

AILA AND THE MAGIC OF THE FAIRIES

Prologue

Every story begins differently, except fairy tales. So...

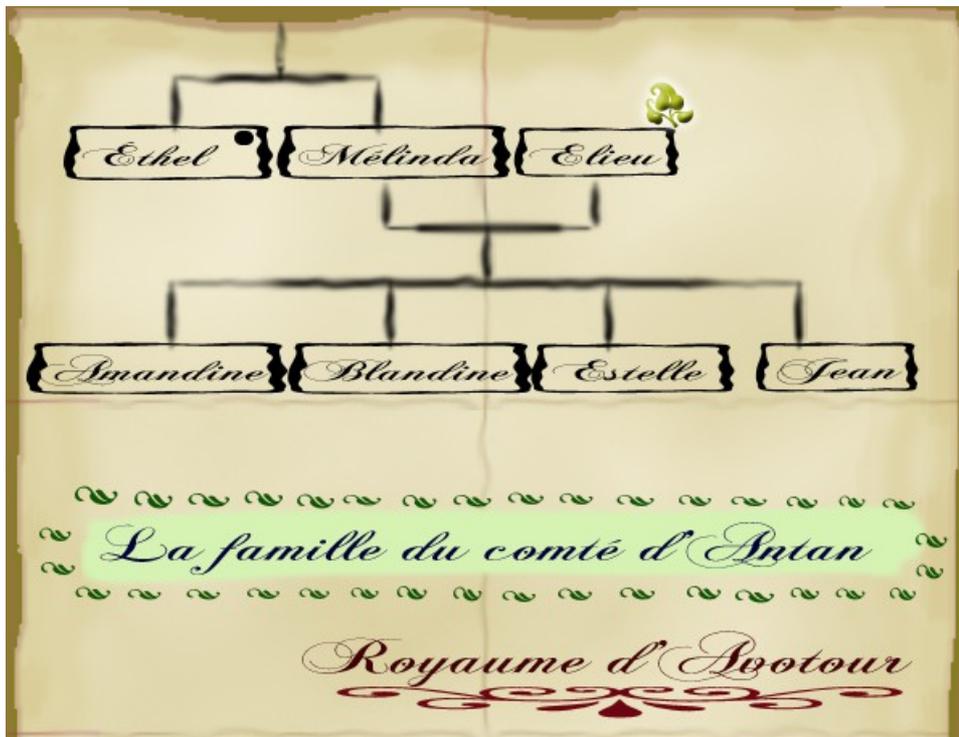
Once upon a time, living in the blessed land of Avotour was most to be sought after. It was bordered by mountains to the West and soothed by the gentle sound of the sea to the East, thus offering a perfect balance in everything, be it between heat and cold, plains and valleys, or meadows and forests. The legend said that for centuries, it had been the land of the fairies. They used to live in harmony with men and it was meant to remain so as long as one single rule was respected: love between a man and a fairy was strictly forbidden on pain of death. Indeed, their bodies were poisonous for each other. Unfortunately, what was not meant to be happened. Two stray souls' exchanging gazes was enough to transgress this formal ban. The fairies, the families and the friends strove to separate them, but in vain. Even though they both knew the dreadful end that was in store for them, they preferred to take the risk rather than lead a life where they would no longer be united. They were isolated, even disowned, and ended up fleeing their country to reach a desert, remote place where twins were soon born from their illicit love. Aware as they were of being doomed by the growing Evil gnawing away at their cores, they gathered their remnant strength to give one last kiss to their offspring, and confided them to Earth's care. Then, hand in hand, they proceeded into the waters of a dark lake, and died together. This is how this forbidden love ended. How could they know they had just turned the future upside down?

The fairies and the men from Avotour, who had been looking for them ever since their flight, only found their lifeless bodies embraced forever at the bottom of the lake. With the power of their magic thoughts, the fairies turned the two lovers into crystal. First, it was designed as a tribute to their passion—despite the sheer folly that had led to it—but also they intended to make sure that such a tragedy would never happen again between the fairies and the men. There was no trace of the babies to be found: it was as if they had never been born. Perhaps they had died of the same evil as their parents.

After this mournful event in the land of Avotour, it was said that the men and the fairies made a grave decision: the latter would go on living by men's side to protect them, but they would become invisible to their eyes, thus keeping them from any temptation. It was also said that one day, the fairies would come back among men to save the world after bequeathing their powers to a human being.

And time went by without a backward glance to this painful separation. In Avotour, the fairies had disappeared for too long so its inhabitants had come to forget all they owed them. There only remained countless legends such as those that troubadours would tell in inns or in public places to the silently meditative—though thrilled—population. Then, time had erased all true memories of the fairies and only a few wild people still believed fairies existed. As a symbol of a past era, they only just appeared in Avotour's motto: "*The Fairies' land Avotour was, is, and shall be*", as well as in some vernacular expressions.

Our tale starts at a time in which some terrible danger cast its shadow over the earth, spreading its endless dark tentacles. It is the story of a young girl like any other—or was she?—that someone, somewhere, had chosen to fulfil an extraordinary destiny. The day was ending and Aila was sitting on a rock. She was quite tall for her age. Her dark hair was plaited in a long braid that hung low on her back. Her black eyes were filled with tears. Although she was sixteen years old already, she was carrying a burden that was far too heavy for such a young damsel. How come her great achievement had been to lose everything the day she was born? How could she right the wrongs that had been done to her? She was the daughter of one of Avotour's bravest warriors and she simply did not exist for him: this was the sad reality she lived in. Her father, Barou Grand, was a red-bearded, blue-eyed giant as tall as he was wide and whose strength was herculean. Twenty years earlier, a small bunch of Hagans—blood-thirsty barbarians from a neighbouring land who were prepared to invade Avotour—had attacked the coach driving Melinda, who was the Lady of the county of Antan, and her companion, Efé. It was quite by chance that Barou should have been riding nearby; he then rescued them, helped by eight comrades-in-arms. In this fight that opposed nine men to twenty, the colossus alone slew ten Hagan warriors under the two ladies' amazed eyes. As for Barou Grand, he could only see the bright black eyes of the dark-haired young woman with the bewitching smile. Once the ladies had been put in a safe place, he won the decisive fights in the last great battles that were to save Avotour. The men fighting by his side would have followed him blindly to their death, while his valour and bravery were becoming the country's most cherished symbols. History reminded the people that it was love that had made the great hero win over the Hagans who, besides, had stayed quiet ever since the memorable victory. As for Barou, he still had to win over the dark-eyed damsel's heart...



Having been praised for his feats by the King and Avotour's population, he was awarded a title and a manor that he turned to tenant farming, so as to settle down in Antan and woo Efé. The latter soon gracefully yielded to the tactful and endearing suitor. She married him a few months later with Lord Elieu and Lady Melinda's blessing. They stayed in the castle where Barou was appointed fencing master, to the people's greatest pride. His fame attracted young lords seeking glory, which led the hero to create a training school for them. Soon enough, Antan was enriched

with a huge training ground, an indoor riding school, a paddock and with a racecourse, as the ring had become too small. All this to show that very little was needed to make dreams of happiness come true. What sort of a daughter would not be proud of such a father?

Today, Aila thought her life was a dead end. And yet, everything could have been so wonderful: she had been a love child. Her mother-- who was such an adorable, devoted person -- and her father had been so eager to cherish an heir. But when an heiress was born, everything fell apart. As soon as he discovered she was just a girl, he erased her from his existence. Right after the delivery, Efée, who was still feeling weak, had not understood how deep and irreparable the break was. But then, she did her best to surround her with love, thus hoping to compensate for her husband's disconcerting behaviour. That is why she had also appealed to all the people she appreciated so as to protect her daughter who was eschewed by her father. Melinda, the lady of Antan, would take her to stay with her own children and treat her as if she were one of them. Hamelin, the magus of the castle, became her private tutor. Although he was only interested in his old books of magic spells, he had been charmed by the baby. Now, was 'charmed' the right word? Wouldn't 'fascinated' be more appropriate? The fact remains it was the first and only time in his life that he found himself gently patting a new-born babe's head. But his gaze had suddenly turned grave... Finally, there was dearest Bonneau, her father's brother, who took her under his wing so as to try and soften her hardship.

