

THE
ALCHEMIST
IN THE SHADOWS

Also by Pierre Povel:

The Cardinal's Blades

PIERRE
PEVEL

THE
ALCHEMIST
IN THE SHADOWS

Translated by Tom Clegg



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2011 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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15 14 13 12 11 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pevél, Pierre, 1968–

The alchemist in the shadows / by Pierre Pevél.

p. cm.

Originally published: London : Gollancz, 2010.

ISBN 978–1–61614–365–7 (pbk.)

ISBN 978–1–61614–366–4 (e-book)

1. Cardinals—France—Fiction. 2. Secret societies—France—Fiction. 3. Spies—Italy—Fiction. 4. Dragons—Fiction. I. Title.

PQ2716.E94A4313 2010

843^l.92—dc22

2010052052

Printed in the United States of America

*This book is dedicated to Patrice Duvic,
who showed me the path*

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|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Porte de la Conférence | 10. Porte de Nesle |
| 2. Porte Saint-Honoré | 11. Porte de Bucy |
| 3. Porte de Richelieu | 12. Porte Saint-Germain |
| 4. Porte Montmartre | 13. Porte Saint-Michel |
| 5. Porte de la Poissonnerie | 14. Porte Saint-Jacques |
| 6. Porte Saint-Denis | 15. Porte Saint-Marcel |
| 7. Porte Saint-Martin | 16. Porte Saint-Victor |
| 8. Porte du Temple | 17. Porte de la Tournelle |
| 9. Porte Saint-Antoine | |



- A. Palais-Cardinal
- B. Palais des Tuileries
- C. Louvre
- D. Église Saint-Eustache
- E. Les Halles
- F. Cimetière des Saints-Innocents
- G. Le Châtelet
- H. Abbaye Saint-Martin
- I. Enclos du Temple
- J. Place Royale
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- L. Arsenal
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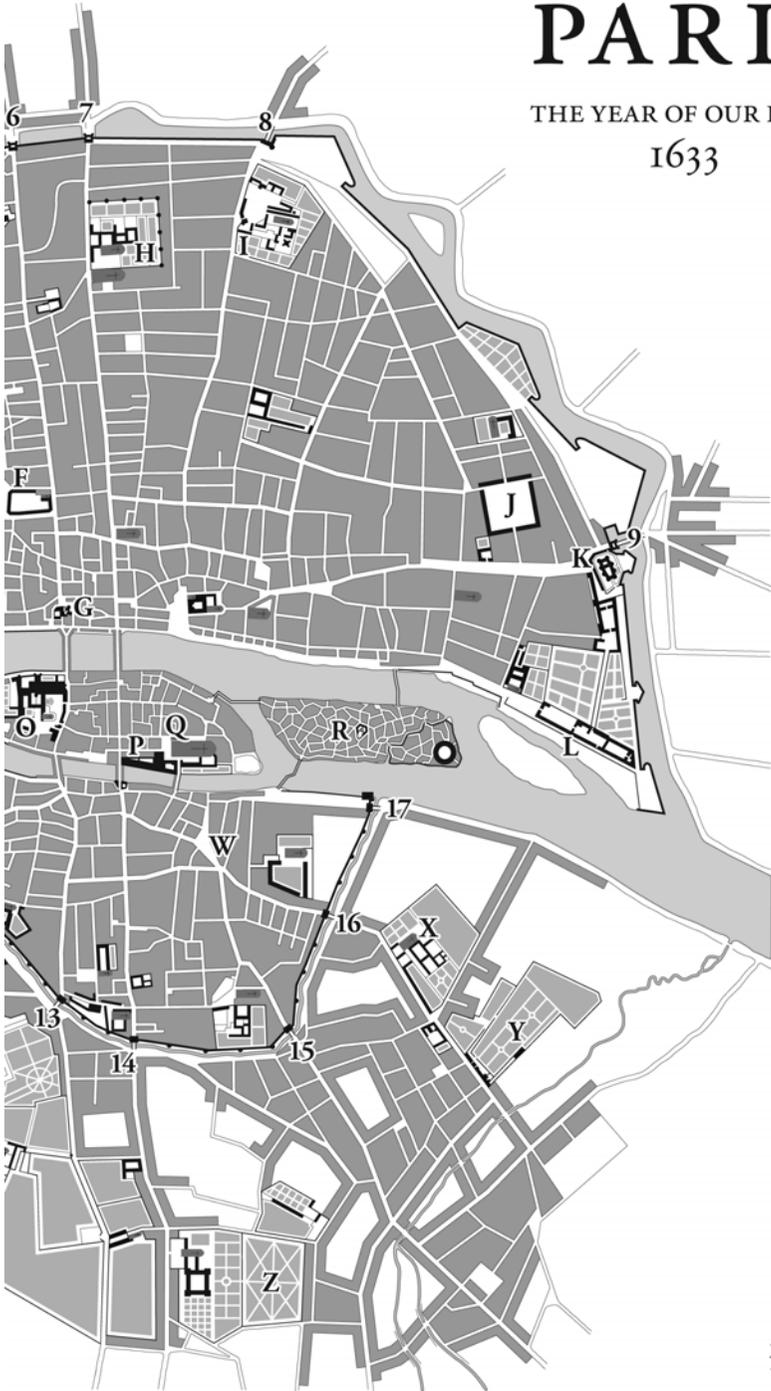
- O. Palais
- P. Hôtel-Dieu
- Q. Notre-Dame
- R. Les Écailles
- S. Hôpital de la Charité
- T. Abbaye de Saint-Germain-des-Prés
- U. Foire Saint-Germain
- V. Palais du Luxembourg
- W. Place Maubert

- X. Abbaye Saint-Victor
- Y. Jardin des Plantes
- Z. Val de Grâce

PARIS

THE YEAR OF OUR LORD

1633



PROLOGUE

JUNE 1633

It was that uncertain hour just before dawn, when the wind dies down and the mist begins to rise, the morning still a pale promise at the edge of night. A veil of dew already covered the countryside around the solitary manor, standing close to the border between Alsace and Lorraine. A great silence reigned beneath the long tattered clouds which lazied across a sky pricked with fading stars.

