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PROLOGUE

It began with a crime. The theft of a boy.

It was not presented as a crime. Indeed, the man in charge of the whole enterprise was a soldier, the Captain of the Arrow Squadron, charged with protecting the King of Castellane and seeing to it that the Laws he made were carried out.

He had an exceeding dislike of criminals.

His name was Aristide Jolivet, and as he lifted his hand to rap sharply on the door of the orphanage, the large, square-cut amethyst on his left hand gleamed in the light of the moon. Etched into it was a lion, the symbol of the city. It appeared to be roaring.

Silence. Jolivet frowned. He was not a man who liked to wait, or was often made to do it. He glanced behind him, where the narrow path cut into the cliffside fell away to the sea. He'd always thought this an odd place for an orphanage. The cliffs that rose above Castellane's northern bay were jagged, dotted with scars like the face of a pox survivor, and dusted with a thin layer of loose, gravelly scree. It was easy to lose one's footing up here, and a dozen or so people did every year, tumbling from the cliffs into the green sea below. None made it to shore afterward—for even if they survived the fall,

the crocodiles lurking beneath the surface of the water knew the meaning of a scream and a splash.

Yet, somehow, the Home of the Orphans of Aigon managed to prevent most, if not all, of their charges from being devoured. Considering the usual fate of parentless children on the streets of the city, these were good odds. A place at the Orfelinat was a coveted one.

Jolivet frowned and knocked again. The sound echoed, as if the stones themselves were chiming. The granite façade of the Home flowed out from the cliff's face, encircled by a single gray-green wall. The Orfelinat did not sit atop the cliffs but rather was part of them. It had once been a fortress of sorts, back in the time of the old Empire. In fact, the door upon which he was knocking was etched with faded words in the old language of Magna Callatis. They meant nothing to him. He'd never seen the point in knowing a language no one spoke anymore.

The door swung wide. The woman on the other side, wearing the blue and white of a Sister of Aigon, looked at Jolivet with wary recognition. "My apologies for the wait, Legate," she said. "I did not know you'd be returning today."

Jolivet inclined his head politely. "Sister Bonafilia," he said. "May I enter?"

She hesitated, though Jolivet did not know why. The question was merely a formality. If he wanted to enter the Orfelinat, there was nothing she or any of the Sisters could do to prevent him.

"I thought," she said, "that when you came before, and then left, it meant you had not found what you wanted here."

He looked at her more closely. Sister Bonafilia was a neat-looking, small woman, with bony features and rough hands. Her clothes were plain, many times washed and worn again.

"I came before to see what there was to see," he said. "I reported my findings to the Palace. I am back on their orders. On the *King's* orders."

She hesitated a moment more, her hand on the doorpost. The

sun had begun to set already: It was winter, after all, the dry season. The clouds massed on the horizon had begun their transformation into roses and gold. Jolivet frowned again; he had hoped to complete this errand before dark.

Sister Bonafilia inclined her head. "Very well."

She stepped back to let Jolivet over the doorstep. Inside was a hall of hollowed granite, the ceiling decorated with faded tiles in green and gold, the colors of the old Empire, now gone a thousand years. Holy Sisters in their worn linen dresses hovered by the walls, staring. The stone floor was worn past smoothness by the passage of years; it now dipped and swayed like the surface of the ocean. Stone steps led upward, no doubt to the children's dormitories.

Several children—girls, no more than eleven or twelve—descended the stairs. They stopped, wide-eyed, catching sight of Jolivet in his gleaming uniform of red and gold, his ceremonial sword at his side.

The girls scampered back up the stairs, silent as mice under the fixed gaze of a cat. For the first time, Sister Bonafilia's composure began to fray. "Please," she said. "Coming here like this—it will frighten the children."

Jolivet smiled thinly. "I need not stay long at all, if you will cooperate with the King's orders."

"And what are those orders?"

Kel and Cas were playing pirate battles in the dirt. It was a game they had invented, and required few tools save sticks and several prized marbles, which Kel had won from some of the older boys at card games. Kel was cheating, as he usually did, but Cas never seemed to mind. He gave the game his full concentration anyway, locks of his dark-blond hair falling into his freckled face as he scowled and plotted his ship's next move.

Only a few minutes ago, Sister Jenofa had shooed them, along with most of the other boys in their dormitory, out to the garden.

She did not say why, only urged them to amuse themselves. Kel had no questions. Usually at this hour he would be at the washbasin, scrubbing his face and hands with harsh soap in preparation for dinner. “A clean soul in a clean body,” Sister Bonafilia liked to say. “Health is wealth, and I wish you all to be rich.”

Kel pushed his hair back. It was getting long; soon enough, Sister Bonafilia would notice, seize him, and lop it off with kitchen shears, muttering to herself. Kel didn’t mind. He knew she had a special affection for him, as she often went out of her way to sneak him tarts from the kitchen, and only yelled at him a little bit when he was caught climbing the more dangerous rocks, the ones that jutted out over the ocean.

