, that you thought his death would cure you.”

“That’s what I thought for a while. The steward wanted to keep me for himself. I wasn’t tricked by his dealings. I was much too useful for his trafficking. It was fair ball. And without wanting to, he led me to believe that the Cynwäll’s death was a potential solution or the only one worthwhile. We spoke for nights on end about Incarnation and the struggle between the Incarnate and his Shadow. He listened to me. These were precious moments for me. Frankly, I had no illusions. If I had to kill Syd, it would have been to appease my shame and take revenge.”

Silence. S’Erum is nervous, ill at ease, torn between compassion he dislikes like a poison and the absolute need to kill. Always this obsession about life and the right to take it away. His hand slides over the butt of 18. A gesture that the First Watchman notices, making him smile.

“Tell me why you killed the steward,” asks S’Erum.

“I had told him my secret a few months ago and our relationship was getting tense. He wanted more and more. He wanted to pass more and more works through and clearly threatened to turn me in if I tried to stop the trafficking. I was trapped. So, I got out. Not only because I wanted to convince myself that I would one day be able to leave my brothers to search for Syd, but also because the attacks were becoming unlivable. I was distancing myself a little more each time. I was coming closer to the surface. I needed to leave the library, to prove to myself that I could escape its influence and all that tied me to it.

“I was on the territory of the sewer works when it happened. An emotion... a call. I was having a full attack, hiding in a shelter close to the corpse of a Cadwë. I had killed him to ease the pain. And I heard it. I distinctly heard its whisper between the old rocks. A small thread muted by the noises of the surface, but it called me. S’Iris. She was alive and was calling me.”

S’Erum tenses. His reflexes take over his thoughts and 18 brutally hits the First Watcher’s head, right between the eyes.

“Don’t play with that, brother. Not with me. S’Iris is dead.”

The First Watchman does not tremble under the steel weapon. The idea of finishing with it all races through his mind. He could simply give the *sydion* the pretext he needs to pull the trigger. A small gesture, the beginning of a threat... S’Erdh decides otherwise at the last moment and says, “I answered her call. Maybe I was more sensitive than the others because of my state ... Or maybe I knew how to read her *waves* better than others.”

S’Erum knows that the magic of waves belongs to Mothers only. Only they can crystallize a message and entrust it to the surface of the waters like an invisible wave able to journey through torrents and seas.

“You can’t imagine,” continues S’Erdh, “what these waves meant to me. They were troubling. They combined the strength of a Mother with the magic of typhonism and the secrets of vibrations. I wandered to the surface like a human, one of their drunks. Waves were everywhere. Like bottles thrown into the sea. ‘They took me to the port.’”

The First Watchman stops for a moment and slowly removes 18.

“She lived in a ship under Templar orders. She was a prisoner. When you left her in their hands, you thought, like many others, that she would die. You were wrong. The enemy has become smarter. At least that enemy. They all belong to the lodge of Hod. They kept her alive and tortured her for years in order to gain knowledge of the path that leads to the Erratum. I spoke to these humans from Hod.”

The First Watchman’s eyes cloud over. He remembers in the slightest detail this unreal meeting on the bridge of the vessel, the long minutes of hesitation on both parts until the end, the unhopd for beginning of a dialogue.

"I made my choice, *sydion*. To save her and me in exchange for the Erratum."

S'Erum's hand tightens around the trigger.

"Wait a bit longer," says S'Erdh, with detachment. "On that night, I tied my destiny to S'Iris'. I decided to do everything to save her from Light. Until then, I had not measured the importance of the bond between us. I was overwhelmed... different than I had been before. This instinct that will be the future of the Alliance. I am talking about an instinct that makes no concessions. Between a mother and her children."

"Like animals."

"Yes. Our intelligence is a curse," confesses S'Erdh, with disconcerting sincerity. "I went back to the Erratum with my secret. I saw the Templars again one week later. They gave me an antidote. Not a serum," he says with a smile. "Just an antidote to control my attacks and make them more discreet, to prevent Light from expressing itself in my body. To delay the mutation and make the pain more tolerable. They didn't try to dupe me and made no promise on the potential existence of a serum able to cure me forever. Today, I believe that S'Iris made sure that no one would want to lie about their commitment."

S'Erum is troubled and hides behind the last question that still binds to him to the act he must now commit.

"Why did you kill the steward?"

"He found out everything. I respect your sentence, *sydion*. I did not act on impulse. I wanted his death and carefully prepared it."

"You built your alibi on a hunt for humans, right?"

"I chose our guests' prey. I cast a spell on the slave myself so that he would follow a specific path. Do you remember the first time we spoke, you and me? I told you that I had followed the slave to the islet of History to the doors of the main building. That was true. Except that I presented the slave in question as a dangerous individual... I wanted to be the only one to enter the building in order to escape for the time required to kill S'Holth and come back. I convinced the guests to wait outside. They are scholars, not warriors. Hunting amuses them as long as it is easy. Danger does not amuse them. So, I entered the building, then killed and hid the slave. I used a secret door and went to S'Holth's place."

"Was he waiting for you?"

"No."

"Did you force the door?"

"No, S'Holth had taken steps to make sure my trace was there. I went in and met him by his pool. I couldn't kill him right away. I had come intending to end it all... and when I found myself in front of him, I... I hesitated."

"Why?"

"Before, nothing and no one could have made me kill a brother. Goldenevil turned me into a murderer, a renegade... So I tried to convince him. I wanted to

salvage a little chance of changing destiny and give up.”

“How did he react?”

“Poorly. He was arrogant and sure of his rights over me and my life. The conversation degenerated. He demanded that I forget S’Iris. He alleged that I had been manipulated by the Templars and that the antidote was probably a poison that would put me at their mercy. I invited him to follow me and to leave the Erratum before it was too late. Until then, I had not planned on him coming with me and S’Iris. But I invited him to give everything up. I spoke to him of another life far from the library with the Tainted Ones who were increasing in numbers and power... Nothing worked. He was confined to his lies in this cave that was his sole reason for being. Words became hurtful. He threw my treason in my face, my degeneration. He humiliated me.”