An elegant gentleman observed the manor from the edge of the nearby woods, watching the few lights that glowed within it. A mere shadow among the other shadows beneath the branches, he stood straight as a blade, his feet slightly spread, with his thumb tucked into his belt and one hand curled around the pommel of his sword. He was a tall handsome man. His name was François Reynault d'Ombreuse.

And today, in all likelihood, he would either kill a dragon or the dragon would kill him.

Behind the wall which protected the ruined manor and its outbuildings, mercenaries with tired, heavy eyes waited impatiently for the sun to rise. They leaned tiredly on their muskets or held up lanterns as they peered out into the lightening darkness, envying their sleeping comrades. They were soldiers of fortune, part of a band of thirty freebooters, who had fought and pillaged under various banners during the fifteen terrible years of war that had raged throughout the German principalities of the Holy Roman Empire. Now they had been hired to escort a quiet, pale-faced gentleman whose looks and manner impressed them more than they cared to admit. They knew nothing of him except that he paid well. As his entourage, they had crossed the Rhineland without ever pausing for long enough to unsaddle their horses, until they reached this manor. It had been abandoned for some time, but the thick outer wall and solid gate remained defensible. They had been camped here for two days now, at a safe distance from the roads and, most important,

hidden from the Swedish and Imperial armies currently fighting for control of Upper and Lower Alsace. It seemed they would soon, secretly, cross into nearby Lorraine. Perhaps they would even visit France. But to what end? And why this halt?

François Reynault d'Ombreuse did not turn around when he heard someone come up behind him. He recognised the footstep of Ponssoy, a comrade-in-arms.

"They've even posted sentries out here, in this isolated place," Ponssoy said after counting the lanterns in the distance. "That's more than just cautious. . . ."

"Perhaps they know we're on their trail."

"How would they know that?"

Pursing his lips doubtfully, Reynault shrugged.

The two men served in the prestigious company of the Saint Georges Guards. They wore a half-cuirass for protection and were kitted out entirely in black: wide-brimmed black hats with black plumes, black cloth doublets and breeches, black gloves and boots made of tough leather, black belts and scabbards, and, last of all, black alchemical stones of shaped draconite which decorated the pommels of their rapiers. The sole exception to this martial mourning attire was the white silk sash tied about Reynault's waist, proclaiming his rank as an officer.

"It's almost time," Ponssoy finally said.

Reynault nodded and they turned away from the old manor, plunging back into the woods.

In a clearing, the twenty-five guards who formed Reynault's detachment prayed beneath the stars. They each placed one knee on the ground and one hand on the pommel of their sword, the other hand pressing their hat against their heart. They held a rapt silence, gathering their spirits before battle. They knew that they would not all live to see the sun set, but the prospect of such a sacrifice did not weigh heavily upon their souls.

Sœur Béatrice, also on her knees, faced the men. She belonged to the religious order they had sworn to serve, dedicated to defending France from the draconic menace. She was a Sister of Saint Georges, or a *Chatelaine*, as members of the order founded by Saint Marie de Chastel were commonly known. Tall, beautiful, and solemn, she was not yet thirty years of age. Although dressed in white, with a veil, her attire looked as much like a young

horseman's as that of a nun. The heavy cloth of her immaculate robe concealed sturdy knee-boots and she had a leather belt cinched around her waist. She even carried a rapier at her side.

After a final amen the assembly stood and dispersed, just as Reynault and Ponssoy emerged from the trees. Ponssoy went over to join the guards, who wordlessly busied themselves with their final preparations: checking their weapons, helping one another with the straps of their breastplates, making sure the horses were correctly saddled, adjusting this, tightening that, taking all of the hundred precautions that prudence dictated but which also served to keep their minds occupied.

Meanwhile Reynault conferred with Sœur Béatrice. They had become well acquainted with one another over the past month, tracking the man now returning to France with the mercenaries he had recruited in the Holy Roman Empire. Their consultation was brief.

"He must not be allowed, at any cost, to regain his primal form," the Chatelaine emphasised. "Because if that happens—"

"If everything goes according to plan, he won't have time."

"Then . . . may the grace of God be with you, monsieur d'Ombreuse."

"And with you, sister."

A coughing fit woke the Alchemist.

Curled up on his straw mattress, he coughed until his lungs were raw. The fit was painful and it was some time before he could finally catch his breath and stretch out on his back, arms extended, his face glistening with sweat. The Alchemist—not his real name, but one by which certain people knew and feared him—felt worn out. His natural form was that of a dragon and his human body was causing him more and more suffering. He was struggling to keep the pain in check. He knew he was a monster, a monster whose flesh was tormented precisely because his true nature was rebelling against it. It was making regaining his primal form almost impossible for him. Each time it was an ordeal, a slow torture that threatened to kill him and whose aftermath left him feeling weaker still.

