

## Chapter One

### Valamir at Ava

The autumn had set upon Ava fast in that year. The sounds of the harvest were upon the countryside, and the color of the leaves of the forests had begun to shift to the vibrancy of oranges and reds. There was still a warmth in the air in the day, brought on by the sea's wind leisurely meandering in from the coast. With it, it brought showers. In the sky, light grey clouds blocked the sun and a soft drizzle of rain fell across the lands. It was enough to dampen the paths but only enough to give a shimmer. This was not a rainstorm, but rather a soft reprieve from the toil of the harvest season.

Traveling along the roads this autumn was a small cadre of men atop horses. Their barding was of mail and leather, well worn and seasoned from years of war. At their hips, they wore quivers and blades. Each man's was slightly different than the last. Some wore thick broadswords or great long blades. Some held arrows with fletching of red or black. All wore armor similar to the barding of their horses – a mix of mail and leather, adorned with warm furs. All including the man at the horse in the center.

This man was Valamir, the Marquis du Nid de Vouivre. Not a piece of his armor would have made him stand apart from the men who protected him. The chained mail layered over boiled leather was of a practical form. A noble of his stature should have been adorned with shining plate, but instead, he wore the same protection as his men. His blade was in a simple scabbard, and the old hilt that was visible was tarnished with age, and seemingly hastily repaired after some damage to it long ago. The man himself appeared no more noble than his comrades either. His hair was of a deep brown, nearly black and was wavy, unkempt, and dirty from the long ride from home. He was scruffy, with a normally well kept and styled beard having grown out and beyond its usual boundaries, and not too evenly at that. He was of an average build, perhaps slightly larger than the average man, but a head taller than most. What stood out the most was his smile, though. It was without a doubt a contagious one, marred with lines and cracks from a lifetime of laughter and speaking, but as genuine a smile as one could find anywhere.

For weeks they had ridden to Ava, and there was little more any in the band desired but to find a comfortable place to sleep, and perhaps a warm meal and bath to soothe the aches in their bones. Finally, that was within sight for them. As the Chateau de Ava appeared over the hills, and the smell of the sea air began to reach them, their pace began to hasten just a bit.

A few hours later, they would arrive at the gates to the abode of the Duc de Ava. This was no small manor house, but a great walled tower atop a cliff overlooking the sea. As guards opened the gate for the precession, they entered the once lavish gardens of the Duc. Now, the plants here were unruly with some growing beyond their containers or plots, and weeds split the walkways. The Marquis asked his men to dismount and to find suitable arrangements for their rest. They agreed, and after the master had dismounted his own horse and gathered his pack, they took their leave of him.

Except of course for the Marquis personal guard and attendant, Bessus and Eberwolf. These three men walked through the gardens to the main entrance, where they were taken into the tower itself by one of the maids of the manor. They were then escorted to the entrance to the Duc's court. There, Valamir and his men pulled masks from their belts and slipped them on to their faces. While his

guards had simple wyvern feather half masks covering their mouths, the master wore an intricately made visage of the wyvern itself, in a deep red color. Once on, Valamir pushed through the doorway to the court chambers.

“Hail, your grace,” Valamir called out as he entered, giving a low sweeping bow as he entered the room. “I hope this evening finds you well.”

The words had barely slipped from the Marquis' lips when he finally gazed upon the Duc. The Duc was a different sort of man, a portly man whose balding had seemed to give up halfway back along his head, transitioning from pockmarked bald head to a wispy tuft of gray hairs still holding on to the back of his head. He was bare faced and rosy-cheeked, and despite his recent experiences, he too wore a warm smile. He stood at the entrance, his legs shivering and hand quaking slightly as he tried to find his balance during the trip to his feet. Finally, in a cracking and weary voice, he spoke up. “Marquis Valamir,” The man said with a distinct smack of his lips. “To what do I owe the pleasure of a Wyvern in my court?”

“Your grace, you have been kind enough to invite us to your home to discuss a proposal.” Valamir had raised back up at this point and moved closer to the Duc, who was flanked by a few attendants. The attendants pushed forward slightly, one guard going so far as to pointedly rest a hand upon the iron pommel of his sword and put himself between the Duc and Marquis.

“Get to the point, Marquis,” The old man laughed. “I don’t want to waste time dancing around the courtly traditions.”