“And instinct took over.”

“Yes. Instinct and Goldenevil. I threw myself on him. He didn’t stand a chance. Vice can do nothing against the metamorphosis of the dragon.”

“Your constriction was awkward. In my mind, it eliminated any suspicions against you.”

“Awkward, yes. That’s the word. The mutation occurs differently each time. It plays on your muscles and arms, and distorts your scales... I master the power it gives me, but it’s like heavy armor, too heavy to carry.

“You marked him as well. Behind his face. You left the mark of Clarity.”

“Everything happened very quickly in extreme confusion. I was worried about regrets and, truthfully, I enjoyed his death. By killing him, nothing bound me to the Erratum.”

“And the slave? He saw you enter the gallery that leads to his lair.”

“You saw the *eyzom*?”

“Yes, I even listened to it.”

“I wanted to destroy it. That’s why I went down.”

“Something bothers me: the slave has to play the harp to open the passageway. What I found in the *depths of his eye* proves that you entered just before he played.”

“It was already open.”

“But you made him play to close the passageway before placing a counter-trace in his eyes.”

“I could have, yes...” he murmurs.

S’Erums tongue hisses and retraces.

“Explain yourself.”

“Right now, *sydion*, I should be over there with the Templars.”

“Who manipulated the slave?” asks S’Erums dryly.

“You already belong to the past, *sydion*. Dust has covered these ancient laws that you defend with such strong opinions. The Rag’Narok has changed the rules of the game. If you knew what is said in the shadows about you and the few brothers

who still believe in mnemosian laws... Not so long ago, at one of S'Hysme's dinners, a Patriarch talked about you. He snickered about your battle and even affirmed that you were probably the last one to continue on. Why do you think the Patriarchs have made so many concessions over the past few years? You don't see how isolated you are. You are alone, or almost. The Alliance has already forgotten you. It no longer wants you. You are a bother, too cumbersome. Clarity and Obscurity are confronting each other in a final battle. The end justifies the means, brother. And Vice is considered by many to be a good path to follow."

A heavy silence falls. S'Erum, troubled, breaks the silence first after a lengthy moment.

"Maybe you are right. It's not important. There will always be brothers who will put the Alliance first. I am convinced that if we let Vice enter and grow here, the ophidians will disappear from the surface of Aarklash. Our freedom comes at this price."

The First Watchman snickers.

"I admire you, you know. I couldn't have your courage."

"You didn't have the courage to die. That is enough in my mind to know that you do not respect the Alliance. You wanted to live despite the risks you caused your brothers."

"What are you talking about?"

"Contamination. Goldenevil can spread..."

"It won't," the First Watchman interrupts. "Vice will prevent it."

"Am I supposed to believe that?"

"That's for certain. If you kill me, Goldenevil will disappear with me."

"Before that, I want the name of your accomplice."

"You haven't guessed already?"

"Answer."

"I did not choose to be sentenced to Light. I resisted and endured the worst suffering to prevent it. They welcomed Vice with arms wide open. They maintained it and fed it."

"They?"

"The archivists."

S'Erum allows his jaws to tremble slightly. A glacial hand squeezes his heart and prevents him from breathing normally for a few seconds.

"S'Ardaï would have discovered it," he retorts.

"Of course. Why do you think that since your arrival and more precisely since the steward's death, he has taken such care to move the treasures of the Erratum to the Pillar? He's looked for a pretext for a long time to take them away from the Alliance and appease his impulses."

"I would have known if he was a Tainted One."

“You are alone, I tell you. S’Ardai tolerated the steward’s minor trafficking. He didn’t really care if he played with a few books of spells while he, with his archivists, was planning on taking over the immense treasure of the Erratum and waiting for the right moment to put the plan into action.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Yet everything fits together. I understood that too late. You and I are witnesses of an Alliance cracking at its seams. Vice is everywhere. Vice is extending and making our brothers more powerful than they have ever been. My warriors, certain guests, S’Enkz, the craftsman, and even S’Hysme. They are not Tainted Ones. S’Ardai did not try to corrupt them or even to convince them. He wanted to threaten the Erratum and transfer the works to the Pillar legitimately for his own advantage, to satisfy his Vice. If you want to carry out your battle to the end, *sydion*, you will have to kill them all.”

“That’s exactly what I intend to do.”

Captivated by the conversation between her master and the First Watchman, Ayane did not notice 18 rise and fire straight at the First Watchman. The bullet pulverizes the First Watchman’s skull, and he crashes to the floor.

S’Erum closes his eyes to try to channel the rage roaring throughout him. At this precise moment, he would like to drink in the scent of the ashes to forget that he, the *sydion*, the living incarnation of the mnemosian laws, now belongs to the past.

## CHAPTER XXIV

*“You will find attached a report from our allies of the Erratum on the activities of the lodge of Hod in Cadwallon. We are counting on you to communicate this information to the dignitaries of the Inquisition so as to discredit the lodge of Hod.”*

- Mission order sent to a Syhar clone infiltrated in Akkylannie.

As the First Watchman's broken skull hits the ground, the master archivist leads the orphans of Hod to a balcony to show them a splendid view of the Erratum.

“It is now yours,” he says.

S'Ardai leaves to let the Templars define a strategy. He has left no detail out and has described the state of the forces present, the number of brothers guarding the islets and those watching the entrance door and surroundings.

Treason tastes like a victory. Thanks to the magic of typhonism, he has taken on the appearance of the First Watchman and attended the meeting set by Mankenz to guide the servants of Merin to the Erratum.

He has never felt this type of exaltation. Despite a few necessary improvisations, the wheels of the machine are working perfectly. He has lived for this lie and the legitimate right to life and death he holds over the library.