“It’s getting dark,” Cas said, squinting up at the sky, which was deepening to violet. Kel wished he could see the ocean from here. It was the one thing that never bored him, looking at the sea. He’d tried to explain it to Cas—how it always changed, was a different color every day, the light slightly altered—but Cas only shrugged good-naturedly. He didn’t need to understand why Kel did the things he did. Kel was his friend, so it was all right. “What do you think they want us out here for, anyway?”

Before Kel could answer, two figures emerged from beneath the archway that connected the walled garden to the main fortress. (Kel always called it a fortress, not an orphanage. It was much more dashing to live in a fortress than in a place you went because nobody wanted you.)

One of the figures was Sister Bonafilia. The other was familiar to most inhabitants of Castellane. A tall man, wearing a brass-buttoned coat printed over the breast with the sigil of two arrows at odds with each other. His boots and vambraces were studded with nails. He rode at the head of the Arrow Squadron—the King’s most highly trained soldiers—as they paraded through the city on feast days or at celebrations. The city folk called him the Eagle of the Fall, and indeed he resembled a sort of raptor. He was tall and wiry, his bony face marked with multiple scars that stood out white against his olive skin.

He was Legate Aristide Jolivet, and this was the second time Kel had seen him at the Orfelinat. Which was strange. To his knowledge, military leaders did not visit orphanages. But less than a month ago, the boys had been playing in the garden, as they were today, when Kel had glanced over toward the fortress and seen a flash of red and gold.

He had always been fascinated by Jolivet, who often figured as a villain in his games with Cas—a pirate and thief hunter who, once he caught hold of an innocent criminal, would lock them up in the Tully prison and torture them for information. Not that Kel or Cas ever broke, of course; a snitch was the worst thing you could be.

Regardless, Kel had recognized Jolivet immediately and scrambled to his feet. By the time he raced to the fortress, Jolivet was gone, and when he asked Sister Bonafilia if the Legate had been there, she'd told him not to be ridiculous and to stop imagining things.

Now a silence fell over the boys in the garden as Jolivet, standing at attention, scanned the scene with his pale eyes, his gaze resting here on that boy (Jacme, engaged in pulling strips from the powderbark tree), there on another (Bertran, the eldest of the group at ten). They passed over Cas and came to rest on Kel.

After a long, unnerving moment, he smiled. "There," he said. "That's the one."

Kel and Cas exchanged a puzzled look. *Which one?* Cas mouthed, but there was no time for discussion. Instead there was a hand on Kel's arm, hauling him to his feet.

"You must come." It was Bonafilia, her grip tight. "Don't make trouble, Kel, please."

Kel was annoyed. He was not a troublemaker. Well, there had been that business with the explosive powder and the north tower, and the time he had made Bertran walk the plank off the garden wall and the idiot had broken a bone in his foot. But it was nothing that couldn't have happened to anyone.

Still, Sister Bonafilia's face was worryingly drawn. With a sigh, Kel handed his marble off to Cas. "Take care of it till I get back."

Cas nodded and made a show of tucking the glass bauble into a vest pocket. Clearly he did not think Kel would be gone more than a few minutes. Kel didn't think so, either—though he was beginning to wonder. The way Sister Bonafilia steered him hastily across the garden didn't sit right. Nor did the way the Legate examined him once he got closer, bending down to peer at Kel as if he were seeking the answer to a mystery. He even tilted Kel's face up by the chin to more closely examine him, from his black, curling hair to his blue eyes to his stubborn chin.

He frowned. "The boy is grubby."

"He's been playing in the dirt," said Sister Bonafilia. Kel wondered why adults seemed to enjoy exchanging observations about things that were obvious. "Which he does often. He likes being muddy."

Kel felt the first stirrings of alarm. He wasn't dirtier than any of the other boys; why was Sister Bonafilia looking and speaking so oddly? He kept his mouth shut, though, as they departed the garden, the Legate marching ahead, Bonafilia piloting Kel through the old fortress at speed. She was muttering under her breath. *Aigon, you who circle the earth with waters, who hold sway over swift-traveling ships, grant unto your daughter the safety of her charge.*

She was praying, Kel realized, and felt that alarm again, sharper this time.

As they reached the front hall, he saw with surprise that the front doors were open. Through them, as if framed in a portrait square, he could see the sun sinking rapidly into the ocean. The sky cast a hot glow over the tin-blue water. At the horizon he could see the towers of drowned Tyndaris, tinted the color of wine.

The scene distracted him, and Kel lost a bit of time, as sometimes happened when he looked at beautiful things. When he was aware again, he found that he was standing among the craggy rocks outside the Orfelinat, flanked by Sister Bonafilia on one side and Jolivet on the other, his red-and-gold uniform glowing like the vanishing sunset.

There was also a horse. Kel stared at it in horror. He had seen

horses at a distance before, of course, but never one so close up. It seemed enormous, rising to the sky, its lips curling back over hard white teeth. It was black as night, with rolling black eyes.