Valamir nodded, and then stood up straight. “Good. I’ve always appreciated that about you.” He took a breath, slow and long before he finally spoke. “My son has reached his fifth year. I’d like to begin planning for his eventual marriage.”

“And you chose to come to Ava?” The Duc could not contain a belly laugh. His entire form moved and jiggled at the laugh, “Surely you jest.”

The Marquis just shook his head.

“You are serious.” The Duc’s face turned away from the joviality it had displayed, noticeably darkening at the thought. “No noble of Ava would willingly give a daughter to a Wyvern.” He trailed off quickly, waving a hand dismissively at the man. “Let alone one with your holdings or reputation...” The Duc stepped back. “If you are seeking my favor in asking one of the other nobles of Ava, you are on a fool’s errand. I will not help you.”

As the Duc spoke, the Wyvern-masked marquis motioned to one of his men, Eberwolf, who in turn stepped forward. He pulled from an old leather bag a simple linen roll and offered it to his master. In turn, the Marquis offered the swaddled object over to one of the Duc’s men. “I expected your response. So, I come with an offer. My lord could never say this himself.” He waited as the Duc’s man brought to him the linen wrapped item and passed it over to the lord of region. “But your station is falling. You are losing grip on your lands. And soon, age and frailty will let another step into your role.”

“And you offer your lord’s assurances and aid?” The Duc laughed and shook his head unwrapping the item.

“No,” Valamir spoke quietly. “Nothing so sincere.”

There was silence in the room as the item was revealed. It was an old tarnished seal, emblazoned with ancient lettering and script, and the image of a dragon rising etched in the precious metals. The Duc visibly swallowed and wrapped the item back up. His breathing heightened, and he shook his head quickly. “You can’t possibly...” The man had been reduced to a stutter, his fingers trembling on the item. He clearly didn’t want to hold the item any longer, and hurriedly tried to push it off on his nearest attendant. The attendant stepped back, his face twisted in a mix of disgust and fear for a moment.

The marquis’ hand was offered. “Duc Gilles,” He said coldly. “There is a Magi in your duchy, of noble birth and high standing.” He motioned to the man to hand over the item. The Duc forced the seal into the marquis hand and quickly stepped back to his seat, falling into the cushions and quilts that adorned the simple throne. He took a swift breath and put a hand on his chest, looking to his attendants for some aid but finding nothing offered. “Your grace, will you arrange a meeting with him?”

The Duc shook his head violently. “How did you find that? Where did,”

“Duc, I’ve taken great pains to keep my reputation exactly where you found it...” The Marquis spoke swiftly. “Those are answers you cannot seek. Don’t worry,” He said as he tossed the item back to Eberwolf, who deftly slipped the item back into the deer hide bag. “Your past is your own to regret. I am much more interested in the sins of a certain Magi.”

“How dare you! Have you no honor? You dredge up trinkets and lies to blackmail a great man into submission to your schemes.” One of the Duc’s attendants finally spoke on his behalf, drawing the eye of all three of the men visiting the court, each cast at a slight cant from beneath the masks they wore.

“There is only honor in service to her Majesty or the gods.” Valamir spoke with a bit of a bite in his tone, a sharp decline and a glance to the Duc.

“How does this act in service to her Majesty?”

“Enough...” Duc Gilles spoke through a few pained and hacking coughs as he collected himself. “Enough.” He slumped in his seat and sighed. “There are none of us here saints.” He smacked his lips again and struggled for a moment to sit up. When he finally rose to an upright seat, he gave a soft nod. “Do you have an answer to that question, Valamir?”

“I do.” The Marquis spoke without hesitation.

The old man groaned and shook his head. “I have seen your work first hand. Now twice in my life.” The Duc spoke quietly. “An accomplishment few can claim.” He took a long breath, which ended in a bit of a wheeze. “I’ll set up your meeting, on once final condition.” He put his wait on one hand and rose the other to point a gnarled finger at the Marquis. “You leave your son and the girl out of it. Whatever your endgame is here, they live a quiet life.”

Valamir stood quietly for a moment, until a smile appeared on his lips, twisting up under the mask slightly to make it unclear if it was genuine, or more of a smirk. “On the Mother, you have my word.”

“Fine, I’ll pen the letter. Duc Vedast de la Cote d’Argent, correct?” The Duc spoke as he waved at one of the attendants, who hesitantly rushed off to find parchment and ink.

“Yes.” The Marquis said with a quiet nod.

“He’ll never agree to this. No matter what you think you have on him.”

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