*His* library, *his* books of spells, *his* works. Everything belongs to him. He has dedicated his entire soul to this end for many years. He has ensured that the sanctuary is the holder of secular know-how, a central site for magic and knowledge.

He is certain that Vice is his reward, a fluid transmitted by Vortiris to give him the most absolute right over the works gathered here. This idea is an obsession, providing him with the motivation necessary to move forward despite his doubts and the obstacles strewn along his way.

Greed has sharpened his appetite. It has opened his eyes and demonstrated why he suffered in silence each time he saw the arrival of new guests from his balcony. Thieves, all thieves, unworthy of looking at his books of spells, unworthy of drinking in their mnemonic scents. He lived through the torture of hair shirts to muzzle Vice and keep himself from shouting when a guest turned the page of a manuscript with a moist and trembling hand.

He wants an untouchable library, available to the rare brothers who are worthy of serving it. Should the profane not be banned from a sanctuary?

He really does not want a sanctuary, but a tomb like the one keeping Vortiris prisoner. A necropolis of memory. And he will be its guardian awaiting the, age of revelation, the beginning of another cycle. Vice has taught him this: only Vortiris has the right to look at the works assembled in the library. With this conviction, he had formulated his plan to bring down the Erratum.

He offers an empty shell to the Templars, the dust of knowledge whose essence will soon travel to a secure place. To draw the Akkylannians here, he has taken this same passage, where the hundred and twenty-two crates of dark wood rest before they leave for their future mausoleum. The orphans walked by these crates without asking questions when they came up, thinking that they were minor works to be kept in reserve. A delicious paradox that S'Ardaï has justly savored.

While the Templars bustle on the balcony like children, the master archivist thinks about the mausoleum. He now believes that Vice revealed itself there, under the white archway of a Cynwäll temple buried in the depths of the city. An old book of spells found on his request by the steward put him on the trail and led him and S'Ylice into the sumptuous vestige of elven founders. Yes, he is quite sure, Vice emerged in his conscience when, his face raised to the archway, he imagined his library there, away from avid tongues and stares.

Mankenz leaves the group to walk up to the ophidian.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Stay in hiding for a while. Wait for the Patriarchs to get over the news. There will be some confusion in our sanctuaries, believe me."

The Templar nods. He has accepted the traitor's proposal as the lesser of evils: to let an ophidian escape to testify to the loss of the Erratum and confirm that he is the sole survivor. The traitor has chosen the survivor, a certain S'Irgeï, a Serpent with limited understanding, almost hateful of scholars and quite happy to put a final end to the Erratum's destiny.

S'Ardaï and Mankenz observe each other for a moment, both convinced that the respite will end when the assault starts. The master archivist feels he should leave before the Templar decides not to abide by his commitments. Unlike the First Watchman, he has no trust in those who act in the name of Merin and has no illusions on the Akkylannians' antidote. He thinks of S'Erdh, no doubt dead right now, executed by the *sydion*.

"I'm leaving," he says. "Make sure nothing's left."

He sets off, then changes his mind so as to play his role right until the end.

"I will contact you... for the antidote."

Mankenz approves with a movement of his eyelid and lets the ophidian disappear in a curve of the ramp. The traitor's future no longer interests him. The only things that count now are the imminent assault and the vision of his companions turning into legends.



He looks at them lovingly. They are an elite that few men can say they have led at any time. They are united by something greater than blood. They have shared the best and the worst, and have confronted together the confines of the Flaming Mercy. They have supported one another and have traveled and shared their meals, fears, hopes, and, mostly, their prayers.

Forged in the memory of their adoptive father, their fraternity has never failed. They know each other by heart. They know who they can count on, who fears what more than the others and what some know better than the others. They are a family burning with desire to achieve in honor of Merin.

Mankenz slowly buttons his vest and forces himself to breathe slowly. His blood boils with excitement. He needs to kill in the name of Merin. The Old Master demanded that the Erratum be given to him in an intact state, but he said nothing about its inhabitants. Mankenz intends to take advantage of this and give his brothers in arms a real carnage. Death and torture as the booty of war, a reward for the sacrifices made to see this day.

Mankenz sees the fever touch the eyes of his men. Fervent animals with silver hearts.

He whispers his order like a love song.

“It’s time. May Merin be with you.”

Since the closing of the doors and the *sydion*’s arrival, time seems to have stood still in the Erratum. Other than the effervescence caused by the moving of the works, quiet surrounds the ophidians.

Inside the inn, S’Hysme naps on his throne and lazily watches the dull ballet of his slaves. In the absence of guests, he has given up organizing his famous dinners. After a few days, he discovered boredom and hopes that the *sydion* will soon reveal the murderer before he completely loses his appetite.

On the islet of Conservation, S’Enkz, the master craftsman, works halfheartedly. He despairs that the most important works will be subjected to the duress of a journey. He himself proceeded with reinforcing the crates to make sure that no work would be damaged. Like his old friend, S’Hysme, the uncertain atmosphere of the Erratum disturbs him.

Of the twelve archivists in the library, only two have resisted Vice. Conscientious and passionate scholars, they love the smell of the sanctuary, its dust and its colors. They effortlessly grew accustomed to the exile decreed by the master archivist. They do not expect anything from life except for the ability to wander freely among the library shelves and watch over the sanctuary’s treasures. They have just disembarked on the islet of History to proceed with the inventory of the works spared by the emergency plan.

The orphans of the lodge of Hod spread over the Erratum like birds of prey. Mankenz knows that the key to victory is based not only on surprise, but also, and more importantly, on their knowledge of the enemy. Thanks to the Mother, they have learned to tame the instinctive fear a human feels in the presence of a Serpent. They have studied the weak points of the ophidian morphology by training to aim for the heart or lungs of straw mannequins.

Mankenz has chosen his ten finest to give the assault on the watchtowers to each side of the entrance door. If they surprise the watchmen and conquer them, the library will fall.

