

# I

*Brecham County, Central West Montaigne, South East Pangaea.  
Tertiday, Rupelian 12th, AD 4004*

Death was a distant stranger.

Not the kind of ominous cloud to overcast the vivacious, romantic mind of a not yet fourteen-year old boy such as Peregrine Farouche, who was brimming with spirit and passion. Especially not when he was care freely gambolling through the rolling glades in the bright, warm afternoon picking clutches of beautiful flowers growing wild; the gentle summer breeze tousling his flowing yellow hair and cooling his fresh, angelic face with its delicately fragranced breath.

Even when he strayed into the dappled shade of the woods, the brooding malice of mortality did not disturb him, although the cautionary tales he'd heard at his father's knee did come flooding back into him like a tide of bad dreams not wholly vanquished by waking.

His father had strictly forbidden him to go near the woods, explicitly detailing grisly consequences that may befall the wide-eyed child if he ever dared wander into those menacing environs.

But he'd been so contentedly engaged in both thoughts and deeds he quite forgot about all the childish fears instilled in him until he was already strolling beneath the lazily stirring and whispering boughs.

Then of course, it was too late.

However, this aberration still failed to arouse anxiety in him, for he reckoned the rewards of his disobedience far outweighed the risks of encountering fabled misfortunes. The woods were so beautiful and inviting it seemed a shame not to enjoy the hospitality. And he could not believe that such a harbour of tranquillity would conceal any monsters. After all, birds perched here and sang their sweet arias, which they surely wouldn't do if dangers lurked nearby.

Comforted by these assertions, Pere sauntered on; pensively arranging the posy of natural flora he'd gathered en route while he listened to the happy choruses high above that stemmed any dark imaginings from curdling his resolve.

Surely enough, the only thing he came across was a deer fawn that promptly pranced away into the deep undergrowth at his approach.

Eventually he reached the edge of the woods, where the land gradually fell away into a shallow river valley. Here he paused to shield his eyes against the sunshine and gaze over the breadth of the ravine to the rolling landscape on the opposite side.

An awe-inspiring rural tapestry lay before him: lush green pastures, golden acres of ripened crops and earthy brown fields were cross-stitched with hedgerows and communal tracks that tied together the tiny farmsteads dotted here and there. Domesticated cattle grazed the grassy enclosures, their lowing and tinkling bells faintly audible on the shifting air. Further in the background, a team of stout plough-horses loyally plodded on with their laborious toil under the encouragement of the gadswoman, their decorative harnesses jingling and sparkling.

Pere grinned in rapturous appreciation.

Then he saw her.

A raven-haired figure standing on the shore of the babbling river, idly skimming pebbles across the glistening watercourse as she patiently waited on his arrival.

He didn't immediately alert her to his presence. Instead, he took a moment to drink in her sheer rugged handsomeness while

she was unaware, devotedly admiring every motion of her lithe, slender form as she impatiently paced up and down, nonchalantly kicking at the ground with her riding boots.

When he found he couldn't resist her any more, he called, "*Amoret!*"

She spotted him waving at her.

A huge smile graced her features.

And his heart melted.

Pere began descending the riverbank, giggling with unbridled glee as he recklessly thrashed his way through the thicket covering the slope.

Amoret hurriedly tidied her straggling, shoulder-length locks and breathed against the palms of her hands to check her oral odour before scurrying away to meet him.

He emerged from the bushes just as she reached them, and they both stopped short of one another to silently absorb the beauty they saw before them. Each privately praising the favour fortune had shown in bringing them together.

Slowly they closed the gap, slapped high fives, entwined their fingers and then joined their lips in a lingering kiss.

"Oh, Amoret!" Pere sighed, plunging into her embrace to press his cheek against her chest. She responsively tightened her grasp on him, not wanting to ever let go of this blessed treasure she'd been gifted.

They had met but a week ago.

Amoret had gotten mixed up in a drunken brawl one evening at her favourite tavern, The Creaking Meat Tree. This was quite a regular occurrence for both her and that particular hostelry, except she usually managed to vanish before the Watch was called. On this occasion, however, the Watch Warden herself had been in the bar room playing cards and swigging flagons of ale with her Deputies, all of whom swiftly dispensed instant justice at the scene.