Outside, dawn was breaking.

The Alchemist sat up in bed, letting the blanket slip down his bony chest.

He was tall and thin, with an emaciated face of a morbid-looking pallor. His eyes were icy grey and his lips were vanishingly thin. He had slept in his clothes, in the room he had taken for his personal use when he and his mer-

cenaries had installed themselves in this abandoned manor. They had already been encamped here for two days and nights, wasting precious time. Through his own fault. Or rather, the fault of the exhaustion and pain which prevented him from riding further. But he had recovered somewhat. Today they would resume their journey, tomorrow they would be in Lorraine, and soon after they would reach France where the Alchemist could pursue matters he had left neglected for far too long.

But right now . . .

Wracked by nausea he felt cold, then warm, and started to shiver.

The symptoms of deprivation.

For his apparent recovery was deceptive. He owed it entirely to the abuse of a certain liqueur, which caused him to burn with an evil fire that energised him even as it devoured him from within.

But wasn't the important thing to hold on and endure, whatever the price?

He turned on his side and, leaning on an elbow, stretched out a hand to a casket hidden near his boots, beneath an old rag. He opened it to reveal four large glass and metal flasks, each secured by leather straps. The first flask was already empty. The three others—one of which was already partly consumed—contained the precious liqueur distilled from henbane, a thick substance that resembled liquid gold.

As always, the first swallow was a delight.

The Alchemist let himself fall back onto the bed, a small smile on his lips. Eyes closed, he savoured the moment as much as he could. A warm, gentle feeling of well-being flowed into him, easing his suffering, lulling his soul. . . .

But loud cries suddenly broke the spell. The sentries outside had raised an alarm and their comrades were already responding to the threat. The Alchemist rose and went to the window, which was nothing more than a gaping hole that looked out over the manor courtyard and the surrounding countryside.

Horsemen. They were coming up the track leading to the manor at a gallop. Armed horsemen, led by a figure dressed in white.

The Alchemist immediately knew who he was dealing with. He also understood he was trapped in this manor, and it would not resist an assault for long.

He turned to the casket that lay next to the straw mattress.

Three flasks of golden henbane.

Enough to kill a man.

Enough to awaken a dragon.

The guards in black charged flat out, raising a cloud of dust that caught the first rays of the rising sun. The thunder of hooves made the ground shake. Reynault and Sœur Béatrice led the column. They rode side by side, their eyes fixed on the manor ahead, whose defence was being hurriedly organised. There were signs of movement, as hats and musket barrels appeared along the wall enclosing the courtyard. The Chatelaine unsheathed her sword and brandished the shining black blade, a blade made of draconite, high in the air.

The mercenaries shouldered their muskets and took aim. They knew their weapons had a range of one hundred and twenty paces and that it was best to let the enemy draw near before firing. So they waited.

The horsemen came on at a gallop, following the dusty track, three or four abreast. But what would they do when they arrived? They charged as if they saw an open gate before them. Yet both the heavy doors were closed tight and an old cart loaded with barrels full of earth had even been pushed behind them as reinforcement. Nevertheless, the guards came on at the same mad pace.

They were only two hundred paces away. At sixty, the mercenaries would start firing.

A hundred and fifty paces. The track ahead was a straight line. Her black sword still held aloft, the Chatelaine chanted an incantation in the draconic tongue.

A hundred paces. At any moment a hail of lead would mow down the front ranks of riders, felling both men and beasts whose bodies would in turn force those behind them to tumble.

Seventy-five. Sœur Béatrice was still chanting.

Sixty. The mercenaries were about to open fire. . . .

But at the very last second, the Chatelaine screamed a word full of power. Her blade shone with a sudden light and the twin doors of the manor gate shattered into splinters. The explosion was tremendous. It shook the walls, made the ground vibrate, and flung the cart and its barrels into the air. It killed, wounded, or stunned the mercenaries posted on either side of the gate and left the remaining defenders in shock, deafened by the blast and blinded by the cloud of dust.

The riders did not slow. They burst into the courtyard, firing their short muskets. Some of their enemies responded with their longer guns. Musket

balls whizzed back and forth, striking their targets. One of them ricocheted off Reynault's breastplate. Another ripped off his hat. He dismounted, drew his sword and shouted curt orders to his troops. All around him, close-quarters combat broke out. Sœur Béatrice remained close by his side.

"WHERE?" he shouted over the din of yelling men and clashing weapons. She seemed to search around and then pointed to the main building.

"THERE!" she cried.

"WITH ME!" Reynault commanded as he leapt forward.

He was immediately followed by Ponssoy and a few others who surrounded the Chatelaine. She knew how to fight, but it was her powers that could save them all as a last resort. Her survival was crucial.

Muskets appeared at the windows of the large manor house and began to blast away. One of the guards crumpled. Despite his loss, Reynault and the rest of his group nonetheless managed to reach the main entrance. It was barricaded shut—they would have to force their way inside. Someone found a beam to use as a battering ram and with each successive blow the twin doors shivered, then began to crack a little more every time. But they still held.

"Faster!" urged the Chatelaine, a fearful expression on her face. "Faster!"