Efée, who felt torn between two loves, did not understand how Barou could be both a tenderly passionate husband and so insufferably indifferent to his own daughter. While she slowly recovered from the delivery, she could sense how miserable her husband felt for not having a male heir. Loumie the midwife had firmly advised her against getting pregnant again. But Efée was thinking about it as a means to restore the balance that was missing in her life now. She wanted a family, a true one, with a father for her children. What had happened in the man's righteous, honest mind to make him reject his only daughter? Trying again to understand him, she unfortunately pushed him too far during a discussion, which led Barou to ban any further attempt to broach the subject. She had never seen him in such an overwhelmingly icy wrath. Then, a little more than a year after Aila's birth and despite her husband's reluctance and Loumie's fierce disapproval, she became pregnant again, hoping from the bottom of her heart that giving birth to a son would put everything right.

Efée's daily life was naturally split in two. As dusk approached, she would entrust her daughter to the girl's uncle, after having taken care of her during the day while her husband worked his part as a fencing master. He was her champion, excelling in all fighting skills. He could fence with just any kind of weapons and he was simply unparalleled at fighting with bare hands. Moreover, he was worshipped by his pupils, and respected by his peers. In a nutshell, he was a hero who was only waiting for a son to follow in his footsteps. Efée knew that, she was going to give him the highly expected child. After that, all would be fine. As her pregnancy went on, Efée felt wearier and wearier, so Loumie, who was worried, often visited her to check on her. When the mother to be could no longer stand up, Melinda came everyday to see her and take Aila away to play with her children. Bonneau was always there too. To relieve Efée, he would also take the girl to look after the horses with him, strapping her to his back with a piece of leather that he tied to his chest. Such a view made every passer-by smile, but no one would have dared laugh at him. They all felt respect for this uncle who behaved better than a father.

Bonneau, who was Barou's brother, did not look like him. Although he was tall, he was no colossus. He had inherited a darker shade of hair colour than his brother and was of a slighter build, yet, he equalled him in strength. He was also amazingly nimble and had an impressive sense of balance. It was in his company that Aila's first fall ended in a fresh dung, to her uncle's

greatest dismay. However, all by himself, he managed to wash her up from head to toe and bring her spick and span back to her mother. When Efée heard about the story that had spread all around the castle, she smiled, and then burst out laughing. Bonneau would be the right man for what she had planned. She knew that her choice was good, so, her determination to protect Aila only became even stronger.

Aila had just turned two and a half years old when her mother went into labour. As a worthy future father, Barou rushed to his wife's bedside and would not leave it despite Loumie's repeated attempts to send him away. By the fairies, a man had nothing to do there! However, she grudgingly tolerated his presence, for he was adamant that he would not leave. Finally, the long-awaited son was born and the bliss the couple shared was never to be forgotten. Barou was beaming with happiness, and Efée felt her hopes revive with the little boy's birth. As for Loumie, she was more taciturn than ever. However, the parents were so overjoyed that they simply did not pay attention to her deafening silence.

It took Efée one night only to lose her illusions. Aubin's birth had not changed anything in Barou's behaviour towards his daughter. She still meant nothing to him and Efée felt deep sorrow. She loved her husband profoundly, but his reaction was an unbearable wound in her existence, which he did not seem to be aware of. She was feeling so weak that she decided that she would have now to act for Aila's own good. Despite her feebleness, she wrote many letters, keeping her children by her side to make the most of their presence as long as she could. Only thinking about her plan, she summoned Melinda, then Bonneau, and finally Hamelin. Although her strength was declining, she spent a lot of time with each to convince them to follow her plans. It was more and more difficult for her to breathe, therefore to speak, but she had to complete what she had started: her daughter's future was at stake. Barou was falling into despair as he saw his beloved wife getting weaker by the day. So he skipped his training hours to stay with her. Their love was so exemplary in Avotour that no one would have dared blame him for his desertion. To avoid her husband and daughter's running into each other, Efée had asked her loyal Loumie to conceal Aila whenever her father came. Thus apparent peace was preserved in their home.

Efée knew she would die soon; it was now just a matter of hours. She had done everything in her power for Aila, but her heart was still weighing heavy, because she was going to abandon her husband, her son, and her little daughter who would need her tenderness so much. How would her dearest Aila manage to grow stronger and more confident in Barou's shadow? When life became but a slight breath in her bosom, Efée cast a last glance at the man she had loved more than her own self, her hand laid on his. She smiled to Aubin that Barou was carrying in his arms, and under her rugs, she held tightly a little cloth doll against her breast, as a symbol of the love she felt for her daughter. Suddenly, her inner light stopped glowing, plunging those who loved her in deep darkness...

The whole castle was in mourning. Barou was nothing more than a giant overcome by pain. However, surrounded by his friends and holding his son tight, he decided to move on for his child, forever keeping in mind the memory of his wonderful wife.

Once she had been driven away from the family house for good, Aila settled down at Bonneau's place, in the small cottage adjoining the stables. Her little heart was trying hard to understand where her mother had gone to, why she had a brother she could not live with and a father who never laid eyes upon her. As she could not come up with an answer, she withdrew into herself and stopped talking. However, Bonneau dedicated himself to his niece, doing his

best to make her feel at home. He converted half of his only room into a bedroom for her. He isolated it with a folding screen Melinda had offered him. He gave her his own bed and his cupboard to furnish it. Then, after boring a hole in the ceiling, he fitted out a tiny place in the garret to sleep in, getting to it thanks to a ladder. Every day he took care of her as if she were his own daughter, feeding her, dressing her, taking her out with him. She would go everywhere with him: look after the horses, and watch him practise kenda, which was originally a sort of stick for combat, that was not a weapon widely used in the realm of Avotour. He spent countless hours every evening tirelessly repeating figures he could even perform on horseback, under Aila's uncomplaining scrutiny. Indeed, she never missed a scrap until she was too tired not to fall asleep. He taught her to ride, tame and look after horses. He taught her about simples, concoctions and massages. Without uttering a single word, she memorized and reproduced everything.

It was more difficult for Hamelin, the magus, to get used to giving reading lessons to a silent child. However, when she raised her huge intelligent eyes –which were as dark as her mother's— he knew that her silence did not prevent her from understanding. Then, he went on teaching her as if everything was fine. From time to time, he would check what she expressed with her gaze then he would move on or explain again. She could very soon read and count. He gave her books to read within a week that she brought back the next day. If he was more than surprised at how quick she was at reading or understanding concepts, he nonetheless accepted it as a fact and shared his knowledge more and more enthusiastically. As he was easily irritated by children's empty babbling, he was more than satisfied by this silent girl... He decided to teach her everything he knew. He taught her about plants, anatomy, the languages of the neighbouring countries, history, sciences, and all the other subjects he had a passion for. Aila followed him bravely through the maze of his erudition, even when he jumped excitedly from one subject to another.

Despite her silence, Aila was accepted and appreciated by everyone. She was growing up to be a helpful and pleasant girl, but she seldom smiled and hardly ever laughed. Even though everyone regretted this state of things, they assumed her silence was the result of all the hardships she had been through. Only her father's pupils rejected her without batting an eyelid. They were on Barou's side and if their master had cast her out, it meant she was not worthy of their attention. She could not come too close to the training area, for whenever she did, she was scoffed and jeered at, and she simply could not answer back. But she could not help it: she would try to catch a glimpse of her heroic father and see Aubin grow up, for the boy never left his father by so much as an inch. He was his – small -- shadow. Although her brother did his best to imitate Barou, following his every movement and attitude, Aila was certain that he would never be as talented as their father was. How on earth did she know that for certain? She could not tell, but, to her, Aubin's soul did not seem to irradiate the same energy as the one that is cast by great men's aura.



Chapter 1

Aila's life took a different turn when she was twelve years old. One day, as she was strolling on her own, she came across a young apprentice of Barou's named Dudau. The fifteen-year-old boy, who was a vain and pedantic womanizer, decided that it would be amusing to play some trick on her. However, Aila never quite knew what he had intended to do to her. Indeed, as he approached with a scornful, triumphant smile on his face, he heard a child's voice firmly exclaim from behind: 'Stay away from her!'

Dudau turned round only to see Aubin -- who was not even ten years old -- with his fists up, ready to fight. He burst out laughing sardonically and strode towards him, forgetting that the child was Barou's son. This was one of that bumptious creature's numerous flaws: He did not think things through. Aubin rushed onto him and found himself lying on the ground, knocked down with a perfect hook. It can be hard sometimes to face the facts of life...Dudau was proud and stupid, but also strong and efficient. It could all have ended like this, but the thick boy -- who must have had some score to settle with Aubin -- started kicking at him, pushing him around on the ground. Then, once again, Dudau heard a voice behind him, but this time, it sounded husky and hoarse: 'Stop this straight away!'