She awoke next morning to find herself in the Rampick town gaol-house, sharing a stinking cell with some vagrant old hag who kept cackling and hacking wretchedly. And while she

was in the process of nursing her throbbing head (not just the result of her hangover, but also the after effect of the wardens' liberally applied truncheons), breakfast was served.

By an angel.

Her troubles evaporating into obscurity at the sight of him, Amoret couldn't help staring at the pretty young boy who had come bearing the meals, wondering why one so dainty and refined was condemned to perform such a menial task in this dismal prison. She later learnt from Pere that since his father died a year ago, after tumbling into the cesspit whilst slopping out the cells, he'd inherited the cooking and cleaning chores around the gaol-house at the express command of his mother: the Watch Warden, no less.

As Pere began meekly posting the meals into Amoret's cell, not really taking any notice of the attention being paid to him, the old hag shuffled forward and grabbed the nubile boy's wrist with her grubby mitt. The grizzled crone cackled, nominating him 'the purtiest berd I ever did see', and violently prevented Pere from pulling free of her hooked claw.

Leaping to his defence, Amoret knocked the hag aside, allowing the boy to rapidly retreat clear of the bars.

Their eyes met.

And from that day forth they had been secretly meeting, every moment spent together increasing and developing their impassioned attachment. Both were fully aware of the bleak prospects ahead if anybody discovered their affair, yet undeterred by what might befall them. To suppress their feelings would be much worse, they agreed.

The whinny of a horse disrupted their intimacy.

Pere glanced up to see a fallow stallion towering above them.

"Favel!" he merrily greeted, reaching out to stroke the beast's obligingly dipped forehead. As if in answer, Favel whinnied a second time. "How're you, boy?"

"Are you sure you weren't followed, Pere?" Amoret doubtfully enquired, checking the overlooking surroundings.

"Of course," he reassured her. "Don't worry. My mother's too

busy expecting the Sceptral Judiciary to turn up at any minute to bother herself with my whereabouts.”

Amoret looked at him earnestly. “They’re coming here?”

“Yeah. Straight from Thirlborh.”

“When, exactly?”

“Day after tomorrow, if they make good time.”

“So soon,” Amoret said.

“My mother told me they burnt *five hundred* people in Faubourg,” Pere hollowly relayed, swallowing dryly.

“Damn Pherenike and her zealots!” Amoret bitterly chided. “Why can’t they leave everyone be?”

“You’ll be safe, though, my love,” Pere optimistically presumed. “You’re a tenant on Lady Mandrake’s estate, and you know how she and the Queen are so at odds over their ideals. She will never allow those persecutors on to her land.”

“Yeah?” Amoret huffed, unconvinced. “My Uncle Semeion and me are scarcely tolerated in town as it is. With this damned blood purge stirring up the residents it’ll be *impossible* for us to have any kind of decent life here.”

“All the more reason to quit now,” Pere hopefully prompted. “Oh, Amoret. How I long to put Rampick far behind me. Can’t we go soon, my darling? You’ve promised me so many times you’ll take me away from all this, but we never seem to get any further than dreaming.”

“It’s too difficult at the moment,” she claimed, breaking the embrace and avoiding the adoring gaze of his doleful eyes.

“I thought you came from a nomadic race?” Pere said, not disguising his disappointment in the sharpness of his tone. “I *thought* travelling was in your veins?”

She turned to face him, divulging, “My Uncle Semeion has been touring this globe for the best part of his life. He’s been through The Morro, Cadmia, Argestes, Mulciber, Arcadia. Some even say he saw The Myall in his youth.”

At the very mention of this impressive list of distant countries, Pere wistfully pictured himself heroically navigating vast, uncharted territories on the back of a faithful steed.

“Now he’s weary of wayfaring and wishes to settle somewhere permanent for his final years,” Amoret continued. “And as Lady Mandrake’s is the only kindness we’ve been shown, he chooses to stay here.”