The doors gave way at last. Reynault and his men rushed inside, charging straight into the mercenaries who greeted them with a murderous volley of musket fire. Several guards fell. Ponssoy was seriously injured and Reynault's thigh was pierced right through, although he paid the wound no heed. A furious melee broke out, in which even the Chatelaine took part. She and Reynault attempted to force a passage through the combatants, until she finally placed a hand on the lieutenant's shoulder.

He turned to her.

"Too late," she said in a quiet voice which he nonetheless heard perfectly clearly.

A dull rumble came from somewhere within the house. The stone floor slabs in the great manor hall began to tremble.

Reynault realised what was happening.

"RETREAT!" he shouted. "RETREAT! RETREAT!"

Carrying their wounded and fending off the mercenaries still pressing them, Reynault and his group hastily withdrew. The whole building was now vibrating, as if shaken by an earthquake. Its foundations began to sag. Tiles fell from the roof. The stones in the walls came loose.

Suddenly a whole section of the façade collapsed.

"Lord God, have mercy on us!" the sister murmured.

Around her, guards and mercenaries were locked in a confused mass, all of them speechless with terror.

A great black dragon emerged from the manor amid a cloud of plaster and a cascade of debris. Immense in size, it reared up and unfurled its leathery wings with a tremendous roar. A surge of power swept through the courtyard, a wave that churned the earth, toppling the men and causing the horses to bolt.

Only the Chatelaine, her white clothing flapping in the storm, managed to stay on her feet. Holding her black-bladed rapier in her right hand she spread her arms wide and began chanting again. The dragon seemed intrigued by the insignificant creature standing before it, somehow capable of summoning a power comparable to its own. It lowered its enormous head to peer at the sister, who continued her incantation without faltering. She chanted words in a language which found an echo in the dragon's brain—a brain dominated by brutal, primitive impulses, but not entirely devoid of intelligence.

Sœur Béatrice knew it was too late. She had failed. Now that the Alchemist had recovered his primal form there was nothing she could do to vanquish—or even restrain—the most powerful adversary she had ever encountered.

But there was one last card she could play.

Looking straight into the terrible depths of the dragon's eye, she gathered her remaining strength and plunged into the huge creature's tormented mind. The effort she had to make was both colossal and perilous. But after several false attempts, she finally found what she was searching for. The vision struck her soul like a fist.

For the space of one brief, yet seemingly eternal, moment the Chatelaine could *see*.

She saw the cataclysm threatening France, both her people and her throne, a cataclysm that would soon become a reality played out beneath ragged skies. It left her terrified, awed, and gasping, while the dragon—having been defeated in the very core of its being—screamed with rage before taking to the air and escaping with a few mighty beats of its wings.



LA DONNA

Beneath the dripping boughs of a forest which, on this dark night, was being buffeted by the wind and downpour of a violent storm, two young dragonnets were playing. They squabbled as they flew, heedless of the weather, chasing one another, spinning and fluttering in midair, improvising virtuoso acrobatics among the branches. The little reptiles were fighting over a small vole they had hunted down together, whose mauled remains were snatched from one mouth to the other in the course of their unruly game. They were brother and sister, both born from the same egg and thus perfectly similar, sharing the same golden eyes, the same scarlet-fringed black scales, the same grey belly, and the same slender, elegant profile.

And the same intelligence, too.

Growing tired of their play, the twins finally settled on a knotty root where they were sheltered from the worst of the rain. They shook themselves, and then folded up their leather wings. Pulling from either side, they tore the rodent in two and devoured it peacefully together. The darkness lay thick around them and, when the thunder ceased, the only sounds in the forest came from the rain, the wind, and the battered foliage. Yet something interrupted the dragonnets' meal. Something only they could perceive. Something that made them rear up sharply and captured their complete attention.

They remained frozen in place for an instant, like a pair of small onyx statues gleaming wet from the rain. They had to be sure they were not mistaken, that there was no danger of misinforming their mistress, and thus risk incurring her anger or, worse still, losing her affection. But there was no mistake. So they roused themselves and exchanged nervous growls before taking wing, the male vanishing into the shadows of the vast forest while his sister flew toward the source of their interest. She moved swiftly, weaving between the tree trunks and seeming to take pleasure in dodging them at the very last moment, only finally slowing when she recognised the sound of voices. She found herself a comfortable perch in the hollow of a tree . . .

. . . where she did not have very long to wait.

There were riders approaching.

* * *

There were three of them, following a muddy trail beneath the rivulets of rain-water cascading down through the forest canopy. Soaked to the skin, they plodded along in the haloes cast by the lanterns hanging from their saddles. These did not shed much light, but at least, between the flashes of lightning, allowed them to make out the puddles disturbed by their horses' heavy hooves.

Saint-Lucq led the way. Behind him, Captain Étienne-Louis de La Fargue endured the rain with perfect stoicism, as it spattered his aging, patriarchal features: pale eyes, handsome wrinkles, martial bearing, grim mouth, closely trimmed beard, and firm jaw. Tall and solidly built, he was wearing a sleeveless vest over his doublet, which was made of leather thick enough to stop a musket ball fired from a distance, or even deflect a clumsy sword stroke. It was black, as were this old gentleman soldier's breeches, boots, gloves, and hat. As for the doublet, it was the same dark red as his baldric and the sash tied around his waist, knotted over his right hip.

Black and red . . .

They were, once again, the colours of the Cardinal's Blades, now they had been secretly recalled to service by Cardinal Richelieu.