He turned round and saw Aila coming towards him, she had tied a knot in her skirt. A lascivious smile spread across his face, but it soon turned into a grimace, for after one kick in his groin, he doubled up in pain. Then, raising high her clasped hands, she hit him in the back of his neck and finished off with a kick in his head. The apprentice collapsed. Aila remained motionless for a while, trying to control her wild heartbeats and recover the full use of her wobbly legs. She staggered up to Aubin who had been watching the scene fully conscious though unable to move, and she knelt down. First, she examined her brother's spine, slowly moving her hand up to his neck to detect a potentially nasty bruise or a slipped disc. Aila had performed these gestures so often with horses that she did it naturally. Then, under Aubin's scrutiny, she did the same with each of his limbs to make sure that they were all sound.

She then took his face in her hands to check his jaw and skull. 'Can you stand up if I help you?' she asked with a faltering voice. He nodded, still unable to speak. He should not have moved, for a sharp pain spread to his skull, making him feel nauseous. They had to wait for the hammering in Aubin's head to recede before he could stand up supported by Aila. He did not go far. A few yards were too much for him, his stomach tightened and Aubin, gripping on Aila's arm, emptied its contents. Despite his current situation, he had this silly notion that losing a fight and vomiting the first time he met his sister was not the reunion he had ever dreamt of.

'That was very brave of you. Thank you Aubin' she said. Aila's voice sounded like a whisper after all these years of silence and a few tears started to roll down her cheeks. She was only a twelve-year-old girl. Still unable to utter a word, Aubin contented himself with stroking her hand tenderly, and he was glad to see a shy smile on his sister's face, though he could not return it.

They walked away together, Aubin leaning against his sister, and reached the stables in no time. Fortunately, they did not meet anyone. She went to the cottage and came back with an ointment she applied softly to the parts of his face which were turning into various shades of purple.

'I'm going to give you this pot. You'll need to apply some of its contents three times a day and massage it well' Aila said gravely. 'As it is all a little painful just now, you'll do it when it is less sensitive. Thanks to this ointment, your skin will quickly turn back to its normal colour. You might also apply some to your other bruises.' She smiled at him and he was painfully mouthing 'thank

you' when his eyes caught a glimpse of a shape behind Aila. His sister noticed the expression on his face and, without turning round, she whispered:

'Hi, Bonneau, could you tell me where Mael's liquor is?'

'It's on a shelf at home.'

'I'll go and get it' she declared before vanishing, thus leaving Bonneau and Aubin alone.

'What's happened to you, my boy?' his uncle asked, kneeling next to him. Aubin swallowed hard while Bonneau started performing the same gestures as Aila, examining his body.

'It's Dudau, he tried to assault Aila.'

'And you beat him, didn't you?'

Aubin noticed Bonneau's look of appreciation, then he met Aila's gaze, who was standing just behind him and begging her brother not to mention her.

'No, I didn't' he whispered lowering his eyes.

'I did' Aila confessed. Bonneau, frozen on the spot, finally turned round and frowned at her.

'Oh' he just said. Then he turned back to Aubin and added 'We'll have to make up a convincing story to avoid getting into trouble with Barou. Dudau gave you a thrashing, I interfered. We'll stick to this, no need to tell more lies. Besides, I think Dudau will prefer this version to confessing he was beaten by a girl who is three years younger than him. Anyway, Barou won't like it and Dudau won't be around much longer.'

'Here, Aubin, this is some liquor that kills the pain' she explained coming close to him. 'You'll need only a spoonful of it four times a day. Use it only when you're really in pain because it will make you feel drowsy.'

'Come, my boy' Bonneau said standing up, 'I bring you back to Barou. You'll lead me to Dudau on the way so that I can pick him up.' Aubin stood up helped by Bonneau and cast a regretful look at his sister.

'Farewell, Aubin, I'll never forget what you did for me'

'No, don't say farewell, Aila. From now on, I'll come back to see you often, I promise.'

Still staggering, the young boy left, supported by Bonneau. Dudau was sent away immediately, forgetting to mention the truth about the whole story.

Life went on unchanged, but strangely enough, Aila often felt her uncle's gaze lingering on her. He had not asked her any questions after the fight, but she knew he was wondering over it all. She had almost made up her mind to go and give him some explanation, only, used as she was to being silent, she became mute again. So, apart from Bonneau and Aubin, no one knew she had spoken.

A few months later, in the early morning, as she was wandering around before going back to the castle, Aila heard a noise behind her. So, she turned round and saw Aubin approaching.

'Hi, Aila! I thought I'd come back to visit you sooner!'

'Aubin? What are you doing here?' she said defensively.

'Training has been pushed back this morning, it will only start in an hour. I had some time off, so when I saw you, I thought it was a good opportunity to chat with you. I haven't been able to since – well, since Dudau. Father is always on my heels. I used to do that with him as if I was scared to lose him, you know, but these days, it's the other way round. Only, now I'd really like to be on my own...'

'You speak more than the first time we met.'

'Of course, my jaw works again! And you, no one knows that you're back into a talking mood, it seems'.

'You're right, it's easier to keep silent.'

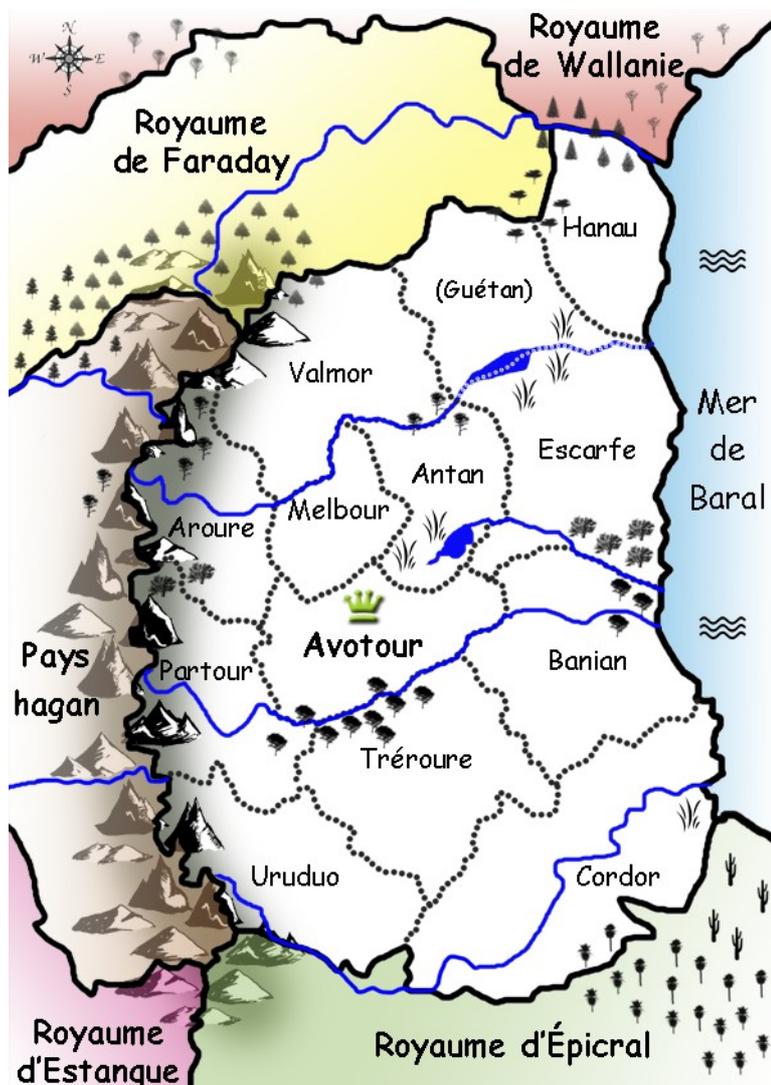
'Than say what you feel? I know that.'

They both felt awkward. They were staring at each other as if they had never met before – which was almost true – discovering each other without daring to come closer.

'Why do you want to know me?' Aila asked bluntly. I guess I'm not your father's favourite subject of conversation.'

'No, indeed you're not. It's no use talking about it then. Yet, you're my sister. And everybody keeps talking about you! I'm curious, I want to know who you are and why you're not part of my life.'

'I'm not the one who can tell you, I don't have a clue. I think your father became like this the day I was born, and no one knows why or has daigned to tell me.'



'That is stupid because with you, father would have a greater fighter than me to succeed him, you're really good at it!' He heaved a heavy sigh and shrugged.

'Oh, you're not that bad either, but you're afraid of hurting people, so it can't work' she explained softly.

'How do you know?' he asked almost aggressively.

'Because I'm curious too, and I wanted to see you. You're quick and efficient. You'll be able to gain the strength that you lack by practising, but you don't really like fighting and it shows.'

'Whereas *you* like a fight!' he replied laughing at her.

'Yes, I have enough hatred stored up to do so.' Aila clenched her teeth.