“That doesn’t mean *you* have to,” Pere concluded. “Surely your uncle doesn’t expect you to stay as well, not when your heart yearns for other horizons.”

He tried to see what her eyes were saying, but she wouldn’t let him.

“Your heart does yearn for those horizons, doesn’t it, Amy?” he asked, beginning to fear for the first time that all the ambitious plans they’d raked over and over during their stolen moments had merely been empty platitudes on her part, expressed only to please him.

“Semeion can’t cope without me,” she informed him.

“Then perhaps *I* can!” he retaliated, flinging the withering posy at her. It harmlessly exploded in her face and sprinkled around her feet.

He turned his back on her.

Favel, who had taken to cropping some nearby grass for his own amusement, glanced up at the quarrelling lovers. He offered his equine opinion by snorting then returned to his grazing.

“Don’t be like that!” Amoret pleaded, coming up behind Pere and placing her hands on his shoulders.

Pere shrugged off her touch.

“What would you have me do? Abandon the only family I have left? He took me under his wing when my parents died of starvation in Cornucopia.”

Guilt seared into Pere like a red-hot needle.

“A wayfarer’s life is not all exciting adventures and sleeping beneath the stars,” Amoret tried to make him understand, meaning to shatter his illusions.

“I know,” Pere fibbed, for he didn’t truly comprehend the nature of such an existence.

“I lived it for the first seven years of my childhood. It’s hard and rough, even when you’re born to it.”

“But will you *never* take me away from here?” Pere queried. “Will we be forever hiding our love amongst bushes?”

“Of course not,” she hopefully projected.

“Wouldn’t your uncle be content to settle somewhere else instead of here?”

“I fear there’re few places we’ll find a ready welcome like Mandrake has shown us,” Amoret mourned. “Her generosity is entirely centred around getting one over on those esteemed inhabitants of Excelsior Montis, of course, but we can live with that.”

“How do you mean?”

“Favel, for instance,” she said, indicating her trusty mount. Favel reared his head again at the sound of his name being bandied about. “Mandrake won him in a wager against the Delphine Princess Eigne. A thoroughbred from the Royal Mews, and she gifted him to *me*, a Giaour, a dyed-in-the-wool heretic in the eyes of the orthodox Zoetic Church. She couldn’t really make her anarchic tendencies much plainer, could she?”

Favel agreed, nodding vigorously and swishing his tail, though whether he was actually confirming his mistress’s statement or the nobleness of his lineage was something indeterminable.

“No, I suppose not.”

“My tribe couldn’t find a home, that’s why they were nomadic. They were censured and exiled for their convictions; century upon century, country after country.”

“Now they’ve been accepted in Gegenschein. Or at least their doctrine has,” Pere said. “Perhaps we could persuade your uncle that Paladin is the home he’s searched so long for.”

“Don’t talk rubbish, Pere!” she scolded. “That’s the reason why that warmongering maniac Pherenike is raising this whole crackpot crusade of hers! That’s why the Frithgild tax is robbing Montaigne blind! That’s why Customs House gaugers guard the coastline! And that’s why we can’t risk going *anywhere!*”

“You promised to take me away!” he threw back, whirling round to confront her. “And now you tell me you’re too *afraid!*”

She grabbed him and shook him severely.

“Yeah, I’m scared! For *you!*” Amoret sharply clarified, her dark eyes blazing. “They’ll burn me for sure, but you *know* I’d willingly kill and die for you! That’s not my fear! What frightens me is what they’ll do to *you!*”

He began crying.

Amoret enfolded him in her arms, immediately regretting her castigation. “I’m sorry, my darling! I’m sorry! Please forgive me!” she apologized, feeling the hitching sobs against her torso and mentally reprimanding herself.

Just then, Favel nudged her with his nose.

She ignored him, so he repeated the action.

“What?” she said impatiently.

The horse nodded towards the thicket.

It was moving; and not by the drift of the breeze, for there was none down in the river valley.

“What is it?” Pere quizzed, noticing the diversion of her attention. “Amy?”