The ten men have advanced in a boat, edging through the mist. The first four Templars disembark on the smallest islet where the Serpentine's six watchmen usually reside. According to S'Erdh, five sharpshooters relay each other in this tower to guard the entrance. The last one, S'Irgeï, is on one of the galleries beside the door and must be spared.

The first combat group accosts the bank without a sound and hides under the low branches of the salphenes to await the signal.

Lysander leads the second group. On his order, the boat glides to the neighboring islet and mutedly hits one of the landing's beams. On the alert, the men leave the boat behind and advance to the southern wall of the main building.

Lysander no longer thinks about Sylene or his father. His erotic dreams have deserted his slumber. Strengthened by the perspective of a near battle, he holds the figurine of the Old Master in one hand, and in the other, a gun that has been blessed.

Each Templar here has kept his personal weapon. It is among the rare objects saved from the wreckage. Some died over there in the cold waters of the port, hoping to find the one they swore to carry until their death as a symbol of their faith. Each orphan has attended at least once the burial of a brother and solemn placing of the weapon on his chest before the closing of the tomb.

A firearm, lengthened by a short, curved blade. Only the gunsmiths of Hod are able to manufacture it with a perfect balance between the blade and the gun. The Old Master in person blesses the gun before handing it to the Templar. Just like on this occasion, he had offered the hundred bullets molded from the armor of warriors fallen during the crusades.

Lysander gives the signal, his arm raised, fist clenched. On the neighboring islet, the five Templars edge along the building in single file, while his group enters a narrow alley towards the guard's courtyard.

S'Hork, the watchman, is crossing the courtyard when he notices an unusual movement to his left. A constrictor without talent, the son of Mother S'Harakine, he has served the Erratum for almost twelve years. He knows that by landing here under patriarchal orders, he has definitively lost any hope of fulfilling his dreams of

glory. After three sloughs, he had already imagined himself as a psyche, an accomplished master of plots wandering through human palaces and spreading discord. But typhonism, magic and its mechanisms were never good to him. This unwanted destiny has made of him a dedicated and poorly appreciated constrictor. The First Watchman, who likes to have the best around him, never forgave him for arriving here with his mother's help. However, he has never spared an effort to provide him with solid bases and to make of him a watchman worthy of ensuring the Erratum's defense.

S'Hork is not aware that his chief is presently lying in his own blood. He is also unaware that S'Erdh's efforts were in vain.

The Templars hurry in his direction before he can give the alert. In any event, the idea of warning his brothers does not even cross his mind. For the time being, he only thinks about surviving the next few seconds.

The orphans noticed the ophidian hesitate before turning around and trying his luck at the main entrance of the building.

The blast resonates like thunder in the inner courtyard. As his men hurry after the watchman, Lysander raises his pistol and aims at the enemy. The bullet hits the Serpent on the threshold of the door, penetrates without difficulty through his scales, and buries itself in his insides. The watchman twists uncontrollably and falls heavily. The bullet stopped less than a centimeter from his heart. S'Hork continues to gather his rings to form a compact mass when the bullet consecrated by Light penetrates his heart. The pain is shattering. He sags and dies before a Templar can decapitate him for good measure.

A blissful expression covers Lysander's face. On the night of the wreckage, he felt similar pleasure in his dream. A violent and almost mystical orgasm.

Arms spread wide, the gun still smoking, he rises in the middle of the courtyard and heartily cries, "Purification! Purification!"

He has ruined the surprise, but his men do not have time to hold it against him. The muted ring of a gong resonates from the depths of the building.

For its part, the group responsible for neutralizing the Serpents has lost its first man. A bullet struck him when he was descending the pearly ramp inside the tower, first in line. The links of his armor did not protect him from the blast. Hit in the chest, he fell backwards and died in the arms of the Templar running behind him.

Three Serpents were killed without being able to defend themselves. Lying lethargically in a pool on the main floor, they were executed in their sleep before seeing or smelling their assassins. Two others located in the upper part of the building were answering the gong and attempted to hurry to meet their slumbering brothers. The orphans were faster. The two Serpents engaged in a lively exchange of bullets. From one passageway to another, bullets hiss and cry, raising small clouds of dust.

The two ophidians retreat to the landing on the last floor. A brief lull separates the fighters and each one counts his injuries.

Two orphans are seriously wounded. A face is torn by a bullet, the right cheek pulverized, the neck, bloody. He lets a companion bandage the injury. The other, the most determined of the four, was hit in the leg and chest. His forehead sweating and his lips pale, he suffers in silence and tries to extract the bullet from his thigh himself, sitting off to the side. But he must move quickly and not let the two ophidians fortify their position.

The Templar with the bloody face decides, a knot in his throat, to lead the assault. A true suicide he engages in with serenity. Pain and excitement have vanquished fear and the promise of a certain death.

He does not tremble when he crosses the path separating him from the ophidians.

“Orphans with me!” he shouts, rushing towards the enemy.

His companions right behind him, he tries to adopt an unplanned path, a zigzag between the sides of the ramp, but both Serpents are sharpshooters. A bullet shatters one of his shoulders and projects him backwards, and the second bullet strikes him right in the chest and exits between his shoulder blades with a splash of blood. His body collapses, and the orphans step over him. Of the three survivors, only one limps, the blessed gun raised like a flag. He pulls the trigger to cover his companions.

The ophidians attempt a final frontal assault. Bullets fly over the heads of the Templars. The Serpents drop their guns and reach for their scimitars. Hand to hand combat ensues, with the orphans taking the advantage. The confined space of the ramp and the rapid movement of their blades force the Serpents to retreat to the guard’s room at the top of the tower.

S’Elgor falls first, having waited too long to remove his scimitar from its sheath. For four years, maybe more, he has exclusively used his gun without thinking even for a second that he might one day be here, obliged to engage in a bodily fight without the support of constriction.