'Oh, I understand, I'm sorry. I have to go now, but we'll see each other as soon as I can sneak out' Aubin added.

'I trust you and – I'll be glad to see you.'

They smiled at each other before leaving. That was the day when Aila finally decided she would never be silent again.

The second major event occurred almost two years later. Bonneau had to deliver an important message and come back quickly with an answer. The country seemed to be shaking now because an ominous mood was floating over it. The message contained a non-aggression pact doubled with a mutual protection treaty between Antan and the neighbouring county of Melbour, as well as a pledge of allegiance to Sérain, king of Avotour. It was an essential first step to struggle against the counties that were ready to turn against the kingdom. Bonneau had taken with him his young niece, who had become a highly skilled rider, and had taken advantage of their being in Melbour – the main city of the county—to buy a new kenda from a specialist. He knew how important the message was, but he had not thought that it would cause so many reactions, and neither had the people from the castle. On their way back, one day away from Antan, they found themselves surrounded by seven mercenaries who were sure they could crush them very easily. As it was Aila who was carrying the message for Elieu, Bonneau said that she should flee while he kept them busy.

‘No, I won’t!’ she simply answered. Then she added ‘Hand the new kenda to me. I think I might be able to do something of it.’ Bonneau seized it and threw it to Aila before taking out his own. The leader of their enemies scoffed at them,

‘What do you think you’ll do with this stick?’

‘Bonneau, shall we?’

Her uncle wanted to ask her if she knew what she was doing, but he refrained from it. He chose to trust her.

‘Let’s go, Aila.’

They both gave a wild scream, then, after spurring on their horses, they dashed at the mercenaries who were blocking the way. As intended, they caught them by surprise. Their stunned enemies saw a thin old man and a young girl swoop down on them at high speed. Some quickly understood their big mistake when they came tumbling down to the ground after being hit by a kenda, and were then trampled by the nervous horses. That was only the first charge. Bonneau had unseated two men while Aila had defeated one. Once the circle had been broken, the uncle and his niece galloped away. The leader, who must have been slyer than the others, had stepped aside from the fight. He quickly gathered up the few men he had left and they all went in chase of the fugitives. As they were aware that they had only taken a short lead over them, Aila and Bonneau sped up. However, the horses would not be able to keep such a pace for long and the mercenaries would soon catch them up. They had to find a solution.

‘Bonneau, this way!’ Aila shouted, showing him a wall of bushes to their right.

They hid their horses behind a thick copse. Aila took out a bow she put together fast, showing how she now mastered that art, and she got into position to shoot at the enemy. At the sight of her, Bonneau was rooted to the spot.

‘Can you hand the arrows to me? I don’t have the time to set up my quiver’ she said, indicating the six arrows sticking out of her bag. Bonneau nodded. She focused, aimed and fired once, then immediately, at her command, her uncle gave her another arrow that she nimbly placed in her bow. Two mercenaries fell down while the two others who were still standing took to their heels and fled to the undergrowth.

‘I failed to kill the leader! Did you see that? So as not to be identified too easily, he swapped his hat with one of his followers! What do we do now? They have bows and won’t be taken by surprise again...’ Her uncle was looking at her fixedly, obviously unsure whether he ought to scream at her or just sigh powerlessly. Finally, he chose to heave a sigh and whispered,

‘I know it’s not the right moment to ask you this, but when did you learn to shoot arrows? How long have you had this very rare bow that can be dismantled? When did you learn to fight with a kenda?’

‘Bonneau, I can see you’re angry and I understand that. Please, let me explain everything to

you later, I promise I will', she begged.

Bonneau took a deep breath.

'Let's leave the horses here. I hope that you can walk silently and that you're ready to kill again...'

Aila blushed without answering, and then nodded. They walked for a short while and squatted to hide behind a small bush. They were on the watch. Her uncle whispered, 'As we won't come to them, they'll come to us. Get ready to shoot and wait for me to give you the signal. You let me take the lead, all right?' He was frowning as he uttered these last words, and Aila nodded again.

Time went by. They remained silent and still. Aila was growing numb. The sun was setting when a small noise was heard to her right. Neither Bonneau nor Aila moved. Then, nothing happened for a few endless minutes, except for the twilight that cast wider and wider shadows over the wood.

'We could kill the horses for a start', a voice murmured. The flash of an arrow appeared in the light of the setting sun, and Bonneau nudged Aila who shot towards where she thought the archer was. A muffled scream vibrated through the air and down went the arrow, along with a body that fell in a thud. Aila realized that Bonneau had vanished. However, right in front of her, there stood the mercenaries' leader, his sword pointed at her, an inch away from her throat. She was trapped.

'Farewell, my dear', the man said laughing nastily.

In a desperate move, Aila plunged down to her right, feeling the tip of the sword scratching her skin, and soon her blood trickling down from her wound.

'Come, Aila, we can go now' Bonneau's voice asserted.

Aila came out of the bush. She cast a look at her uncle who was taking out his knife from the last mercenary's chest and then wiping it.

'Can you do that, throw a dagger?'

Aila shook her head.

'I'll teach you, then. As for now, I'm going to heal the nasty gash I can see on your neck, so that it won't turn into an ugly scar.'

Bonneau was putting the last branches in the fire. They had found a little hut in the depths of the wood, away from the area where the confrontation had taken place. He shared a few slices of dry meat, some bread and cheese with her.

'Now you know what facing death feels like. It's an amazingly tense moment in the life of a human being. Unforgettable... After that, you choose to live depending on your experience. What did you think about at that moment?'

'I thought about mummy. I wondered if she, at least, would be proud of me...'

'Of course she would. Your mother was an extraordinary woman. She would have admired her daughter becoming a woman like her.'

'But she did not kill anybody!', Aila replied briskly.

'Yes, she did. When your father rescued her, she killed a man who had escaped us unnoticed and was threatening Melinda. No one knows this story at the castle, and it will remain a secret.'

'And you know about it because you were there, weren't you?'

'Yes, I was.'

'And the two of you fell in love with the same woman, didn't you?'

Bonneau stared at his niece, surprised by her insight.

'Yes, that's true, but she saw him first. I've never stopped wondering if she would have fallen in love with me, had she seen me before him...'

'Is it the reason why you never married and welcomed me into your own house?'

She raised her big dark eyes to him, expressing her yearning to know the truth.

'Yes, er, and no...At first, I took you with me to please her, but then the reason changed. It

became my own choice, and I've never regretted it. You're the child I'll never have and above all, you're her daughter, which matters a lot to me. Besides, you're amazing. Now, where did you learn to use a bow?

'It's Aubin who...The bow is the present Lady Melinda and he offered me for my birthday. It was also our secret...'

'And what about the kenda? I guess that it was enough training for you to watch me and then practise secretly'

'I've been watching you even since I was a child, so, it seemed easy to me to imitate you.'

'As for risking your life? Where did you learn that?'

'My dear uncle', she said acidly, 'when you're the daughter of a man who has never acknowledged you, when too many people regard you as dirt because the great hero must have good reasons to behave like this, when you know deep in your heart that you're the warrior he is looking for and that he'll never lay eyes on you...'

Her voice broke. Tears started rolling down her cheeks. Bonneau stood up, thinking she would be better off on her own, but then he changed his mind.

'Your father's just a man. And he's just your father... Many people have rallied you, giving all their love to a girl who is not their daughter. They don't deserve your contempt, they deserve your respect. Your duty is to be equal to their devotion!'

He heard a soft sob, then, turning round before disappearing in the dark, he added,

'It is not that easy to kill for the first time. Take your time to put up with it... I'll start your training as soon as we get home.'

Once they were back to the castle, Bonneau never mentioned what had happened. He took to giving intensive training to Aila, correcting her flaws, improving her perception, her sharpness, her level of analysis and sharing all his knowledge with her.