“Stay here,” Amoret advised him in a hushed tone, stealing away from him towards the dense plantation along the bank-side.

“Amy?”

She pressed a finger to her lips to beg his silence while her other hand drew a short bladed dagger from its sheath on her belt.

Favel snorted.

Amoret stealthily crept into the bushes, her heart dully thudding, her eyes darting here and there in an attempt to catch a glimpse of whoever might be lurking amidst the vegetation. Pausing, she adjusted her hold on the knife’s hilt, which was fast becoming slicked with perspiration. She then went in deeper, secure in the knowledge that Pere was safe under the loyal supervision of Favel.

Pere and Favel stood watching Amoret as she disappeared among the leafy branches. The young boy sighed and thought his secret sweetheart very like some brave hunter tracking a wily quarry, whereas the horse just shook his head despairingly.

A rustling noise suddenly alerted them both.

They looked round in time to see a figure draped in a hooded cloak and brandishing a carved staff surreptitiously creeping up on them from the rear. It halted mid-step, its element of surprise ruined.

Pere gasped, stricken with fright.

Favel whinnied and bolted.

Oblivious to this, Amoret persevered with her nerve-racking sweep of the bank-side bushes, starting at every shape she saw in the stunted, entangled shrubs and tensing at every tiny crackling of twigs.

Suddenly, something behind her loudly crashed through the foliage.

She stopped, apprehension freezing her solid.

Whatever it was, it was very large and forging straight towards her position.

Amoret stifled a whimper.

Her fingers instinctively flexed around the knife's hilt.

It was gaining on her; its heavy footfalls trembling the ground beneath her and its rhythmic, raging breath blasting onto the prickled hairs on the back of her neck.

Mustering all the courage she could, she prepared to make her strike; a swift pirouette, a hard body jab and then a quick exit. Get in first and get out fast. Those were the rules she lived by when brawling.

A familiar snout urgently bunted her in the back.

"*Favel!*" she gasped in relief, almost collapsing as the pent up tension dissolved. Alarm gripped her again when she realized her horse was where he shouldn't be. "You should be with *Pere!*"

The steed grabbed the collar of her leather jerkin with his teeth and insistently dragged her along, fractiously whinnying as he did.

A squeal pierced the air.

Amoret didn't need any further motivation.

At the riverside, Pere was lying on the shingle, having slipped and fallen whilst trying to escape the mysterious cloaked figure, who was now steadily approaching.

“Who’re you?” it demanded from the shadowy depths of its cowl.

Pere cried shrilly.

The figure pulled its staff apart, drawing a rapier blade cunningly concealed inside the shaft. “*Who’re you?*” it repeated.

Out of nowhere, Amoret flew at the antagonist, grappling it in her muscular arms and violently bustling it into the water. She plunged the figure below the surface for a few seconds then hauled it up, letting it splutter and gag. Ducked it under once more, holding it down longer this time. Hefted it out before it drowned and then pulled her dagger ready to strike a mortal blow.

Aghast, she hastily stayed her hand.

Recognizing the assailant’s face, she exclaimed, “*Uncle Semeion!*”

“*Get off me, you blundering oaf!*” yelled the old man. “That temper of yours will be the ruination of you! And *me* at this rate!”

“Whuh ... what’re you doing frightening folk?” Amoret questioned, sheathing the knife and doing as he’d requested.

“I came to find out where you’ve been sloping off to these past few days,” Semeion admitted, sitting up. “Look at me! I’m soaked to the skin! You’ll be lucky if I don’t catch my death!”

“I ought to let you, you silly old fool!” his niece unfeelingly admonished, wading ashore and leaving him where he was. She attended to Pere: helping him to his feet, brushing down his russet tunic and checking his limbs for any bruises or abrasions.

“Well, that’s gratitude!” Semeion complained. “After all I’ve done for you! Raised you! Taught you everything you know!”

He began struggling to stand, but couldn’t manage it against the river’s current and plopped down. He cursed profusely, causing the innocent boy to blush.

“I could’ve killed you!” Amoret shouted back at her relative. “You’ve no business here!”