His death precedes that of his brother by a few seconds. Thanks to his tail, S’Ilykine has unbalanced an adversary and cut his throat with the tip of his nails before he falls to the ground. There is only one Templar left. A man abandoned by life, an orphan for whom each breath means pain. Pinkish bubbles appear between his lips. Blood chokes him. Leaning against the frame of the door, he raises his gun. S’Ilykine charges the survivor and cannot prevent the bullet from entering his right eye and exploding in his head. Blown by the impact, he collapses at the Templar’s feet.

The gun clangs as it hits the ground. The orphan slides along the frame. His head gently nods for a moment before falling to his chest. He is sorry to see his

group decimated but he has accomplished his mission. He is dying, with one hand on the creature's warm body.

## CHAPTER XXV

*“Wrath is an emotion. It is born in the presence of an obstacle that separates us from satisfaction. We, the Tainted Ones, know that the obstacle is Light. We, the Tainted Ones, know that satisfaction will belong to Vortiris when Light disappears. We, the Tainted Ones, master Wrath like a prayer.”*

- Vibratory war chant of a Tainted One of Wrath.

Panic has spread over the Erratum. The enemy is here. The enemy is everywhere and no one knows its number. How did they get in? S'Hysme will never know. The assault group led by Mankenz erupted in the inn, surprising a handful of slaves. S'Hysme can detect the hope of freedom in the depths of their eyes. The flicker shining in their pupils clearly shows how the magic of typhonism vacillates and risks ceding under this assault. While the orphans move around the throne of stone, smiles on their faces, he attempts to throw the slaves into the battle. It is a useless effort. Hope takes with it everything in its path. In a single movement, S'Hysme sacrifices them all. Typhonism has become a devastating whirl ravaging consciences and stopping heartbeats.

One by one, the slaves fall to the ground. Eyes narrowed, Mankenz and the four Templars with him raise their guns and execute the old S'Hysme without pity. He tried to jump, to rise from his throne and rush to the entrance, but the blessed bullets devour him from inside. His mass shakes the ground as he falls, riddled with bullet holes.

Mankenz and his brothers chase the guests who, surprised by the surrounding chaos, converge in the common room. Defenseless scholars are massacred in their rooms, in the hallways and in the indoor gardens. Two of them seek their salvation in escape and try to slide through the wall of a garden. Mankenz catches them in person and executes them.

Everywhere else, the bond that links the slaves to their masters, dissolves and frees the prisoners from their psychic shackles. Numbed by the shock, most wander, like senile old men, arms dangling, eyes unseeing. Others regain their consciousness and hide here or there, under the branches of the salphenes or in the dark hallways of the libraries. They are all victims of a great emotional shock and attempt to relate reality to their last memories as free men. Their stories are

different, but their paths one day crossed that of an ophidian. Trembling with fear, none of them can envisage taking a weapon to help the Templars.

On his islet of Conservation, S'Enkz attempts the impossible to save the works being restored. With him are six disciples, young ophidians in their third or fourth sloughing cycle, who he blindly trusts. As soon as he realized that the enemy was present, he gathered the works in peril and placed them in three oak chests before leading the convoy in an attempt to reach the center of the library.

S'Enkz knows of the existence of a secret passage under the Pillar. He does not know more but wants to try his luck and find a refuge while waiting for the watchmen to take control of the situation. Under his anxious gaze and feverish movements guiding the maneuver, the disciples load the chests in a boat, then push it towards the central esplanade. Mist conceals the convoy heading to the landing located at the southern section of the Pillar. S'Enkz starts hoping and joins his disciples in unloading the chests and crossing the esplanade.

A Templar has watched the scene from the steps of the inn and sounds the alert. Warned by his brothers, Mankenz immediately decides to abandon the inn and run after the ophidians. The orphans leave behind them the butchery and an unusually quiet and macabre building. No one has survived their passing, not even a slave with a renewed conscience attempting unsuccessfully to convince his liberators of his sincerity. The orphans have made no distinction between this slave and the enemy. Like the others, he was marked, soiled and corrupted by typhonism. Murdered in cold blood, he will have been freed in order to die.

The Pillar has become a magnet attracting the forces present. While the few archivists spared by Vice rush there in the hope of protecting their master and forming a common front with him, he climbs an old Cynwäll staircase with his accomplices. Close to thirty slaves follow them. They move in twos to rapidly transport a chest. They end this last voyage with a few returns and bring three quarters of the Erratum's treasures to their new home.

The Tainted Ones contain their euphoria. Morale is high. With little difficulty, the plot has been carried out as they hoped. They will leave behind them ruins and the bodies of brothers lacking ambition, incapable of understanding the incredible potential of a tainted Alliance.

From a narrow ledge, the Mother observes the strange convoy with immense relief. Dirty, her scales impregnated with a pestilential stench, injured and completely exhausted by her journey, she enjoys this spectacle in silence, having imagined it so often in her prison in Carthag Fero and the hold of the *Karl IV*.

She cannot contain her happiness although she was too late to warn the Erratum. She is proud to be alive, to have saved Sagoth and to have said goodbye to him. Proud to have frayed a passage through the narrow galleries and caves to find her brothers. As well as a son.

S'Ylice freezes, troubled by an emotion he cannot explain. His scales quiver and he motions his master to stop. Behind them, the convoy slows down as best it can. S'Ardai approaches him.

*Are we being followed? What is going on?* he, carefully vibrates.

S'Ylice rises and oscillates like a mast in the wind. His contracted face reveals the extent of his efforts to recapture the trace of his mother. He must be mistaken, but his heart says otherwise.

S'Ardai is worried. He was careful not to tell the archivists that the ophidian detained by the Templars was a Mother and, in this specific case, S'Ylice's mother. Overwhelmed, S'Ylice again starts to feel the invisible bond uniting him with S'Iris. She is here, close by. Alive.