From that day on, Aila's life seemed to take a quicker pace. The young girl repeated the same activities, all punctuated by the bells chiming every other hour from six in the morning to ten at night, only now, there were Bonneau's training exercises every evening. More and more often, she would go on missions with him, and they sometimes ran into bandits, or some enemies. To kill was not always necessary, but when she had to, she did it without flinching. She also spent time with Melinda and her daughters, visiting the neighbouring villages to give bread and attention. Aila had specialized in healing, thanks to her knowledge of horses and plants. However, she did it reluctantly, without really understanding why... She also still attended Hamelin's lessons and discovered new books, new stories, especially concerning fairies whom, to her great surprise, he seemed to worship. As she could read and count now, she really did not understand why Hamelin insisted so much on her cramming her head with his whole library -- well, not the *whole* library. There was this special area where the magus never picked up a book. Surely, this part was dedicated to the fairies' magic. Aila obediently waited for the moment when she would be allowed to discover those forbidden pieces, but as she thought that neither fairies nor their magic existed, she did not feel any eagerness. She appreciated those moments of peace and solitude when she could increase her knowledge of plants and go deeper in her reading of legends. Although she would never have confessed it, she was particularly moved by the story of the Dark Prince and the White Lady, as well as by the tale of the lovers forever entrapped in a crystal coffin lying at the bottom of a lake in a remote land. Until then, she had never dreamt of being a knight's lady-love, but lately, she had begun to think about it. Unfortunately, the only boys who came near her were her brother and the servants of the castle. It was highly unlikely for her heart to start beating wildly. All the other boys, who had given themselves heart and soul to Barou, would never have dared cast a glance at her. All but one, actually! There was this boy she had come across for almost a whole year until he completely disappeared and was never to be seen again. Every time they had met, he had greeted her with

a smile. He must have meant to laugh at her. She had overcome that episode too. It would surely be more difficult with Melinda who, as she saw the young girl behind the fighter, had taken it into her head to change her clothes that she deemed were too masculine. The lady of the castle gave her a few skirts and blouses and, for her fifteenth birthday, a beautiful ball dress, like the ones her daughters wore. Of course, this new attire was not practical when she was riding, so, trying not to offend anyone, Aila decided to cut her skirt in the middle, from top to bottom, in the front and in the back, and then, she sewed each part on the inside together. Once finished, the piece seemed like some pair of wide trousers: it looked like a skirt, but was as comfortable as them. When Melinda saw through the trick, Aila got scared of her reaction, but, true to form, she laid her ever so gently benevolent eyes on the girl and said teasingly

‘Has the same fate fallen on the ball dress I offered you?’

Aila flushed.

‘Oh, no, Lady Melinda, I would never dare —’

‘Tell me, is this attire comfortable?’

‘Oh yes, it is! It’s really convenient when you ride’

‘Well, I should try it!’

Behind her, Amandine, Blandine and Estelle, the damsels of the castle, were giggling discreetly, looking at Aila knowingly. And that was it. Melinda and her daughters soon wore ‘Aila skirts’ for all their outdoor activities. The people around them enjoyed the situation immensely, and this light-heartedness was much appreciated, especially when this new fashion spread beyond the boundaries of Antan.

The state of the country was getting worse. The quarrels between the counties were growing more and more frequent, as if each of them only waited for the other to have their back turned so as to betray and backstab them. Again, some Hagans were gathering at the frontier. As they were aware of the fragility of the kingdom, they were making the most of some people’s weakness and of others’ perversity. The people of Antan were surrounded by insecurity like by some malevolent shadow, and inexorable hardships were looming on the horizon. Elieu and reliable men often went away to try to save what could be saved, but the inhabitants of the castle were justly worried. One night, a piece of news plunged them into a state of affliction: a man had tried to assassinate king Sérain of Avotour. Even though the king had survived, his wife and his youngest daughter had perished tragically next to him. A week of mourning was decreed in the county of Antan. Melinda seemed more affected than any other person. Her desperate expression had not escaped Aila. As soon as she had a free moment, she went to knock at her door. A long time elapsed before she was invited in. Aila shyly pushed the hand flag and entered. She quickly perceived all the efforts Melinda was making to keep her composure.

‘What do you want, Aila?’

Aila felt silly. Who was the evil fairy that had brought her here?

‘I just wanted to know if there is something I can do for you. You look so miserable...’

All of a sudden, Melinda’s face changed dramatically and her eyes filled with tears. The next moment, they freely started to roll down her cheeks. Aila came closer and she tenderly took the lady in her arms, all the while keeping silent as she used to do so well. Melinda sobbed quietly. Then, she pulled herself together and held Aila tight before gently pushing her away but still holding her hands.

‘Oh I wish Efée were still with us’, she sighed, ‘I miss her so much. She had been my friend since I was a child and we shared so many things. You know, when you entered, within the space of a minute, I thought it was her. You look so much like her, maybe a little taller: the sound of your voice, your dark eyes and hair, this noticeable dynamic gait, this way of staring at people as if you could see in them all the things they are not aware of. There is so much of her in you... She was an exceptional woman and neither you nor Barou knows how extraordinary she was. You

are fearless like her, Aila, and she would be so proud of you.'

Melinda had never talked to her about her mother with so much passion. Aila knew about their friendship, but she felt there was something more, something even Barou was unaware of.

The lady went on:

'You are wondering what the cause of my great sorrow is, aren't you? Well, the queen who died was my sister, and her daughter was my niece.'

Aila gasped but managed to stifle a cry of surprise. She let Melinda proceed.

'Apart from Lord Elieu, no one knows I was born in the royal family and, more importantly, no one must learn this secret. I left Avotour court a long time ago and mark my word, I will never set foot there again. My home is here, in Antan...'

Melinda was no longer looking at Aila. She seemed to be talking to herself, staring at the sky through the window.

'Efée was my bodyguard and she fought like a wild cat with grace and energy...'

Melinda turned to face her, intently watching her reaction. Aila felt her heart race. Her mother, a fighter! The room started to swirl.

'Sit down, Aila.'

The lady pointed at an armchair beside her. Aila fell -- rather than sat -- down on it. She took her head in her hands, trying to recover. She felt she was drowning. Her mother! The sweet, feminine, and frail woman she had imagined as her opposite was actually a warrior! But why hadn't she been told before? She looked like her mother! This discovery was overwhelming her. All this time her father ignored her, she had desperately been seeking some family heritage. Now, all of a sudden, in the most unexpected way, she had found it! She wanted to jump for joy all around the room. She looked like her! She had taken after her! At last, for the first time in her life, she had the feeling she was living for real, as a complete human being. At last, she could identify with someone, be linked to a family... She had never felt such intense emotions. Raising her head towards Melinda, it took her some time to ask:

'Why today?'

Melinda stared at her gravely.

'Because our world is becoming more and more fragile and we will soon need women like you. Because I made a promise to your mother which I have a mind to fulfil, whatever the cost, and telling the truth is part of this promise, even if it is just a first step.'

'How come *he* knows nothing about it', Aila asked, thinking of Barou.

'It is all because of infinite love. Your mother would never have risked hurting her beloved husband by showing she was his equal. *He* was her hero, she had become the hero's wife out of love. It was her choice but I disagreed with her. We quarrelled more than once about this subject. I would not accept to see her step back for a man, even though the man was Barou. Yet, I ended up respecting her decision. She wanted to live like any other woman, be a mother and stop thinking of those fights she could not bear anymore.'

'Like Bonneau', Aila murmured to herself.

Melinda heard her.

'I have always wondered if Efée would have fallen in love with Bonneau if she had seen him first instead of Barou... Well, I don't think she would have, she chose Barou because it was meant to be that way...'

Aila smiled faintly when she heard this. Bonneau had asked himself the same question in front of her and she had finally reached the same conclusion. Aila cleared her throat.

'Lady Melinda, why did she accept his attitude towards me? Did she love me less than him?'

The tears she had managed to fight back so far were now burning her eyes. Melinda heaved a sigh. Again, she looked up to the sky as if it were the most fascinating sight in the world, then she turned back to Aila.

'I had often asked this question to myself until she gave me the answer. Our friendship did not

always go smoothly, and we would often argue about some subjects like this one. She could be unbending in her resolutions. There is just one thing I can tell you and which I am certain of, even though you might not understand it today: the day will come when her love for you will be stronger than the love she felt for Barou, and on that day, it will be Barou's world that will totter, not yours.'