“You said you were going *hunting!*” Semeion reminded her, trying to fight the flow again and failing just the same. He splashed his hands down in frustration.

Favel snorted and dutifully strode into the river. He plucked Semeion up by his hood and unceremoniously dragged him out.

“*Arrrgghhh!*” the aged man shrieked, gurgling and retching in the water. “*Let go of me, you stupid nag!*”

Heedless, Favel carried on till he could deposit his burden on dry land.

“You want to keep that beast reined, my girl!” Semeion grouchyly muttered, indignantly righting himself and glowering at his patient, forbearing saviour.

He turned his gaze upon Pere, slit eyes studying the boy.

“And is *this* what you’ve caught while out *hunting?*” he directed at his niece. “We can’t eat him, he’s too skinny.”

“You keep a civil tongue in your head, Uncle,” Amoret warned him through pursed lips as she elevated herself to her full height beside Pere and curled a protective arm around his shoulders.

“What’s your name, berd?” Semeion asked, flicking his sopping grey locks aside and slowly scrambling to his feet. Favel helped, bunting and nudging, but the old codger slapped away his interfering gestures.

Pere first looked at Amoret, who nodded her approval, then back at Semeion.

“Peregrine, sir,” he said meekly. “Peregrine Farouche.”

Semeion stared at him. “*Farouche?*” he parroted. “As in *Watch Warden Farouche?*”

“Yeah, sir. She’s my mother.”

“Oh, that’s *wonderful!*” Semeion laughed, spreading his hands towards the sky. He went to collect his staff from where it lay. “As if we haven’t got *enough* problems,” he added, glaring at Amoret, “you have to take a fancy to a neck-stretching bigot’s son!” Seriously disgruntled, he stormed off.

Pere and Amoret looked at each other.

“Can you believe I want to stay here with that berd?” she joked, smiling gently.

He didn’t find the remark in the least bit funny.

“Will you be missed yet?” she asked him.

“Well, I have to prepare and serve the prison meals at three-

seventy five. But there's only old Gaby Cailleach in the gaol-house at the moment ...”

Amoret fumbled in the hip pocket of her britches and produced a battered, nickel-plated watch from it. She popped open the lid, studied the dial and checked its reading against the position of the sun. Pere glanced at the watch face and saw the hands claimed it was 2.93.

“Plenty of time.” She snapped the watch shut and stowed it. “C'mon,” she goaded, chucking him under the chin. “I can't bear to see you unhappy, Pere. I know what might cheer you up.”

“What?” he probed, being led to Favel.

“Well, you once said you wanted to see where I live,” Amoret explained, effortlessly lifting him and placing him side-saddle style onto the horse's bare back. “So I'll show you.”

They set off, Amoret walking alongside Favel as they sedately strolled the curvaceous course of the Talweg River. Coming to a wide, shallow stretch, they forded its breadth and continued traversing the valley until the bank flattened out.

Clinging onto his ride's mane, Pere took the opportunity to survey the magnificent, unspoilt countryside from his elevation; his heart touched and delighted by all the sights, sounds and smells filling his senses.

If there were one thing he would gladly stay put for it was this. But he believed his life to be too unsatisfying even for his over-indulged sentimentality to trap him in the confined sphere in which he dwelt. And although he deeply appreciated the majestic natural beauty that he now saw, the irresistible lure of far horizons and mystical lands tugged more greatly at him.

Eventually they reached the summit of a ridge, affording themselves a spectacular view across the fluctuating hills and dales of Brecham County.

Occupying the majority of the foreground was a huge, densely populated forest, which was currently being plundered for its removable assets. Gaping holes opened up by the systematic stripping out of trees marred the lush arboreal canopy, and sooty smoke plumes from brush fires and charcoal-burning rose high

into the pastel blue sky. Drove of draught-horses strained to manoeuvre felled forest giants from their resting places to a massive clearing, where multitudes of carpenters crafted the rudimentary trunks into stacks of planks and fashioned beams. These finished products were then being loaded onto trailers by simple, rough-hewn derricks and transported off onto purpose-laid tracks leading, presumably, to the main Excelsior Road.

