



"EVERYTHING I LOOK FOR IN FANTASY." —GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SWORD CATCHER





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**Cassandra
Clare**



NEW YORK

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Map](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[*Author's Note*](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

Who rules Castellane, rules the whole world.

—Proverb



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. Castelguards 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 dome of the Tully, the glow of the clock at the top of the Windtower, where it brooded over the city’s largest square. The walled area of the Sault, where the Ashkar lived. The Ruta Magna cutting across the city like a dueling scar.

He must have been staring, because Jolivet shook him. They were passing through the North Gate of the Palace, where guests entered. The pennants fastened to the gate-tops indicated which foreign dignitaries were visiting, if any. Right now the blue banner of Sarthe, with its white eagle, fluttered in the salt wind.

Up close, Kel could see that the texture of the white walls was rough, not smooth, and they glittered with bits of crystal. A boy could climb a wall like that, if he was agile and determined. Rough rock meant handholds and

footholds. Kel had always been good at scrambling over the rocks in the harbor. He dreamed of joining the Crawlers one day: pickpockets of the Warren who, it was rumored, could clamber up any wall regardless how smooth.

Jolivet shook him again. “Sit up straight, Kellian Saren,” he said. “You’re about to meet the royal family.”

“The *what?*”

Jolivet chuckled. “That’s right. The King and Queen of Castellane wait on your pleasure.”

Kel wasn’t sure what reaction Jolivet expected. Excitement, perhaps? Instead Kel immediately curled up like a pillbug. Jolivet yanked him upright as they clattered into a massive square courtyard.

Kel had a blurred impression of arched palisades, with the bulk of the Palace rising behind them. Everywhere were the Castelguards, charged with protecting the Palace itself, in red-and-gold livery, bearing torches of perfumed wood, which released scented smoke and bright sparks into the sky. Servants, their tunics bearing the lion blazon of the royal family, were rushing to and fro with salvers of wine, fruit, and chocolates; others bore flowers and arrangements of peacock feathers bound with golden twine.

Kel could hear laughter and chatter from inside the Palace. Two great bronze doors had been thrown open to the courtyard and the soft evening air. A tall man, not dressed in livery, stood in the arch of the doorway, watching Kel and his captor with narrowed eyes.

Jolivet hauled Kel down from the saddle like a costermonger tossing a sack of onions from a cart. He set Kel on his feet and placed his big hands on the boy’s shoulders. There was a touch of puzzlement in his expression as he looked down. “Do you understand what’s going on, guttersnipe? You’re here to do a service for the King of Castellane.”

Kel coughed. His throat still hurt from being sick. “No,” he said.

“What do you mean, no?”

The King was a nearly mythic figure in Castellane. Unlike the Queen, he rarely left the Palace, and when he did, it was for ceremonial events: the Marriage to the Sea, the yearly Speech of Independence in Valerian Square.

He reminded Kel of the lion on the flag of Castellane: golden and towering. He certainly didn't seem like someone who would talk to orphan brats with no connections to speak of.

"No, thank you," Kel said, mindful of the manners Sister Bonafilia had tried to teach him. "I'd rather not talk to the King. I'd rather go home."

Jolivet raised his eyes to the sky. "Gods above. The boy is simple."

"Aristide?"

A soft voice. Soft voices were like soft hands: They belonged to noble folk, the sort who didn't have to shout to be listened to. Kel looked up and saw the man from the doorway: tall, thin, and bearded, with thick gray hair and aquiline features. Sharply jutting cheekbones shadowed hollow cheeks.

Kel realized suddenly why the man wasn't in livery. He wore a simple gray cloak and tunic, the usual dress of the Ashkar. Around his throat hung a silver medallion on a chain, finely etched with a pattern of numbers and letters.

Kel wasn't entirely sure what being Ashkar meant, but he knew they were not like other people. They were able to do small kinds of magic, even though most magic had disappeared from the world after the Sundering, and they were famous for their physicians' ability to heal.

Because they did not acknowledge Aigon or the other Gods, by Law they must live within the gates of the Sault. They weren't allowed to roam freely in Castellane after sundown—which must mean this man was the only exception to that rule: the King's Counselor. Kel had heard of him only vaguely—a shadowy sort of figure who advised the Court. Counselors were always Ashkar, though Kel did not know why. Sister Jenova had said it was because the Ashkar were cunning by nature. But she had said other, less kind things, as well: that they were dangerous, devious, different. Though when Cas had gotten scalding fever, Sister Jenova had run right to the Sault and roused an Ashkari physician—forgetting, apparently, about all the times she'd said they couldn't be trusted.