S'Iris moves first, encouraged by the vibrating call of her son. She leaves her shelter and, with painful contortions, slides along a rock wall. When she emerges at the foot of the stairs as if appearing on the stage of a theater, the group of archivists bustles.

On S'Ardai's orders, a slave brandishing a torch moves towards her. The Tainted Ones take a step back. The Mother's body is nothing more than a gross wreck, a terrible testimonial of what a Serpent can endure when facing death. They all note the sewn crevices along her sides, the sickly seeming scales, the bloodshot eyes, and the purple tongue that can hardly hiss and weakly flicks between her jaws.

The master archivist is not really surprised. He does not know by which miracle S'Iris has survived and frayed a passage to this place, but she undoubtedly proves the power of Vice. There is no other explanation. Only Vice could allow the Mother's body to continue to survive.

Overwhelmed, S'Ylice glides along the steps beyond his master and between the last ranks of slaves that separate him from S'Iris. He wants to touch her and know she is really there. A meter separates them still. Her moldy stench does not prevent the archivist from smelling the intimate odor of his mother. It breaks down his final resistance. He forgets S'Ardai's severe glare and the doubtful looks of his accomplices, and throws himself into his mother's arms, embracing her with desperate strength.

Their tongues join. Their eyes devour each other. Time no longer has any meaning for S'Ylice.

S'Erum has changed and no longer resembles the ophidian who answered the master archivist's call. The Alliance he knew, the one in which he believed with all of his heart and for which he made every sacrifice, that Alliance, he wants no part of. He no longer belongs to it.

The bullet that struck the head of the First Watchman drew a final line through the role and values he thought were his since he swore the oath before the Patriarchs.



S'Erdh was right. He is part of the past, a time gone by when the Alliance, pure and sure of itself, was loyal to the mnemosian laws.

The *sydion* strangely feels no bitterness and no regrets. For many years he has felt that the Patriarchs no longer share his values. They had blinded him. They had prevented him from seeing the deep changes affecting the foundations of the Alliance and invading the sanctuaries.

Further proof of the different vision he has of the future is that he no longer needs to forget the world in the scent of the ashen flowers. He has grown and feels close to a new shedding that will leave behind him the old cast-offs of the *sydion*.

The execution of the First Watchman opened his eyes.

Vice has been within him from the beginning.

He probably knew it without admitting it. He probably wanted to delay this fatal moment since the first flower. That flower and all the others suffocated Vice. They were muzzles to his heart and suffocated his instincts by coloring his past in blood and violence.

He no longer feels betrayed or disgusted by his own body. On the contrary. He accepts Vice like an ally, a means to remove the last chains binding him to the *sydion's* oath. This freedom tastes bitter although he has dreamed of it. Freedom to belong to the age of the Rag'Narok. In other words, freedom to fight and to die.

There remains a promise he made to himself when he bent over the First Watchman's body. This brother's battle moved him. S'Erdh sought his liberty by fighting against Goldenevil. His execution was justified, if only because he attempted to give the Erratum over to the enemy. That is not sufficient, however. There is someone else responsible for this tragedy, and S'Erum intends to find him.

On his order, Ayane decapitated the head of the First Watchman and placed it in the bag she wears over her shoulder. Although the ashen flowers are no longer a necessity, he wants to see. a last one grow and blossom so that he can tell it one day that the one and only guilty party was executed.

Syd de Kaïber will have to die one way or the other. S'Erum has accepted his victim's heritage. He has become the Shadow of Syd and will continue to hunt him so that this story has an end worthy of the deaths it has left behind.

His forehead wrinkled in thought, the *sydion* studies the scene below. He has recognized S'Iris. He has seen her son throw himself against her. The scent of their effusion reaches him.

All those present must die. It is no longer a question of values or oaths. His body and mind claim the due of the Darkness. He must offer a sacrifice to Vice.

He turns towards Ayane. The contrast between her sensuous face and the ice in her eyes has never been so stark. Is she still a *syhee*? S'Erum will not cast the spell in the depths

of the eye again. Freed, he wants her to be freed as well and to choose whether she follows him or not.

A few minutes earlier, she returned with his request. She has not said a word about the contents of her bag, nor about the bloodied material covering her right arm. She arrived, bent under the weight of a canvas bag, and laid out the offering before her master. She then retired into the shadows.

S'Erum puts on the armor of an unknown watchman with awkward movements. He does not like the contact with metal; it reminds him of the branches of the *eyzom* in the steward's library. The armor covers only some of his rings, but enough to protect the more sensitive areas of his anatomy, in particular his heart and lungs.

As soon as he finishes dressing, his unease disappears. Maybe it is the effect of Vice already at work. Lined with ermine on the inside, the armor is comfortable... S'Erum makes a few simple gestures to assess his freedom of movement. Despite certain parts that slide over each other perfectly, the armor is a burden on his body he must get used to.

He cautiously takes the vortal sword found by his *syhee*. His fingers slide over the open wings of the sheath and clasp the pommel. Again, he feels the caress he first experienced, the sensation of being brushed inside by the warm and living breath of the mineral soul. This time, however, the weapon has found its master.

S'Erum attaches the sheath to his armor and inserts the sword.

A stab of pain in his jaws. The needle has entered the *sydion's* glands and avidly pumps the precious poison.

18 quivers.

Of the one hundred and sixty-two ophidians born of the Mother and dispersed over Aarklash, ninety-eight are still alive today and suddenly feel an emptiness, each in their own way, as if they were conscious of an invisible wind that had accompanied them since their sticky hands first broke out of the egg.

S'Erum's first bullet is aimed at S'Iris. Holding her close, her hundred and thirty-first son feels the burning bullet brush his face. The Mother jumps and swoons in his arms.

The stairs S'Ardai's convoy is climbing has ninety steps. All the ophidians and slaves turn to see who shot the bullet that has stricken the Mother.

S'Erum is standing at the top of the stairs, his gun pointed at the convoy. A fearful murmur runs through the group of archivists. No one can escape the spicy odor descending the stairs like a breeze emanating from nowhere. The scent of vengeance is tangible.