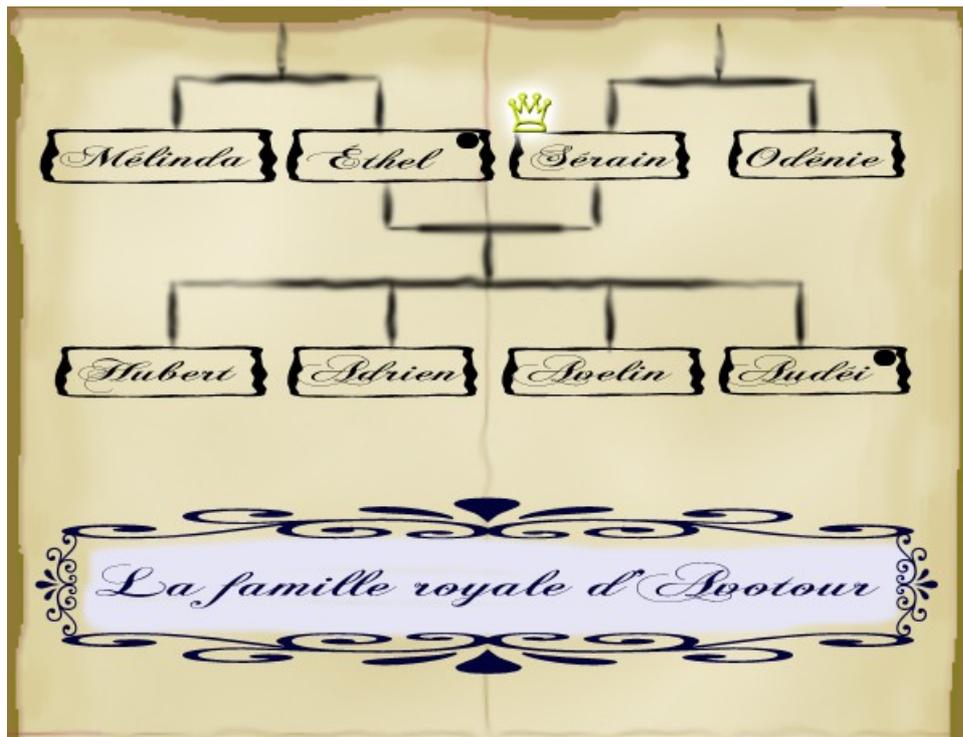
Silence fell in the room. Aila busied herself scrutinizing each and every detail of the bare room. In its centre, there stood a modest bed with a warm, cosy duvet which had lost its colours. The canopy had disappeared, although she still could remember it. In the same way, she realised that other ornaments were missing, including the magnificent inlaid sideboard she had admired so much when she was a little girl. She opened her mouth to ask Melinda about it, but as soon as she met her gaze, she gave up the idea. She decided to take her leave of the lady.

'Aila, one last word.'

Aila turned round, waiting. Melinda went on,

'Barou is a man I deeply respect. He never suspected what your mother imposed upon herself, and I wanted you to know it. If his behaviour towards you is most incomprehensible, he still is dear to my heart. And, if one day I have to hurt him, it will be out of duty, not out of hatred. Now, you can go back to attend your affairs.'

Aila looked intently into Melinda's eyes before closing the door on those enigmatic words.



Chapter 2

Aila was grooming her horse in the stable when Aubin bolted in excitedly.

'Aila, Aila! Where are you?'

'Over here, in Lumière's stall!'

'That's amazing news! Two sons of the king are coming to find trained fighters who will have to protect the royal family! Do you realise they're coming to recruit them here!'

'Oh, that's great...'

'Of course it is! You're the best! No one knows yet and you'll be able to prove it to everybody!'

'Oh, and who would want a girl as their bodyguard? Aubin, you're talking nonsense.'

'They'd be fools if they didn't choose you!'

'Wait, wait. Can't you imagine Barou's reaction if the men he's been training with passion weren't selected? He'd have a stroke!'

Aubin looked at her fixedly.

'What are you afraid of, Aila? Is it him? What else can he take from you?'

'Aubin, stop this!'

She started to brush down her horse again. Aubin caught her arm, forcing her to look at him.

'Aila, you haven't answered my question!'

'Leave me alone now, will you? Let me go!'

She briskly freed herself from his grip, and she strode away, her face expressionless.

The night was falling in Bonneau's main room which was modestly furnished with a table, two benches, a cabinet and a folding screen that concealed Aila's bedroom. A fire was softly crackling in the fireplace while Aila watched it thoughtfully. She heard Bonneau's footsteps on the flagstones in front of the house, then the latch clicked and the door slowly creaked open.

'Aubin came to talk to me. You have to do it, Aila. As far as I know, these competitions aren't forbidden to girls.'

'What are you talking about, Bonneau? I don't want to take part in this competition which is no more than a pedigree contest!'

'You're a fighter! The way is clear for you, you're the best! You can lead the life you choose now, forget about Barou.'

'Look at you! Who are you to sermonize me? How come such an outstanding warrior like you ended up as a groom? You should have been a fencing master like Barou! Then why are you satisfied with your being an underling, a mere shadow in your brother's glittering light? Explain, mister adviser!'

'This is the life I chose and I can give you my reasons very simply. Once you've seen such slaughters as I have seen, once you've cut off as many limbs as I have, once you've been splashed by as much blood as I have been, maybe you'll want to change your life. Maybe you'll feel like merging into the masses so that all those you come across with won't remind you that you killed more people than you meet in a year staying here. I have chosen to change my life, to become a shadow in the light as you say, and I have no regrets. But you, you're different! Whether you like it or not, you are your father's daughter and you were born to fight! So, do what you're destined to do! I'll help you. Meet me tomorrow at the first bell on the racecourse. They will test riders. I'll be waiting for you.'

Bonneau walked out, leaving Aila even more thoughtful than when he had entered. She no longer knew what to think or what to do. Did all sixteen-year-old girls have to make such

important decisions as her? All of a sudden, she felt so young, so inexperienced. She thought about her mother. If *Efée* had lived, to what extent would her life have been different? Would she look like *Melinda's* daughters whose only preoccupation was to be elegant and find a nice husband? No, she was being unfair, if they did not use weapons, *Amandine*, *Blandine* and *Estelle* fought everyday with their mother against poverty which was spreading in the country. *Aila* had accompanied them so often on their visits that she knew how courageous they were when they were confronted to adversity and diseases. That was how she had understood what had become of the hangings and valuables of the castle. They had been sold to relieve the misery that was so obvious as soon as you stepped outside of the castle. She knew that they were not wearing the wide trousers she had created only for the fun of it, but also for the sake of economy. *Aila* felt almost ashamed of the magnificent dress that she carefully kept in her little cupboard. No, it would really be unfair to regard them as airheads. Yet, when they were confronted to sufferings, they could face them together whereas *Aila* was all alone. She lay down on her bed with her clothes still on, her hands clasped behind her head, waiting for sleep. She vaguely heard *Bonneau* come back and put something near her.

The next morning, when *Aila* woke up, the first thing she was aware of was the odour of new leather. She opened her eyes and saw a pair of trousers and a waistcoat lying on the chair beside her bed. She appreciatively felt their soft and smooth texture with the tips of her fingers, delighted by the delicate light brown colour, even though she knew that the leather would soon tan in the sun. By the fairies, it was really beautiful. She poked up the fire in the fireplace, had a quick breakfast and took off her clothes. Once the water in the kettle was warm enough, she poured it in the tub and started to wash. Pulling her wet hair back as the glistening drops were winding down her skin, she caught a glance of her reflection in the shifting water. Once she was dry, she put on the trousers which were a little wide, already thinking about what belt would fit best. Opening her cupboard, she took a shirt that *Bonneau* had offered to her some time before. It was beige and would suit perfectly well. How odd! Why was she so intent to look elegant even though she had always despised such stylishness? After adjusting her waistcoat, she turned down the collar of her shirt and tied her belt. She plaited her hair carefully and put her boots on. Once on the threshold, she stopped abruptly. She turned round and walked up to the fireplace, set fire to a twig and lit up a lamp. She hesitantly approached the tub in which the water had become still, and she looked at her reflection in this makeshift mirror as if for the first time. She watched her dark eyes, her frowning eyebrows, her slightly hollow high cheekbones, and her resolute mouth with its tight lips: she looked like her mother. She tried to visualize her, imagining small differences in her own reflection. She wished she could remember her. She held out her hand above the table and caught a leather strap she tied around her neck. Another present from her uncle. She had been wrong throughout. She had always had a generous, loving father who had always been there for her: *Bonneau*. Why had it taken so long for her to realize how important he was in her life? He had given her everything, but what had *she* given him? Yet, it was not over, she could still make good, she was sure of it. Today, she was going to pay homage to him. She would be the best for him, she would compete right to the end. She had made her decision. She blew out the lamp, walked out and turned towards the stables.

When she arrived there, *Bonneau* was preparing *Lumière*, *Aila's* horse. It was a three-year-old black mare that was full of life and promises. As soon as she had seen it, *Aila* had singled her out among all the others. He turned to the girl and gave a whistle of admiration.

'You look gorgeous.'

'As gorgeous as my mother?'

Bonneau pulled a face showing she had scored.

'I mean, as gorgeous as my warrior of a mother?'

'Oh, so you know. Lady Melinda told you, didn't she?'

Aila nodded.

'I was going to tell you this morning, but she beat me to it.'

'What would you have said about her, then?'

'That you're as amazing as her, maybe even more! But it's true you started earlier.'

He sighed slightly. She came up to him and gave him a kiss. He startled and looked up to her. She swallowed hard.

'You're the father I wish I had had, Bonneau.'