The man spoke curtly. "I'll take the boy. Leave us, Aristide."

Jolivet raised an eyebrow. "Good luck to you, Bensimon."

As Jolivet sauntered away, the Ashkar man—Bensimon—crooked a finger in Kel’s direction. “Come along.”

And he led Kel into the Palace.

Kel’s first impression was that everything in Marivent was enormous. The corridors of the Palace were wide as rooms, the staircases grander than tallships. Hallways sprouted in a thousand different directions like branches of coral.

Kel had imagined that everything inside would be white, as it was outside, but the walls were painted in marvelous colors of blue and ochre, sea green and lavender. The furniture was delicate and jewel-like, as if shiny beetles had been scattered about the rooms. Even the shutters, carved and painted with images of flowering gardens, were finely wrought. It had never occurred to Kel that the inside of a building, no matter how grand, could be as beautiful as a sunset. It calmed his racing heart, somehow. Surely terrible things could not happen in a place so lovely.

Unfortunately, he had little opportunity to stare. Bensimon seemed unaware he was escorting a child and did not slow his pace to match Kel’s. Instead, Kel had to run to keep up. It seemed ironic, considering he wasn’t the one who wanted to be wherever they were going.

Light blazed from torches bolted at intervals along the wall, each at a level higher than Kel could have reached. At length they came to a massive pair of double doors covered in gold-leaf panels, each carved with a scene from Castellane’s history: the fleet’s defeat of the Empire’s ships, the sinking of Tyndaris, the King presenting the first Charters to the Council, the building of the Windtower Clock, the fires of the Scarlet Plague.

Here, Bensimon finally paused. “We are entering the Shining Gallery,” he said. “Not quite the throne room, but a ceremonial place. Be respectful.”

Kel’s first impression on entering the Shining Gallery was of blinding whiteness. He had never seen snow, but he had heard talk of trade caravans trapped in thick drifts of the stuff when they tried to cross the icy peaks

north of Hind. White, they had said—everywhere whiteness and a cold that could snap your bones.

In the Gallery, the walls were white, the floor was white, and the ceiling was white. Everything was made of the same white stone as the Palace walls. At the far end of the room, which seemed as vast as a cavern, was a raised dais on which a long table of carved and gilded wood groaned under the weight of crystal glasses, alabaster plates, and delicate porcelain cups.

Kel realized he was hungry. *Blast.*

Bensimon shut the doors behind them and turned to face Kel. “In an hour,” he said, “this room will be full of the noble families of Castellane.” He paused. “I assume you know of the Council of Twelve? The Charter Houses?”

Kel hesitated, despite his anger at being called ignorant. Maybe it would be better to let Bensimon think he was ignorant. Maybe they would send him back home. But Bensimon would likely guess he was pretending. Everyone in Castellane knew of the nobles on the Hill, and particularly the Charter Families. Their names and their positions were as much common knowledge as the names of the city’s streets.

“Cazalet,” he said. “Roverge. Alleyne. I can’t name them all, but everyone knows about them. They live on the Hill. They have Charters”—he remembered Sister Bonafilia’s lessons, screwing up his eyes as he reached for the words—“which are, um, special permissions from the King to control trade on the Gold Roads.” (He did not add that Bonafilia had described this as “a rotten plan to make the wealthy more wealthy, of no benefit to the common merchants of Castellane.”)

“And over the seas, yes,” said Bensimon. “Remember, each House has its own Charter—House Raspail runs the trade in timber, Alleyne in silk. A Charter is itself a valuable thing, granted by the King, or revoked at his pleasure.” He sighed, scrubbing his hands through his cropped hair. “We have no time for a lesson, though. I understand that you don’t want to be here. That is unfortunate. You are a citizen of Castellane, correct? But you have Marakandi heritage, perhaps, or Hindish?”

Kel shrugged. He'd often wondered the same, given that his light brown skin was a shade darker than the olive tone common in Castellane, but unlike some of the other children in the Orfelinat, who knew their backgrounds, he had no answers. "I was born here. I don't know about my parents. Never met them."