S'Erum rushes forward, Vice invading his body. A first slave instinctively tries to avoid 18 pointed at him. His head cracks and explodes on impact. With an empty

look, his companion raises his arms to protect himself. He sees the warrior coming and does nothing when Ayane's sword enters his stomach with a wet sound.

The death of the first two slaves spreads panic among the ophidians. As best he can, S'Ardai orders them to face it and regroup in the middle of the stairs to form a barrier between him and the *sydion*. Fear sweats like thick mist between the scales of the Erratum's archivists.

The *sydion* advances steadily and frays a bloody passage through the slaves. With the vorpal sword in his right hand and 18 in his left, he offers his victims to Vice.

The slaves fall one by one. Those not killed by the gun are finished off by the *syhee*. Ayane knows that this battle may be the last one she will share with the master. Almost twenty victims lie on the ground and she knows he has changed, that his movements are broken, that his strikes are increasingly savage.

She wants to stay to the end. She wants to stay to see Vice replace her in her master's heart.

S'Erum continues his massacre with an ecstatic grimace. A few archivists have tried to gather the surviving slaves and impress their will to face the *sydion*, but the humans, inexperienced in battles, are a derisory front.

A bullet kills the last slave, who spins around, then falls at the feet of the archivists. Torches still burn on the ground, projecting vacillating shadows on the sides of the stairwell. The blood running down the steps, trickles between the crates and the human corpses. His armor now reddish, and his eyes bright, S'Erum slides 18 to one side of his armor to take the vorpal sword between both hands.

A deep silence falls. S'Ardai has moved back to the bottom of the stairs and wonders about escaping. Just beside him, S'Ylice is lying on the body of his mother and raises his eyes filled with distress. The sadness in the irises of the archivist overwhelms S'Ardai.

"Did you know it was her?" whispers S'Ylice.

S'Iris's son is holding his hands under his mother's jaws. From under his fingers and the hole left by the *sydion's* bullet, blood is still flowing. His mother is still breathing, her eyes closed.

"You knew..." whispers S'Ylice. "And you didn't say anything. Not even to me. You left her in the hold..."

Vice lights up in S'Ardai's eyes. Faced with the despair of his most faithful archivist, his convictions shake, his certainties as well. But Greed has returned, happy to reconquer lost territory. The master archivist only sees the overturned or crushed crates lining the stairs, a few books of spells covered in blood that may be damaged forever.

"What are you waiting for?" he growls at S'Ylice. "Get up! Help me!"

Deep emotions invade the heart of the master archivist. He cannot stand seeing so many efforts reduced to nothing. He no longer has the strength to attend the slow death of parchments impregnated with blood.

Wrath.

For S'Erum, Vice now has a name. Strength he did not know he had inundated his veins. For a brief instant, he staggers, his heart struggling. He feels like he never has until today, that all he has lived through his various sloughings has influenced his existence. A feeling of rebirth, a trading of his used carcass for another leaner and stronger one.

His fingers play on the handle of the vorpal sword. A savage smile distorts his face.

In a breath, he rushes over the ten meters separating him from the small group of archivists. Armed with short blades, they try to stop him. The vorpal sword sings in his hands, blocks the pathetic attacks of his brothers and decapitates them with a shrill cry.

Ayane has not followed the master to the heart of the melee and observes with astonishment the massacre of the archivists. The master does not seem to suffer from the swords striking at his sides and cracking against his scales. He runs through the assailants like a storm. She does not know that Vice is Wrath and that it inspires S'Erum beyond anything imaginable.

The old *sydion* stands still among the decapitated corpses of his brothers. He can hardly see and only vaguely distinguishes the stairs through a reddish haze. Wrath is subsiding. Wrath is satisfied. He is as well. He drops the vorpal sword and remains silent for a moment.

Ayane does not dare come near. Not yet. The ophidian staggering before her as if in a trance has nothing in common with her master. Until now, their strange complicity managed to survive like a nail in the wall of Darkness that separates them. She now knows that she no longer has a place at his side.

S'Iris breathes for the last time and lies still in the arms of her son. S'Ylice no longer hears the raging hiss of the master archivist exhorting him to fight S'Erum.

He is crying inside for the one who had escaped the worst to be present here, at the foot of a Cynwäll staircase, killed by a bullet that could have killed her years before.

Vice no longer has a hold on his heart. He feels nothing at the sight of the crushed crates. He, who a few weeks ago would have given his life to save even one manuscript of the Erratum's, feels nothing more than a slight sensation of waste.

There is no longer any place for anything other than hatred.

He stands, with a fierce expression and turns to S'Ardaï.

"This is strange. I can't believe he was the one who killed her," whispers S'Ylice, pointing at the old *sydion*. S'Ardai trembles and tries as best he can to withstand the cold gaze of his disciple.

*You are forgetting who's the master, vibrates the master. Go and fight. Cover my escape. I must go to the sanctuary.*

S'Ylice smiles at him with irony.

"You did worse than kill her."

S'Ardai steps back. His disciple has unsheathed a dagger and glares at the master.

"You left her in the hands of the Templars. You abandoned her to Light."

S'Ylice throws himself forward to kill. The master and disciple engage in a ferocious clash of bodies under the indifferent eyes of the *sydion*.

S'Erum lets it happen. He can barely make out the confused bodies of S'Ylice and S'Ardai. In memory of the Mother, he wants to let her son have a chance to finish it off with dignity. Minutes slowly pass by, punctuated with the cries and hissing of the combatants. Ayane motions as if to intervene, but S'Erum stops her with a move of his hand.

The two ophidians killed each other, entwined like lovers, their rings holding their respective bodies together. Neither would give in. S'Ardai fought to the end for a sanctuary he had dreamed he would lead in the name of Greed. For his part, S'Ylice fought to avenge the humiliation inflicted on his mother.