"Are we even still in France?" Almades asked, with a trace of a Spanish accent.

Anibal Antonio Almades di Carlio, to give him his full name, rode slightly behind and to La Fargue's left, ready to draw level with a dig of his spurs and protect the flank that a right-handed cavalier would have difficulty defending. Thin and austere looking, he sported a fine greying mustache that he occasionally wiped dry—always thrice each time—with his thumb and index finger. He sat straight in the saddle, his waist snugly fitted into a red-slashed black leather doublet, and he was armed with a Toledo rapier whose guard consisted of a full hemispherical shell and two long straight quillons. Made of tarnished steel, this duelling sword offered no concessions to aesthetic values whatsoever.

"I doubt it," La Fargue said to the Spanish fencing master. "What do you think, Saint-Lucq?" he enquired in turn, raising his voice against the din of the wind and the rain in the branches.

He knew the young man had heard him despite the distance between them. Saint-Lucq took the lead precisely because he heard—and saw—better than any common mortal.

Because he was no common mortal.

Saint-Lucq was a half-blood. The blood of dragons ran in his veins. With his slender, supple figure, smooth cheeks, and shoulder-length hair, his

ancestry endowed him with enhanced senses, superior athletic abilities, and a personal charm that was both seductive and disturbing. He certainly had an allure, but there was also something dark emanating from him, with his silences, his long stares, his slow measured gestures, and his proud reserve. This darkness was heightened by the fact that he only wore black and, on him, the colour was associated more than ever with death. He only permitted two exceptions: the thin red feather in his hat and the lenses—also red—of the small round spectacles which hid his reptilian eyes. Otherwise everything, even the fine basket guard of his rapier, was black.

“We are in Spain,” the half-blood declared without turning round.

They were five leagues from Amiens and had already reached the Spanish Netherlands, which began just beyond Picardy, comprising the ten Catholic provinces that had remained loyal to the Spanish Crown when the lands further north controlled by the Calvinists seceded to form the Dutch republic. The province of Artois, along with the towns of Arras, Cambrai, Lille, Brussels, Namur, and Antwerp, were thus all part of the territory of Spain, a power that was hostile to France and jealous in her exercise of full sovereignty. Spanish troops were garrisoned there and guarded the border, only a few days’ march from Paris.

“This storm works in our favour,” said La Fargue. “Without it our lights might be seen by a Spanish wyvern rider. They fly over this area every hour, when weather permits.”

“So all we have to do is avoid the ordinary patrols,” Almades observed wryly.

“Let’s hope the person waiting for us had the same bright idea,” the old captain replied in a more serious tone. “Or else we’ll have come all this way for nothing.”

Ahead of them, Saint-Lucq slowly turned his head to the left as his horse advanced at the same steady pace. He’d just spotted the dragonnet spying on them from the shadows, and he wanted to leave it in no doubt as to the fact. Intrigued at first, the young female craned her neck to peer out at him from her tree hollow. Keeping her golden eyes fixed on the half-blood as he passed, she tilted her head slowly to one side, then to the other. Could he really see her? Finally, when she was certain that the rider with the strange red spectacles was staring right back at her, she growled at him in hatred and fury before taking flight from her hiding place.

La Fargue and Almades both reacted to the sound of wings flapping swiftly through the forest and, thanks to a flash of lightning, they caught a brief glimpse of the small reptile as she sped away.

Saint-Lucq, expressionless, turned his gaze back to the trail ahead.

“We’re almost there,” he announced, just before the roll of thunder came.

The storm was still in full fury when the trail began to gradually slope upward and led the riders to the crown of a hill, where a large building could be seen emerging from the treetops, like an island in a sea of tossing boughs. It was a former inn which had been abandoned after being partially destroyed in a terrible fire. The windows were boarded up, the roof tiles rattled, and the inn’s illegible sign swung wildly in the gusting wind and rain. An old wall surrounded the courtyard and a well. Only a few charred vestiges remained of the stables, evidently the starting point of the blaze.

The riders passed beneath a stone arch and crossed the courtyard, halting in front of the inn. They cast wary glances at their surroundings, and although they had extinguished their lanterns they still felt exposed out here in the open, beneath the turbulent sky. Remaining in their saddles, all three could see the wavering light coming from behind the boards nailed across a window on the upper floor.

“She’s already here,” La Fargue observed.

“I don’t see her mount,” Almades replied.

“Neither do I,” added Saint-Lucq.

The old captain stepped down from the saddle into a mud puddle, and gave his orders: “Almades, with me. Saint-Lucq, keep watch out here.”

The half-blood nodded and turned his horse around. Almades dismounted as La Fargue, always cautious, loosened his rapier in its scabbard. The weapon was well matched with its owner, being both solid and quite long: a Pappenheimer, named after the German general who had equipped his cavalry corps with it. La Fargue had put its qualities to the test—and had sometimes been tested by it himself—on battlefields in Germany and elsewhere. He appreciated its robust strength and long reach, as well as the guard with its multiple branches and the openwork shell that protected his hand.

The dark, cluttered ground floor of the inn smelled of old soot and wet wood. It was impossible to move without stepping over pieces of debris or making the floorboards creak alarmingly, as if they might give way at any moment. The wind whistled through the gaps between the planks that had been crudely nailed across the windows. A single lit candle had been placed on the lowest step of the staircase leading to the upper floor, the flame guttering in the draughts.