“What’re they doing?” Pere asked.

“Building ships for the fool’s errand,” Amoret acidly answered.

He looked at her, perplexed.

“The crusade,” she expanded. “Virtually every artisan in the country is under contract. You can scarcely get a horse shod because the farriers are too busy producing cannon-shot and broadswords. It’s worth more than their regular trade. War is big business.”

“Who’s paying for it all?”

“The ordinary gys and berds, who else? The same ones who’ll pay the highest cost in grief when the battlefields run with martyrs’ blood,” Amoret said. “It’s easy to talk tough in the ivory towers of Excelsior Montis, but it isn’t Pherenike who’s going to put the money where her mouth is and turn words into action. Nor will it be her who picks up the pieces afterwards.”

“My mother said they’ve already got press gangs working the citadels,” Pere imparted, contemplating the activity below as they carried on along the ridge. “Do you think they will come here?”

“They’ll go anywhere they think they can rally troops, voluntary or otherwise. No gy is safe from induction into this madness unless she’s crippled or dead. And if she isn’t either of those, she soon will be.”

Pere felt that Amoret had justified his case for their escaping abroad while they at least still had a decent chance of success. But he refrained from stressing the point, as he knew it would probably be of little use.

After another kilometre or so they came upon the end of the ridge they’d travelled. It abruptly curtailed into a rocky outcrop

overhanging a sheer drop down to a wide, well-maintained road. On top of this outcrop stood a curious rotunda clad in discoloured marble, its two-tiers constructed entirely of elegant arches and colonnades. Roofing it was a copper-plated cupola capped with a small spire, both of which had gone green in the weather.

“There!” Amoret said, delaying Favel and pointing to it. “Selcouth folly. Home sweet home.”

“It’s lovely!” Pere genuinely enthused, taken by its oddness in appearance and location. “What’s it doing here?”

“One of the estate bailiffs told me Mandrake’s Great Grandmother Gallimaufry built it,” she relayed as they walked on. “She was completely mad, by all accounts. She stationed her bondswomen up here to watch the Excelsior Road.” Indicatively, she traced the line of the carriageway at the foot of the cliff with her index finger.

“What for?”

“Trespassers,” Amoret replied. “This was back in the days when feudal nobility had autonomy over their estates, and during the transition when that autonomy was brought under municipal jurisdiction, old Gallimo resisted all legal and strong-arm tactics to make her conform. Hence why Mandragora Demesne is such a fortress today. She used this as a lookout post, garrisoning guards from her private army up here to take pot shots at anyone using this road, so effectively cutting off major communication between the capital and most of the northern territories. Even then this was the only direct caravan route to Excelsior, crossing the Pignon Hills and bypassing the Morasses to the east.”

“How did it turn out?” Pere urged her on, intrigued.

“Sieges failed, so they starved them out. Severed all supply lines to the Demesne, waited till their resources ran out, then stormed the place. The few Mandrake soldiers still hanging on who hadn’t died of disease or famine or deserted the cause were found to have been resorting to cannibalism and were slaughtered on the spot.”

“Eurgh!” exclaimed Pere, shuddering at the inhuman thought. “What happened to Gallimaufry?”

“Executed for treason. The estate was seized as compensatory payment for lost commerce and divided up between neighbouring aristocrats, leaving only the immediate manor under the family’s control. The gossips reckon Gallimo’s eldest daughter and heir was forcibly ...” Amoret coughed embarrassedly, “‘put with child’ by the then Sangreal Prince, to ensure her loyalty to the House of Gerent before she was allowed to inherit.”

“Is that why there are so many rumours about Lady Mandrake being related to the Queen?” Pere ventured.

Amoret only shrugged her ignorance. “Could be.”

“How come the estate is so big if it was broken up?”

“Apparently, the current Lady Mandrake’s mother had the seizure of her birthright quashed through some legal loopholes, reclaiming all forfeited tenure and turning minor nobility off the lands. In truth, Lady Mandrake is entitled to bear the mantle of Duchess, but the Crown never granted reinstatement of that particular privilege.”