The red glaze over S'Erum's eyes fades. The former *sydion* has descended to the bottom of the stairs and stands transfixed before the two ophidians. He has switched the vorpal sword for 18 and negligently places the gun on back of S'Ardai's head. He pulls the trigger and turns to the *syhee*.

"Come here," he says.

She moves forward, her shoulders trembling.

"I have to kill you too," he admits softly.

She moistens her lips.

"Yes, of course. But you won't be able to, will you?"

He nods. She is right. He will not be able to. After moments of silence, he adds, "You should leave."

She acquiesces with a quick movement of her chin and delicately grabs the master's hand in hers and places it over her stomach.

"Thank you," she whispers.

He frowns.

"You should leave," he insists.

"What are you going to do, master?"

"Fight. Offer myself to Darkness."

“Is that the best thing to do?”

“Yes, it is.”

Ayane sadly releases her master's hand and starts to move away. As she enters a hallway, S'Erum hopes she will turn around one last time, but she disappears.

Without looking back.

## EPILOGUE

*“Disparaged by some, treated like heroes by others, the free leaguers require our full attention. Outside of Cadwallon, these individuals would be treated like outcasts, left on the fringes of society or hunted down. In the free city, they are a caste of their own, privileged and engaged in secular tradition.”*

- Report of the intellectuals of Acheron

The Erratum has fallen. The library that held the secrets of History and ungodly works is now in enemy hands. The news has caused a real quake throughout the Ophidian Alliance. For some, it is proof of the influence of Vice. For others, it is a sign of its advent.

For almost a decade, the Patriarchs had tried to control the increase in power of Vice to protect the foundations of the Alliance. They had understood that the Tainted Ones wanted to destroy the authority of the sanctuaries, but no Patriarch saw Vice coming from the depths, the rumor causing more and more ophidians to leave the depths to reach the surface and serve the Rag’Narok.

The Alliance trembling on its foundations. Until now, the ophidians had worked in its name. The Tainted Ones, for their part, work in the name of Darkness to harass Light and spread terror.

Glued to their dusty thrones, the Patriarchs, powerless, attend the birth of a new Alliance under the command of Vice and its various families. Wrath, Lust, Greed... families or brotherhoods that gather and organize.

Since the fall of the Erratum, the ophidians’ power has dissolved. War has slowly led to manipulations, plots and political maneuvers. The Tainted Ones are anxious to make up for lost time and bring their battle everywhere Darkness and its allies need support. No question remains as to the Syhar alchemists or even the baronies of Acheron leading the fight against Light alone. Tainted Ones have appeared in the armies of the Meanders of Darkness to contribute their power, magic and knowledge.

The Tainted Ones have a symbol, a reference. S’Erurn’s name has become a war cry. The former *sydion*, having joined the Tainted Ones, proves that the mnernosian laws have lived their time.

S’Erurn has chosen to march to the south and crack Syd de Kaïber.

His body is considerably strengthened. His scales have hardened, his muscles have developed, and he now regularly trains and kills to master his body. Each day, he learns to channel the force of Vice to use it like a weapon, just like 18 or his loyal vorpal sword.

The Wrath beating in his heart has finally closed the past and his ashen dreams. He has forgotten his victims and the Patriarchs.

But nostalgia sometimes forces the locks closed by Wrath, in particular when he removes the watchman's armor given to him by Ayane. He remembers the *syhee*, this human he thought he had to kill to respect his ophidian soul. On these occasions, he likes to remember the details of the cruel and sensual game that tied him to Ayane. Maybe one day destiny will bring them together if he decides to return to Cadwallon.

Six days ago, he smiled when he heard the rumor his brothers of Pride shared with him on returning from Cadwallon. They spoke of a mutilated free leaguer on her way to becoming a legend. They could not say why, but affirmed that on her shoulder she bore a large tattoo in the shape of a serpent.

S'Erum had burned the head of the First Watchman and took his ashes with him. They have been stored away in a vial he keeps attached to his armor. Two weeks ago, a small shoot appeared. It will soon become an ashen flower to which the former *sydion* will offer the head of his Shadow, Syd de Kaïber.

He is anxious to engage in the combat of Cynwäll territory. He knows that he somehow owes his rebirth in Vice to his Shadow. A just ending: Light must pay the price. He will not cease to search for Syd from the borders of Lanever to the fortress of Kaïber.

S'Erum is not worried. Time means nothing to him.

Darkness has become his law.



## BIOGRAPHY

Mathieu Gaborit, alias William Hawk, was born in 1972. After his impressive debut as the author of a role-playing game (*Écryme*, the basis for the novel *Bohème*), he has continued to write and published his first trilogy: *Les Chroniques des Crépusculaire*, also meeting great success. He is now a dedicated author of fantasy novels in French. His First Literary success allowed Mathieu Gaborit to write other works and propose other worlds, but also to play. He has participated in the creation of many role playing games, as well as the development of video games.

*"The City of Cadwallon: it is almost six o'clock in the evening. Warm, heavy rain is falling on the three towers of the Couturiers Quarter and its hanging gardens. The atmosphere is humid, saturated by the fragrance of flowers bending under the heavy storm drops. Perfumers run along the paths to gather nectar, hiding under the shelter of their hoods. [...] They have been there forever, since the very first roots started running through the cobblestones and climbing the towers to the terraces, culminating in this exceptional garden."*

*"Wrapped around the young man, the master had tightened his hold with perverse patience, taking pleasure in seeing the armor bend and grind his victim's body. Constriction as a warrior's art form. She has an almost hypnotic memory of the metal crunching, the rivets ceding with a dry crack, the scarlet face distorted in agony. The master had waited for the Templar's last breath before ripping his head off and spitting it [...]."*

Mathieu Gaborit, alias William Hawk, was born in 1972. He is the author of many fantasy bestsellers. Furthermore, he has participated in the development of gaming universes.



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ISBN 2-915556-29-6