"If you were born here, then you owe the King and the city allegiance," said Bensimon. "You are"—he wrinkled his brow—"ten years old, correct? You must be aware of the existence of the Crown Prince."

From somewhere in the back of his mind, Kel dredged up the name. "Conor," he said.

Bensimon's eyebrows rose into his hairline of thick gray curls. "*Prince* Conor," he corrected. "Tonight, a delegation from Sarthe will be visiting Marivent. As you may or may not know, there has been unrest between our kingdoms for quite some time."

Sarthe and Castellane were neighbors and quarreled often over taxes, goods, and access to the Gold Roads. Most of the sailors at the docks referred to Sarthians as "those bastards on the border."

Kel supposed that was what unrest meant.

"As always, the King—ever with the best interests of the citizens of Castellane at heart—is seeking peace with our neighbors. Among the political, ah, *treasures* of our city is our Crown Prince Conor. It is always possible that, at some point in the future, the King may wish to form an alliance between his son and one of the royal family of Sarthe. For that reason, it is important that, even at his young age, Prince Conor attend tonight's banquet. Unfortunately, he is indisposed." He looked closely at Kel. "Are you following me?"

"The Prince is sick, so he can't go to a party," said Kel. "But what's that got to do with me?"

"The Prince cannot be seen to be absent from tonight's affair. Therefore, you will take his place."

The room seemed to turn upside down. "I'll do *what*?"

"You will take his place. He isn't expected to speak much. You are about his height, his age, his coloring—his mother the Queen is Marakandi,

as you no doubt know. We will clean you up, dress you as a prince should be dressed. You will sit quietly through dinner. You will not speak or draw attention to yourself. You may eat as much as you like as long as you do not make yourself sick.” Bensimon crossed his arms over his chest. “At the end of the night, if you have performed satisfactorily, you will be given a purse of gold crowns to take back to the Sisters of Aigon. If not, you will earn nothing but a scolding. Do you understand the arrangement?”

Kel understood arrangements. He understood being given a coin or two to run a message for the Sisters, or the prize of an apple or candy for picking up a package from a tallship and delivering it to a merchant’s house. But the concept of a gold crown, much less a purse of them, was beyond comprehension.

“People will know what Con—Prince Conor—looks like,” said Kel. “They won’t be fooled.”

Bensimon slipped something out of his pocket. It was a hammered-silver oblong on a chain, not dissimilar to the one the adviser wore around his own neck. Etched into it and picked out by the flame of the firelight was a delicate pattern of numbers and letters. This was Ashkari magic. Only the Ashkar knew how to manipulate and combine letters and numbers in ways that wrung enchantment from their design; only the Ashkar, in fact, could perform any sort of magic at all. It had been that way since the Sundering.

With little ceremony, Bensimon dropped the chain over Kel’s head, letting the tablet slip below the collar of his ragged tunic.

“Will this make me look like the Prince?” asked Kel, trying to peer down his own shirt.

“Not quite. What it will do is make those who look at you, and already see a boy who resembles our Crown Prince in complexion and size, more inclined to *regard* you as Prince Conor. To hear his voice when you speak. Your eyes are wrong,” he added, half to himself, “but it does not matter; people see what they expect to see, and they will expect to see the Prince. It will not physically change your features, you understand? It will simply change the vision of those who look at you. No one who really knows who you are will be fooled, but all others will.”

In a way, Kel did understand. There were tales of the way magic had once been before the Sundering, when a spell could blow a mountain apart or transform a man into a dragon. Magic now—Ashkari magic, talismans and charms and poultices, for sale in Fleshmarket Square—was a shadow of a shadow of what had once been. It could incline and convince and direct, but it could not change the substance of things.

“I would suggest,” said Bensimon, “that, at this juncture, you speak.”

Kel tugged awkwardly at the chain around his neck. “I don’t want to do it,” he said. “But I ain’t got no choice, have I?”

Bensimon smiled thinly. “You do not. And don’t say *ain’t*. It makes you sound like a mudrat from the Warren docks.”

“I *am* a mudrat from the Warren docks,” Kel pointed out.

“Not tonight,” said Bensimon.