The trio ascended the beaten track winding towards Selcouth, and as they neared their destination Pere saw it was reasonably well facilitated. Situated behind it was a dewpond equipped with a hand-pump, a large vegetable patch and a fertile glade that sloped away to the woods.

Noticing how his eye was engaged, Amoret said, “Lady Mandrake lets me hunt the game in that copse, and a rill runs through it where I fish and Semeion does the washing. We gather nuts, berries, truffles, fire kindling and much else from there too.” She helped him dismount. “We’re well provided for.”

“Quite a haven,” Pere appreciated.

“We’re thinking of getting some of our own poultry, and perhaps a few pigs, a cow and maybe a goat.”

“You’ll be completely self-sufficient,” he flatly commented, dismayed her plans for the future centred on putting down roots rather than spreading wings. “You won’t need the townsfolk.”

“Oh, we will,” Amoret corrected, guiding him to the folly while Favel wandered off to graze. “That’s the only drawback to Selcouth, its remoteness. Rampick’s the nearest town to here.”

“Nearer than Slackton?”

“Oh, yeah! Slackton’s thirty clicks south, whereas Rampick’s barely ten north. The only trouble is, we have to cross the Talweg boundary into Brecham.”

As they entered Selcouth via one of the arches at the rear, Pere realized the exterior was in a very poor state of repair. It bore the damage of exposure to the elements and what he suspected were the pockmarks of impacted musket shot, perhaps inflicted in the turbulent times it had previously witnessed. On closer observation he also discovered its fancy arches contained ornate stained-glass windows, some of the fragile panes of which had been broken and crudely replaced by transparent impostors or left empty.

When they went inside the smell hit Pere immediately, compelling him to put his hand to his nose. He soon acknowledged the tangy odour’s source, seeing a sizeable quarter of the floor was untidily strewn with horse-dung soiled straw. This left him in no doubt that Favel enjoyed shelter here too.

The interior was spacious, though highly vaulted since the second storey was merely a circular balcony accessed by a spiralling iron staircase and not a real upper level. Of course, this made keeping the place tolerably warm very difficult. There was a single pot-bellied stove squatting in the middle of the cracked blue-brick floor, but this possibly did little to combat the draughts; in fact, it most likely did more harm than good as its bent chimney vented directly into the room.

Furnishings were minimal. Two truckle beds lay headfirst against the blind walls between three of the windows, separated by a cupboard sporting jug-and-basin washing amenities. Set next to the stove was a stout table with cooking and dining utensils littering its surface and several oil lamps hanging about its flanks on deliberately hammered-in brad nails. A few empty crates and kegs resourcefully served as chairs.

At the centrepiece table, Semeion was preparing vegetables for a large stewing kettle, muttering and avenging a sour mood on the blameless foodstuffs as he performed his labours. He was

swaddled in a grey wrap-blanket now, having thrown off his drenched habit to hang it on an airing rack beside the stove to dry.

“I brought Pere to see Selcouth, Uncle,” Amoret explained, attracting his attention.

“Yeah?” said Semeion, suspiciously eyeing the boy. “To see how the pagans live?”

“Uncle!”

“Well!” the old geezer huffed. “How do you expect me to react? We’ve just settled nicely here. No taxes. No rent. No bother from bigots. Then you start playing lovey-dovey with a tipstaff’s lad!”

“Amy and I love each other very much, Mister Ducdame,” Pere proudly announced.

“That’s *Master*, boy,” Semeion churlishly put him right. “I’m not wed.”

Pere glanced across at Amoret then blurted, “We plan to elope.”

Shocked, Semeion hit his thumb with the cutting knife.

“*AAARRRGHHH!*” he yelled, holding up his injured hand as accusatory evidence. “*Now look what you’ve made me do!*”

“Uncle!” Amoret cried, rushing to his aid. “Are you all right? Here, let me see!”

Her elderly charge indignantly refused her interference. “Oh, no! You were ready to slaughter me in the river not more than ten minutes ago! Leave me be!”