As she was not satisfied with her way of putting it, she rephrased:

'No, I didn't say it right. You're the best father I could ever have, and I'm really sorry I've only just realized it.'

She threw herself into his arms and he was soon hugging her. They remained thus for some time before parting, still holding each other's hands.

'Hurry up, go and explain to Lumière the feat you expect from her, she loves it when you tell her stories', he said cheerfully.

'You flatterer!' she retorted.

She approached her horse, softly brushed her face against its nostrils and started to whisper all she wished her to do and how sure she was they would win the competition together.

'It's time to go now', her uncle said.

They exchanged glances, smiling. Bonneau put his powerful, large hand on her shoulder.

'I trust you. Even though I don't know how, you'll manage'.

When they arrived, a great number of riders were waiting near the training field. Aubin was among them, but neither Aila nor he dared greet each other because of Barou. She felt on her rather than saw her brother's look of approval, and it was heart-warming as she knew the worst was yet to come. Elieu and Melinda were present, as well as Hamelin and a man in his thirties – maybe less – that Aila identified as one of the king's sons, surely the heir to the throne. A tall, lean man was standing next to him. He had piercing eyes and a long white beard. He must have been the royal magus. Other people were there too but Aila focused on Barou, trying in vain to capture his attention. Bonneau spoke:

'I am the former fencing master of Avotour and I request from you to allow my pupil to participate to the competition that will select the fighters.'

Barou was petrified, but he soon pulled himself together.

'No way', he hammered out fiercely.

'Why not?' a newcomer followed by his horse intervened.

Barou turned white with rage, but contained his fury in front of the royal colours that the newcomer was wearing.

'My lords, my Lady, miss, I am Avelin of Avotour, the king's second son and, to put it modestly, the best rider in the kingdom. As you can see, I am ready to ride with you. It is true that I have asked for this extra test to compete with your champions.'

He bowed, smiling ironically. Aila felt like laughing out loud when she saw the faces of the people present. Their expressions varied from utmost surprise to strong disapproval. What a sorry sight! Only Aubin looked cheerful, and Aila hoped Barou would not notice.

The latter finally said:

'Place yourselves on the spots you have been appointed, but do not forget to move back a row, the first being naturally sire Avelin's.'

Of course, Aila was not even mentioned and found herself relegated on the most external part of the racecourse, not too far from Aubin. She would have to play it tight. She carefully observed the horses that were now stamping on the starting line, trying to locate the riders who would be the most difficult to compete with. Barou resumed speaking:

'I shall now remind you the rules: you will have to complete five laps. The first five riders only will be selected. You will be assessed on your ability to cope with the distance, on your tactics during the race as well as on your mastering your horse. Naturally, your rank at the finishing line will prevail. The first signal will warn you to get ready to go at the second signal that will follow shortly.'

All the riders concentrated and started off at the second signal. From the outside, Aila had to ride a longer way to keep on a level with the others. Having understood that the prince's presence had increased every competitor's motivation, she strove to keep his figure in her field of vision, which was easy as he was wearing the king's colours. She felt Lumière ready to dart off, but she chose to remain near the central group of riders. Yet, she decided to keep some distance with them so that they would not feel she was a threat and might even forget her and let her pass them more easily. During the next lap, as the gaps were widening between them, she slackened her grip a little to give more freedom to her horse and get closer to the leading riders. Little by little, she had drifted to the centre of the racecourse, which made each lap shorter. Avelin was caracoling in the lead at an even speed. When they reached the third lap, still holding Lumière, she positioned herself behind her brother who was doing very well. Finally, as soon as she started the last lap, she gradually loosed the reins so her mount could now take longer strides and overtake Aubin. Then, she caught up with those who were riding close behind the prince, yet she did not dare to overtake him. When they saw her, they spurred on their horses, but Aila was inexorably breaking away from their group, getting closer and closer to Avelin. The latter realized this and slackened his hold so his horse leapt forward and was now galloping at a very high speed. Lumière was not outdone by it and accelerated too, bridging the gap between them as she rode on. The other riders who had been left behind were struggling to catch up with them. She imagined how angry, how offended they felt but she could not care less, she was just flying with Lumière. The race was coming to an end. Aila slackened her reins and the mare, with a last floating stride, arrived on a level with the king's horse on the finishing line. Little by little, the competitors came to a stop and she leant her head on Lumière's neck, patting it and whispering:

'Sweet Lumière, you're the best, you're a bird, an arrow! You're my angel.'

'Congratulations, you are an amazing rider. Is there any other field in which you excel?'

She sat up on her saddle and looked down on Avelin who was staring at her with his ironic smile.

'I excel in all fields', she thrustured drily, pouting.

Avelin's smile widened.

'So, I hope I will have the pleasure to check some of them. I shall see you tomorrow.'

He turned round. Without really knowing why, Aila started turning bright red. Fortunately Bonneau arrived exultant, which released her from her awkwardness. He seemed to be floating on a wave of joy, endlessly repeating that she was the best. All the competitors gathered around the lord of the castle who gave the names of the winners:

'First, Aila Grand; second, Emelin Gingon; third, Aristide Héran; fourth, Aubin Grand; Fifth, Aimé Faller. This extra competition has permitted to reveal the elite of our riders and it may count greatly for the final selection. The joust will start tomorrow.

Barou spoke after him whereas everybody was beginning to leave.

'Let me inform you that only four of the winners aforementioned will take part in the next competitions, for, to be allowed to participate, they will need their fathers' authorization. So, I announce that Emile Gerdain, who arrived sixth, will be able to join the next competition as the fifth winner.'

Aila's heart leapt to her throat. After feeling overjoyed for winning and having Aubin selected too, this was a terrible blow. Her voice suddenly boomed:

'What sort of a father would refuse that his child became a fighter? Where is such a man? Let

him step out and show himself! Let everyone see what a coward he is!

Bonneau laid his hand on her shoulder while a heavy silence fell on the crowd. Aila was choking with rage.

'Where is the man? Let him dare look at the one he's forbidden to live ever since she was born! How can he pretend to be a father when he's been nothing but a malevolent shadow hanging over her life? Look at me Barou! Look at me instead of showing me nothing but the face of cowardice!'

Without even casting a glance at her, Barou turned his heels and walked away, while Aila kept on yelling, held back by Bonneau:

'You Coward! That's all you are! You don't even have the courage to look at me! Look at me! I hate you! You hear me? I HATE YOU!!!'

Her father had gone. Overwhelmed by the violence of her feelings, Aila stopped talking, she was shaking all over. She heard Bonneau talk to her but could not understand a word and she felt he was pulling her arm to take her away. She could no longer see anything, she was all alone and the world had come tumbling down around her. She made out Aubin but would not look at him. She refused his pity or anyone else's sympathy. She just wanted to disappear.

Emerging slowly from her inner emptiness???, Aila realized she had come back to Bonneau's house. Her uncle made her drink a homemade herbal tea and she started to recover from her fit of madness.

'It's over. It's all over. You'll never be proud of me.'

She burst into tears, cursing her weakness, blaming the horrible herbal tea for it.

'Enough, Aila, pull yourself together! It's not over. Tomorrow, you'll have to participate to the next competitions.'

'Why?' she enquired with a glimmer of hope, 'Has he changed his mind?'

Bonneau shook his head.

'You heard what he said, he will refuse to give me his permission and I need it!'

'Calm down, I said!'

Bonneau's snappish voice echoed in the silence of the cottage and she had to make a great effort of will to obey his command.

'First of all, I haven't waited until today to be proud of you; secondly, I have a solution to your problem, even though I'd rather I'd have sacrificed my right hand than resort to it.'

Bonneau's eyes were wet with tears. It was the first time in her life that she saw her ever so quiet and even-tempered uncle look so upset. What was going on? He had left her for an instant and was now coming back with a small trunk he had taken from the cupboard. She had never seen it before and could have sworn it was not there the day before.

'This is Eféé's legacy, the token of her tenderness beyond death, the proof of her love and trust for you.'

He opened the lid, plunged his hand into the treasures the box contained and took out a small portrait. He stroked it softly before handing it to Aila.

'This is her, this is Eféé. She was seventeen and was as amazing as you are.'

Aila was more than moved when she discovered her mother's face. They looked like each other so much that she could hardly believe it.

'Mummy', she murmured.

'And this could be useful to you for some special event.'

Bonneau delicately took out of the trunk a magnificent dress in raw silk which seemed amazingly light and soft. It was simply extraordinary. Aila admired the pearls finely sewn at the neck. She touched it lightly with her fingers, imagining her mother on her wedding day. She must have been so beautiful. As if reading her thoughts, Bonneau added:

'She was radiant. Barou and she formed a real dream couple. They were meant for each

other.'