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Kel was brought to the tepidarium: a massive chamber with two stone-bound pools sunk into the middle of a marble floor. A rose window looked out over the nighttime glow of Castellane. Kel tried to keep his eyes on the horizon as he was poked, prodded, and scrubbed with vicious thoroughness. The water ran dark brown into the drain.

Kel thought about whether he trusted this Bensimon and decided he did not. Bensimon said the Prince was sick—indisposed—but Jolivet had come to the Orfelinat a month ago. He couldn’t have known then that the Crown Prince would take ill tonight and need a stand-in.

Nor did the idea that he’d be sent home at the end of the night with a bag of gold make much sense. There was a well-known tale in the Maze about the Ragpicker King, the most famous criminal in Castellane. It was said that he’d once invited three rival criminals to his mansion and fed them a splendid dinner, offering them a partnership in his illegal empire. But none of them had been able to agree on anything, and at the end of the night the Ragpicker King had regretfully poisoned his guests, on the grounds that

now they knew too much about his business. (He paid for glorious funerals for all three, however.)

Kel could not help but feel that he had already been told a great deal that he ought not to know, and was about to learn more of the same. He tried to think of what he would do were he playing a part in a game with Cas, but could imagine no better strategy than keeping his head down.

After the bath, he was dusted, perfumed, shod, and dressed in a steel-blue satin tailcoat with silver links at the cuffs and collar. He was given velvet trousers as soft as mouse's fur. His hair was trimmed and his eyelashes curled.

When he finally went to look at himself in the mirror that covered the whole west wall, he thought, with a sinking feeling, that if he ever stepped out in the streets of the Maze looking like this, he'd be beaten six ways by the Crawlers and run up the flagpole outside the Tully.

"Cease shuffling your feet," said Bensimon, who had spent the past hour watching the goings-on from a shadowed corner of the room, like a hawk planning its descent onto a family of rabbits. "Come here."

Kel approached the adviser as the rest of the Palace servants melted away like mist. In a moment, he was alone in the room with Bensimon, who grabbed him under the chin, tilted his head up, and surveyed him unceremoniously. "Tell me again what you're doing tonight."

"Being C—Prince Conor. Sitting at the banquet table. Not saying much."

Apparently satisfied, Bensimon let Kel go. "The King and Queen know who you really are, of course; don't worry about them. They are well used to playing parts."

Somehow Kel's imagination hadn't gotten this far. "The King is going to pretend I'm his son?"

Bensimon snorted. "I wouldn't get too excited," he said. "Very little of any of this is about you."

That struck Kel as a relief. If everyone important ignored him, maybe he could make it through the night.

Bensimon led Kel back into the warren of corridors that seemed to make up the interior of the Palace. They took a back set of servants' stairs down to a small but elegant room full of books; there was a tall golden door at the far end of the room, through which Kel could hear music and laughter.

For the first time, Kel's heart jolted with real longing. *Books*. The only reading material he'd ever had were a few shabby novels donated to the Orfelinat by charitable patrons, satisfying tales of pirates and phoenixes, sorcerers and sailors, but of course they didn't *belong* to him. The study books—histories of empires fallen, the building of the Gold Roads—were kept locked up by the Sisters, brought out to be read from during classes. He'd been given an old book of tales by a boatswain once, in return for running a message, but Sister Jenova had confiscated it. According to her, sailors only read two things: murder stories and pornography.

These books were as beautiful as the sun sinking behind Tyndaris. Kel could smell the scent of the leather that bound them, the ink on their pages, the bitterness of the stamping mill where the paper was made.

Bensimon was watching him with narrowed eyes, the way a professional gambler eyed a mark. "You can read, then. And you like it?"

Kel didn't have to reply. Two people had swept into the room, surrounded by Castelguards, and he was stunned into silence.

Kel's first thought was that these people were the most beautiful he had ever seen. Then he wondered if it was just because they were so fastidiously groomed, and their clothes were so lovely. He didn't know the words yet for silk and satin and cloth-of-gold, but he knew when things looked rich and soft, and shimmered in firelight.

The King was familiar: unsurprising, since his face was on every coin in Castellane. On the coins he was in profile, gazing to the right—toward unconquered Sarthe, went the tale. But the coins did not show the breadth of him, his barrel chest or wrestler's arms. He made Kel quail with his sheer size and presence. His eyes were light, high-set, his beard and hair a pale mixture of blond and early silvering.