“That’s right,” said the Legate, taking Kel’s silence for admiration. “Never ridden a horse before, I’d warrant? You’ll like it.”

Kel did not think he would like it. He found himself not minding when Sister Bonafilia pulled him close to her side, as if he were a child. (Kel did not think of himself as a child. Children were something else, carefree and silly, not like orphans at all.)

“You must say he will be treated well,” burst out Sister Bonafilia in the voice she rarely employed, the one that made orphans burst into tears. “He is so young, to be taken for Palace work—” She straightened her back. “He is a child of Aigon, and under the protection of the God, Legate. Remember it.”

Jolivet bared his teeth in a grin. “He will be treated like family, Sister,” he said, and reached for Kel.

Kel took a deep breath. He knew how to fight and scratch and kick. He had already drawn back his foot to deliver a vicious kick to the Legate’s shin when he caught sight of the look on Sister Bonafilia’s face. He could not quite believe the message he read in her eyes, but it was there, as clear as the outline of a tallship on the horizon.

Do not struggle or cry out. Let him take you.

Kel went limp as Jolivet lifted him away. Deadweight. It didn’t seem to faze the Legate, though, who swung Kel up onto the monstrous horse’s back. Kel’s stomach turned over as the world went upside down; when it righted again, he was seated squarely on the beast’s saddle, lashed in place by wiry arms. Jolivet had swung himself up behind Kel, his hands gripping the reins. “Hold tight,” he said. “We’re going to the Palace to see the King.”

Possibly he meant to make it sound like a jolly adventure, but Kel didn’t know, or care. He’d already leaned over the side of the horse and vomited all over the ground.

After that, their departure from the Orfelinat was precipitous. Jolivet muttered darkly—some of the sick had gotten on his boots—but Kel felt too miserable and ill to care. There was a great deal of swaying, and of Kel being certain that every time the horse moved its head it was planning to bite him. He remained in this state of high alert as they passed down the cliffs to the Key, the road that ran along the docks, against which lapped the dark waters of the harbor.

Kel was convinced that he would never, at any point, develop an affection for the horse he was sitting on. Still, the view from its back was impressive as they cut through the city. He had spent plenty of time looking *up* at the crowds thronging the city streets, but for the first time now he looked *down* at them. All of them—rich merchants' sons in gaudy fashions, innkeepers and dockworkers trudging home from work, sailors from Hanse and Zipangu, merchants from Marakand and Geumjoseon—made way for Jolivet as he passed.

It really was rather thrilling. Kel began to sit up straighter as they turned up the wide boulevard of the Ruta Magna, which ran from the mouth of the harbor to the Narrow Pass, slicing through the mountains that separated Castellane from its neighbor-kingdom of Sarthe. He had nearly forgotten he had ever felt sick, and his excitement only grew as they neared the Great Hill that loomed over the city.

Cliffs and hills ringed the port city, and Castellane huddled in the bottom of the valley like a hedgehog reluctant to poke its nose out of the safety of its lair. But it was not a city in hiding. It sprawled—and how it sprawled—from the western seas to the Narrow Pass, every bit of it crowded and noisy and dirty and shouting and full of life.

Like most citizens of Castellane, Kel had lived his life in the shadow of the Great Hill but had never expected to set foot upon it, much less make his way to the top, where the Palace of Marivent stood. The Hill—really a range of low limestone peaks covered with a tangle of scrub pine and lavender—was where the nobility

lived, their vast estates dotted up and down the slopes. *The rich live high, and the poor live low*, Kel had once heard Sister Bonafilia say. It wasn't a metaphor. The richer you were, the bigger your house and the closer to the Palace, which occupied the highest point in the city.

The nobles liked their pleasures, and sometimes the sounds of their revels drifted down to the city at night. People would wink at one another in the streets and say things like, "It looks as if Lord Montfaucon has started drinking again," or "So Lady Alleyne has rid herself of her third husband, has she?" When you were rich, everyone knew your business and delighted in it, even though they didn't actually know you at all.

They turned off the Ruta Magna and rode through the darkened city streets until they reached the foot of the Hill. Castleguards in red uniforms crowded around the path here; their job was to prevent undesirables from accessing the Hill. Jolivet held Kel firm in the saddle while they rode through the checkpoint, the torches of the guards blazing as they stared curiously at the boy. They must have been wondering if the Arrow Squadron had caught a very small criminal, and, if so, why they were bothering to bring him to Marivent. Most lawbreakers, regardless of age, were destined for a short ride to the gallows of the Tully.

One of the guards dipped a slightly mocking bow. "The King awaits you."

Jolivet just grunted. Kel was getting the impression he didn't talk much.

The path to the Palace wound steeply up the slope through a terrain of lavender, sage, and sweetgrass that turned the mountain deep green in summers. As they reached the top of the mountain, the massive horse puffing, Kel glanced down and saw the city of Castellane spread out before them—the crescent of the port, the lighted ships in the harbor like scattered match tips. The canals of the Temple District. The neat lines of the Silver Streets. The white