“Wait here,” ordered La Fargue before climbing the stairs alone.

Obeying with some reluctance, Almades unsheathed his rapier and took up vigil below.

At the top of the stairway, the old gentleman found a long corridor with a second candle burning at the end, placed on the worm-eaten lintel of a half-opened door. Other doors—which led into the bedchambers—also lined this hallway. But the door at the end, in addition to being lit, was the only one which was not closed.

Since the way had been so kindly shown to him, La Fargue advanced toward the light. He trod carefully, however, keeping a cautious eye on each door as he passed, his hand resting on his sword. . . .

There were leaks in the ceiling, and in places, he could hear rain pattering in the attic, directly over his head. The roof must have split wide open, although neither he nor his men had noticed this when they arrived, but a section of it was invisible from the courtyard and could have been missing as far as they knew, not having made a point of inspecting it.

La Fargue stopped in front of the door indicated by the candle.

“Come in, monsieur,” said a charming feminine voice.

A scraping could be heard through the racket of the storm, coming from just beneath the rafters. There was a peal of thunder at almost the same instant, but the sound did not escape the keen ears of the captain, who pondered for a moment, understood its meaning, and smiled to himself. And as if to confirm his suspicions, he then detected the clinking of a chain.

He entered.

This room had been spared by the fire, but not by the ravages of time. Dusty and decaying, it was lit by a dozen candles placed here and there. A large bed, of which only the frame and cabled columns remained, took up almost the entire space. At the rear was a door whose outer corner was bevelled to fit against the sloped ceiling just beneath the roof. Tattered curtains swayed before a window with broken panes. Planks had been nailed across it from within, but one of them had been ripped away recently. La Fargue understood why when he saw a dragonnet wend its way into the room from outside.

After shaking its dripping wings dry the small reptile leapt onto the wrist held out by a beautiful young woman who, turning to the old gentleman, greeted him in a friendly fashion.

“Welcome, monsieur de La Fargue.”

She was perfectly poised and elegant, wearing a grey hunting outfit composed of a jacket that clasped her waist prettily and a heavy skirt that was

hitched up on the right to allow her to ride in a saddle like a man. Her attire was completed by a pair of hose, a hat tilted coquettishly over one eye, and gloves that matched her fawn leather boots.

“Madame.”

“You can’t imagine, monsieur, my pleasure in meeting with you.”

“Really?”

“Of course! Do you doubt it?”

“Yes. A little.”

“And why is that?”

“Because my orders could be to arrest you and bring you to France to be tried. And in all likelihood, be convicted.”

“Are those your orders, monsieur?”

La Fargue did not reply. Impassive, he simply waited.

He was nearly sixty years old, a more than respectable age in a century when anyone over forty was considered elderly. But if ordeals, battles, and grief had turned his hair white and left his eyes dull from lost illusions, time had not yet stripped him of his vigour and personal aura. Tall and wide-shouldered, with a proud, confident bearing, the old gentleman remained impressive both in his figure and in the strength that emanated from him—and he knew it. He deliberately resorted to silence rather than words to impose his will on others.

Standing before him, the young woman seemed small and fragile. She met his eyes for a moment, without blinking, and then, quite casually, pointed to a small table and two stools.

“I wager that you have not supped. You must be famished. Sit, please. You are my guest.”

La Fargue took a stool and, as she busied herself with preparations, he was able to look more closely at this woman playing the role of hostess. She was a pale-skinned, red-headed beauty with delicate features, finely drawn lips, a charming smile, and dark, lively eyes. But the old gentleman was aware of the danger lurking behind this pretty face and innocent air. Others before him had learned that lesson to their bitter cost. The she-devil was cunning and had few scruples. And she was said to be a mercenary at heart.

With her dragonnet perched on her shoulder, she brought over a heavy wicker basket, removed the cloth covering it to dress the table, and arranged various victuals between the captain and herself, setting a porcelain plate, a fine-cut glass, and a knife with a mother-of-pearl handle before each of them.

“Would you pour the wine?” she proposed.

Readily enough, La Fargue took the bottle he saw poking from the basket, removed the wax stopper, and tipped the layer of oil that protected the wine from contact with the air out onto the floor.

“What should I call you?” he asked as he filled the glasses.

The young woman, who was amusing herself by feeding titbits to her dragonnet, paused and gave La Fargue a puzzled glance.

“I beg your pardon?”

“What is your name, madame?”

She shrugged and smiled as if he were jesting with her.

“Come now, monsieur. You know who I am.”

“To be sure,” allowed La Fargue. “But of all the names you have employed in the service of France, England, Spain, and the Pope, which do you prefer?”

She stared at him for a long moment and her eyes grew cold.

At last, she replied: “Alessandra. Alessandra di Santi.”

She nodded with her chin at the glass which the old gentleman had not yet raised to his lips. “Aren’t you drinking? The wine is from Beaune, and I believe it to be to your liking.”

“Indeed.”

“So?”

La Fargue gave a drawn-out sigh of restrained impatience.

“Madame, a short while ago you asked about my orders. Here they are: I am to hear you out and then report your words to His Eminence. So speak, madame. My men and I rode for ten hours, almost without a break, in order to meet you here, now. And I am anxious to leave again soon. Even in Artois, the Spanish climate does not suit my health. . . .”

And having said this, he lifted his glass and drained it in a single gulp.

Then he added: “I am listening, madame.”