“You need a dressing on that!” she insistently diagnosed, taking a clean handkerchief from her britches pocket. She wrestled with her uncle until he begrudgingly consented to her binding the wound.

“Is this true?” Semeion asked. “Do you plan to *elope* with him?”

Her eyes darted between him and Pere, her mind scrabbling for an answer to suit them both. Naturally, such an ambiguous concession didn’t exist. “I have considered it.”

“But ... but he’s just a *child!* Barely pubescent, I’ll wager!”

“I’m fourteen this Tortonian,” Pere disclosed.

“Well, she’s *twenty-four* next Aquitanian!” Semeion ruefully accentuated. He glared at his niece. “There’s a word for what you’re doing, and it’s *perverse!* You’re a *grown woman*, for Icarus’s sake!”

Amoret deliberately tightened the bandage she’d created, making her uncle wince.

“Yeah, I am. So I think I’m about old enough to live my own life, don’t you?” She continued, “Besides, with circumstances as they are, Pere and I have decided to postpone such rash actions for the time being. Right, Pere?”

She looked at him very hard, inducing his compliance.

“I should think so!” Semeion mumbled, picking and fiddling with the wrapping once his niece had finished. “You’ll be going enough places if the press gangs catch hold of you, my girl.” He glared at Pere again. “You’re best off here with me where they can’t get at you. Not faffing about on the hair-brained whim of some young bit of tunic!”

“Uncle!” Amoret gruffly chastised.

“Well!” Semeion justified, returning to his chore. “My own niece taking up with a *Zoetic!* It was his creed that harried us here in the first place. Now you want to *run away* with one of ‘em!”

“Shut up, you nasty old *goat!*” Pere vehemently insulted.

Both Semeion and Amoret gawped at him, astonished at his outburst: Semeion because he had never before been so disrespectfully spoken to by anyone so young, and Amoret because she had never heard Pere be so rude. She knew he had a fiery temper when roused, but impudence was not a trait she’d attributed to his character.

“You complain of being discriminated against, yet *you* are the biggest bigot I have *ever known!*” the youth condemned, approaching the table.

“If I am so, it’s what I’ve been made!” Semeion retorted. “By the likes of *you!*”

“*Me?* You haven’t even seen *me* yet!”

“I’ve seen *that!*” the crusty hermit spat, prodding the knife he held at Pere’s upper chest. Amoret tensed, sure her uncle meant the boy no harm but readying herself just the same. Pere looked

down at the gold saltire hanging round his neck on a doubled fine-link chain, which the knifepoint savagely singled out. “And that is enough. I’ve also seen what that has done in the past, and what it will do in the future.”

The junior’s wide, inquisitive eyes met the senior’s. “What do you mean?”

“My uncle is an Oneiromancer,” Amoret replied, with almost as much shame as if she were exposing him as a criminal. “He dreams the future.”

Pere stared at them.

“That’s *Heresy!*” he whispered, as if hushed tones were required.

“Only to the Zoetic Church, which is so blind it sees nothing!” Semeion contemptuously countered. “Its ignorance has brought nothing but death and destruction to this world, and I have seen what new atrocities are looming under the ill-favour of this latest abomination. Fields strewn with the desecrated corpses of men-folk and children; forests of impaled women set aloft as victory trophies ...”

Semeion paused, seeing something in Pere’s docile gaze.

He drew a shaky, fearful breath.

“*You* have seen it too!” he gasped.

Skittishly, Pere ran across the floor and hurtled up the spiral staircase.

“Pere!” Amoret called, concerned by his sudden flight and worried for his safety up there.

“He has seen it too!” Semeion impressed upon his niece, waylaying her and pointing with a dithering hand.

“Damn you and your prophecies!” Amoret cursed, jostling him aside and going after Pere.

High above on the circular gangway, Pere found the only window that accessed the external balcony and threw it open. He staggered out, leant on the wrought iron guardrail to support his quaking body and thirstily drank in the fresh air.

“Pere!” Amoret hollered.

She came up behind him and eased him clear of the rail.