Thoughtful for a moment, Alessandra watched the old gentleman who was proving so immune to her charms. She knew he found her ravishing, yet her beauty inspired him with no need to please her in return. It was unusual in a man, and merited further study.

Outside the storm continued to rage. The intervals between lightning flashes and the resulting thunder seemed to be diminishing.

“I see that you have a poor opinion of me, monsieur de La Fargue,” the young woman said in a provocative tone.

“My sentiment toward you is of no importance, madame.”

"Come now, captain. What do you think of me? In all frankness."

La Fargue paused for a moment, aware that Alessandra was trying to control their conversation. Then he said: "I know that you are both intelligent and skillful, madame. But I also know that you are venal. And lacking in scruples."

"So you don't believe I am capable of loyalty. . . ."

"Only if you use the word in the plural form. Because your loyalties, madame, have been many in number. No doubt they still are, even if none of them will ever force you to act against your own interest."

"So in short, you don't believe me worthy of confidence."

"That's correct, madame."

"And what if I were to tell you that I have some knowledge of a plot?"

La Fargue raised an eyebrow.

"I would ask you whom this plot threatens, madame."

The pretty redhead smiled. She raised her glass to her charming lips, took a sip of wine, and then declared with utmost solemnity: "I have knowledge of a plot, monsieur. A plot that threatens the throne of France and whose scale goes beyond anything you can conceive."

The old captain gazed directly into Alessandra's eyes, which remained quite calm. She did not blink, not even when lightning struck so close that the inn shook.

"Do you have so much as a shred of proof to support your claim?" he asked.

"Obviously. However—"

"What?"

"However, I'm afraid I cannot proceed any further without some guarantees . . . from the cardinal."

"What do you want?"

"I demand His Eminence's protection."

La Fargue stared impassively at the young woman before rising to leave.

"Goodbye, madame."

Alessandra leapt to her feet.

"Wait! Monsieur, wait!"

Was that a hint of fear in her eyes?

"I beseech you, monsieur. . . . Do not take leave in this manner. Grant me just one more moment. . . ."

La Fargue sighed.

"Is it truly necessary, madame, to inform you that the cardinal is as

miserly in giving his protection as he is in giving his trust, that he only grants them to those who are deserving of them, or that you would need to provide much more than this if you wish to become one of their number? Come now, madame, think! Remember who you are! And ask yourself—”

At that moment a second dragonnet, identical to the first, entered by way of the missing plank at the window. Very nervous, it shook its wings and emitted a series of piercing cries intended for its mistress.

She listened to them, and then spoke quickly: “We must part now, captain. Riders are approaching along the same path by which you came. They shall be here soon, and it would be best if they did not find me.”

“Who are these riders?”

“You shall make their acquaintance soon enough. They are one of the reasons that press me to demand the cardinal’s protection.”

“Abandon this foolish notion, madame. His Eminence will never—”

“Give him this.”

She removed a thick sealed letter from her sleeve and held it out to La Fargue.

“What is this?”

“Take this letter to the cardinal, monsieur. It contains . . . it contains the shred of proof you just demanded. . . . When the cardinal opens it, he will see I am not inventing tales but that the throne of France is truly under threat.”

They heard Almades call from below.

“Captain!”

La Fargue opened the chamber door a crack and saw the Spanish fencing master coming up the stairs at the far end of the corridor.

“Riders, captain.”

“How many?”

“According to Saint-Lucq, at least five.”

Behind La Fargue’s back, the dragonnet uttered a brief hoarse cry. Already, whinnying could be heard outside.

“Seven,” Alessandra informed them in a calm voice. “There are seven of them.”

“Stay right here!” the old gentleman commanded over his shoulder.

He left the chamber, closing the door behind him, and entered a neighbouring room where Almades joined him. Through a gap between the planks in the window, they saw seven armed riders come charging into the courtyard.

“Where is Saint-Lucq?” asked La Fargue.

“Down below. He’s the one who saw the riders coming.”

“Damn it all!”

Leaving the Spaniard standing there, he returned to the chamber at the end of the corridor.

It was empty.

“*Merde!*”

But the little door at the rear was standing half open.

Behind it, some very steep stairs led to the attic. La Fargue climbed them and, pushing through a trap door, he rose up into the deafening fury of the storm. As he had guessed, a portion of the roof was missing leaving the attic open to the sky, directly exposed to the weather. And there he saw Alessandra, already in the saddle, struggling to force a wyvern to turn toward this exit. Its wings spread to keep its balance, the great reptile was resisting, digging its two clawed feet into the floor. It was frightened by the storm.

“THIS IS MADNESS!” the old gentleman shouted.

Keeping a firm grip on the reins that ran along the wyvern’s neck to the bit in its mouth, the young woman smiled confidently at the captain.

“WORRY INSTEAD ABOUT THE PLOT AND PLEAD MY CASE WITH HIS EMINENCE! YOU MUST BELIEVE ME AND, IN TURN, THE CARDINAL MUST BELIEVE YOU. . . . BE PERSUASIVE! THE FUTURE OF FRANCE DEPENDS ON IT!”

“RENOUNCE THIS MATTER, MADAME!” La Fargue insisted, just before a blast of wind almost knocked him over.

Lightning was striking ever closer. Not far from the inn, a tree had burst into flame.

“INFORM THE CARDINAL. WE SHALL MEET AGAIN SOON, IN PARIS.”

“WHERE? HOW?”

They could barely hear one another, even shouting at the top of their lungs.

“TOMORROW EVENING. DON’T WORRY. I KNOW HOW TO FIND YOU.”

“MADAME!”

Alessandra’s wyvern launched into the air and was already flying away into the storm, trailed by the fluttering silhouettes of the twin dragonnets.

La Fargue cursed, powerless to stop her. Then, remembering the riders, he went back down into the inn. Almades followed in his wake as he passed. They reached the ground floor and emerged into the courtyard that was now one immense, slippery mud puddle beneath the deluge of rain.

* * *

His back to the door, Saint-Lucq was facing seven horsemen who, forming an arc, had dismounted and drawn their swords. Clearly expecting trouble, they were dressed for combat, wearing wide hats, thick leather doublets, rough breeches, and riding boots.

Beyond that, they were not human.

They were dracs, La Fargue realised, as a flash of lightning gave him a glimpse of the nightmarish scaly, jowled faces beneath the dripping brims of their hats. Worse still, they were black dracs.

Dracs had been created long ago by the Ancestral Dragons to serve and fight for them. In time they had freed themselves from the tutelage of their creators, but they remained cruel, brutal beings who were rightly to be feared. Dracs enjoyed violence. They were stronger and tougher than men. And black dracs were even stronger and tougher than the ordinary kind.

“We’re here, Saint-Lucq,” said La Fargue from the doorway, moving forward.

Without turning round or looking away from the dracs, the half-blood took two steps to his right. The captain occupied his place while Almades covered their left. The trio had their swords in hand, but still waited before placing themselves *en garde*.

La Fargue noticed that the dracs stood in a pool of black mist that rose to their ankles and did not disperse.

Sorcery, he thought to himself.

“The woman!” the drac facing him snarled in a hoarse whistling voice. “We want the woman!”

He was the biggest and most muscular of the seven, which had no doubt earned him the right of command. His face was marked with bright yellow lines that followed the contours of certain facial scales to form complex, symmetrical patterns that La Fargue recognised.

“Impossible,” he declared. “She is no longer here.”

“Where is she?”

“Gone. She flew away.”

“What?”

While La Fargue devoted his attention to the leader, Saint-Lucq and Almades were watching the six others. The dracs were tense and nervous, obviously making an effort to contain the desire for battle that consumed them. They were almost quivering, like starved dogs forbidden from throwing themselves upon a scrap of bloody meat. Only their fear of their chief held them back. They waited for the order, gesture, or pretext that would unleash them.

"She had a wyvern," La Fargue explained. "You brought the wrong mounts."

"Who are you?"

"Someone hunting the same game as you. But I arrived too late."

"You lie!"

Saint-Lucq had his eye on one drac—younger and more impetuous than the rest—who was struggling to control his aggressive impulses and twitched with each peal of thunder. The half-blood imagined the desire to hurt and to kill eating away at him like acid. The tiniest thing, probably, would suffice to . . .

"Do you really think so?" La Fargue replied to the drac leader. "Do you believe this woman only has one enemy?"

"Who do you serve?"

"That's none of your business. Even so, I could answer if you tell me who your master is. . . ."

The young drac who had attracted Saint-Lucq's attention could by now barely contain himself. His head was drawn in, his jaws were clenched, and he was breathing hard. His glance crossed that of the half-blood, who, with a thin smile on his lips, dipped his own head slightly to stare directly at him above his red spectacles.

"There are seven of us, old man," the drac leader observed. "And only three of you. We can kill you all."

"You can try, but you shall be the first to fall. And for what? For a woman who is long gone, if the storm hasn't already brought her wyvern down. . . ."

As if hypnotised, the young drac couldn't take his eyes off Saint-Lucq. He was filled with a boiling rage and the dracs on either side of him were aware of it. They didn't understand the cause but they, too, started to become agitated.

Then the half-blood supplied the final trigger: a discreet wink and a blown kiss.

The young drac screamed with rage and attacked.

Saint-Lucq easily dodged him, inflicting a nasty sword cut to the face as his opponent charged past. That could have been the signal all had been dreading or hoping for. La Fargue and Almades took a step back and placed themselves *en garde*, while the dracs were about to launch forward when their chief barked out an order that froze them in place: "SK'ERSH!"

For a few long seconds, no one dared to move. Bodies remained fixed in martial stances beneath the pitiless downpour. Only eyes shifted, looking left and right, watchful for the first threatening gesture.

“SK’ERSH!” the drac leader repeated in a lower tone.

Little by little, muscles relaxed and breathing resumed.

Blades were not replaced in their scabbards, but they were pointed back down at the sodden ground. His mouth bloody, the drac Saint-Lucq had wounded ruefully regained his place among his comrades.

Then their leader advanced slowly but resolutely toward La Fargue, who had to wave Almades back before he intervened. The black drac drew so close that they touched chests, allowing him to sniff at the captain’s face from below.

He did so for some time, with a mix of avid hunger and animal curiosity.

La Fargue endured this examination without flinching.

Finally, the drac stepped back and promised: “We shall meet again, old man.”

The dracs retreated in good order and soon vanished at a gallop into the night and the howling rain, taking their black mist with them.

“What now?” Saint-Lucq asked after a moment.

“We return to Paris,” the captain of the Cardinal’s Blades replied. “I don’t know what’s going on, but His Eminence must be warned without delay. The king’s life may be in danger.”