'How could mummy afford such a dress?' Aila asked all of a sudden.

'It was a present from Queen Ethel as a reward for the services Efée had done. She held your mother in high esteem, you know--'

'Bonneau, wait a minute, will you? You're telling me that she was in the queen's service before being in Melinda's? I don't understand. This morning, you introduced yourself as the former fencing master of Avotour. How come you two had never met before the attack of the coach?'

He remained silent and thoughtful.

'Bonneau!' Aila insisted.

Her uncle rubbed his face before clasping his hands at the level of his chin.

'It is a little complicated. Actually, I think we were dogged by ill luck. Efée was born in Melbour. She loved her freedom and was considered as a real tomboy by the family. One morning, when she was about ten, she decided to spend the day riding with one of her father's men who were in charge of watching over her. So, away they went. It was the smoke they saw in the distance that warned them that something wrong was going on. Only, when they reached the burning castle, it was too late. Her whole family had been burnt alive. This was one of the Hagans' first misdeeds that would lead to the great battles. That day, Efée decided that from now on, she'd always be there to defend her loved ones in the face of danger. The queen, who had welcomed her after the tragedy, realized how determined she was. While her elder daughter, Ethel – the one who'd become King Sérain's wife and died with her child – was studying and learning her obligations with her mother at the royal castle, her younger daughter Melinda was attending the girl school in Havens. Efée was sent there. That's how they met and struck up a friendship. Efée became Melinda's bodyguard as the latter travelled a lot and didn't spend much time in Avotour. So I only knew her by name. Moreover, no one knew that instead of simply educating herself like the princess, she also had learnt to fight. I thought she was just a lady-in-waiting, serving the queen and her daughter. I don't even remember ever seeing her back then. I was a fencing master in two different places at the time, first in Avotour, but also in my county of birth where Barou was still living. She'd leave when I arrived in court, and conversely. By the fairies, we were not meant to meet. Just before the great battles, I had to travel up and down the land to find men ready to fight and join the army. I even enrolled Barou. Then, shortly before joining our troops, I made a detour to go to the castle and do my report to the king. The queen and a woman who was turning her back to me were about to leave. Out of curiosity, I tried to see who Ethel was discussing with. At that moment, Efée turned round and I was able to distinguish her face for the first time. I still remember that moment, my heart was beating wildly. Unfortunately, I did not have time to catch my breath to say something, for they were already in their coach ready to set off. I never saw her again until the Hagans' attack.'

'I'm sorry, Bonneau.'

'Why? Because she never became my wife? I was sorry too for some time, but then, I became reasonable again. She kept telling me I was the older brother she'd always dreamt of. I often wondered if she knew how much I loved her. Anyway, she was too subtle not to suspect it. She gave me a great place in her heart as her indispensable, loyal friend; thus preserving both Barou's and my pride. That was all she could offer to me and I am glad of it, for it brought me much happiness. Today, when I think of her, I remember how close we were and the respect and trust we shared. Moreover, as I told you already, I had the great honour to educate her daughter.'

Bonneau smiled at her and then went back to fumbling in the trunk.

'Here is the last memento Efée had of her parents. Actually, it did not belong to her. Her family had offered it to the queen as she was staying in Avotour. Ethel had kept it with much care, and when your mother got married, it became one of her wedding presents in memory of her parents and also as a sign of friendship.'

Bonneau took out a case. He opened it slowly, revealing jewels consisting of a pearl necklace, matching earrings and a tiara. The latter was very simple: it was made of a gold chain in the middle of which hung a pearl meant to be displayed on the forehead. Aila was speechless; she did not even dare touch the jewels, contenting herself with observing the vivid reflection of the lamp on the pearls, which made them sparkle brilliantly. Aila's uncle put an end to Aila's fascination by shutting the case.

'And now, here is the most important thing.'

Aila wondered what could be more beautiful than Efé's portrait, a magical wedding dress or extraordinary jewels. With a shaking hand, Bonneau handed out a paper folded in four.

'It is a letter from your mother. I never opened it', he announced with a quavering voice. 'I leave you with her.'

He stood up and slipped out. Aila was watching the letter lying on the table. She was petrified. She could not feel anything and just stood there staring at it, unable to move. Suddenly, she felt terribly scared. What if her mother had decided to disown her like her father had done? No, that was impossible, not after giving her such a legacy! She closed her eyes, trying to quieten her wild beating heart. At last, she managed to overcome her fear, stretched her fingers towards the letter she soon seized and opened.

My dearest Aila

Time must have elapsed since I parted from this life. I am sorry if you have felt lonely, growing without me. I hope you will forgive me for abandoning you in this way.

If you are holding this letter in your hands today, then your existence has reached a crucial point. What I feared the most has happened: you are going to have to stand up against your father. If I failed to make him change his behaviour towards you when I was still there, I will not let him destroy your future now that I am dead: I will be in death the brave mother I did not manage to be when I was alive.

I have made a decision before I die: I want you to be able to choose your life, despite Barou. That is why I entrusted you to your uncle. He will be a caring, loving father for you, the best you could ever have. I know that the love he felt for me has turned into infinite tenderness, and I share the same feeling for him. I have sometimes wondered what my life would have been like if I had seen him before Barou. In all cases, know that I have adored your father and I would have gone to the other end of the world for him. The feelings I have had for Bonneau were very different, but just as deep. He is the brother I never had a chance to see as a grown man since he died in a fire. I know his courage, he will respect the promise he made after Aubin's birth. For my sake, he will protect you, like Melinda and Hamelin. What they promised is something that will make them suffer, for they love Barou as much as I do, and they run the risk of breaking their brother's or friend's life. Yet, I know for certain that none of them will fail you when the time has come.

There exists an ancient law which is still in force. It is so rarely used that it has almost been forgotten. Yet, I know it and have decided to resort to it now to free you for good from your father who never behaved like one. It is called "Patrico Determago". It stipulates that a child who has been neither protected nor supported by his father (or mother) can request to choose another father. For this, the mother and three relatives have to write a testimony. I have done my part, so all the conditions have been fulfilled and you will be able to have another father. If Bonneau is also the one you think of, choose him, for it will bring him such an honour that it will compensate the sorrow he will feel betraying his brother.

As for your father, my heart is bleeding at the thought that he failed to overcome his incapacity. You are not responsible for his attitude. The reason why he never managed to acknowledge and love you can only be found in the story of his life. If one day you feel like understanding him, go and seek for his truth. What you will find may give you the strength to forgive him and give him another chance. He is a wonderfully great man, but I know I will not manage to convince you, whatever I may do or say. You have now to create your own future.

My sweet little angel... How much I love writing those words I will soon be unable to whisper to you! Your birth and those few years I have spent with you belong to the best moments of my life. I am trying to gather as many memories of you and Aubin as possible so as to die serenely. Barou will be by my side, I love him so much, and so will Aubin and you. I am holding your doll tightly in my hand, you know, the one whose hair is made of wool. I have asked Bonneau to bury me with it, without telling Barou. I hope you will not miss it. Melinda will find you another one.

I have done what I had to do. Now, I can go.

I love you, Aila.

Your mother, Efée.

Aila felt her tears running down her cheeks as she was overwhelmed by a feeling of distress. She had noticed that her mother's handwriting was becoming more and more hesitant as she read on. Efée seemed to have thought that it would be an easy choice to make, but how could she ask his father's closest friends to betray him for her sake? She could not do this to Bonneau, his own brother, she could not expect from him to give up the last member of his family! Lady Melinda had said quite significantly that she regarded Barou highly and that any evil action against him would cause her pain. Her mysterious words had become crystal clear now. What about dear peaceful Hamelin? How would he cope with a confrontation with Barou? Would he outlive it? No, she could never do this to all those she loved. She collapsed on the table, more desperate than ever.

Bonneau's hand on her neck brought her back to reality. She had fallen asleep on the wooden table, the letter lying in front of her, her sleeves wet with tears.

'What's wrong, Aila?' Bonneau asked tenderly.

'I can't ask this from you, his friends, his own family. I just can't!'

'Yes, you can, Aila. We all made a promise to Efée, and we will keep it.'

'But Barou will never forgive you!'

'I made this choice a long time ago, and I will never change it.'

'What if he cast you out? What if he died because of it?'

'Those who can't adapt to their world die, that's life.'

'But Bonneau, he is your brother!'

'Yes, but he has gone too far, and even though I love him deeply, I chose to protect you from him.'

'What about Melinda, and Hamelin?'

'They made the same decision, accepting all its consequences in full awareness. We all made the promise. But the only person who can make the request is you, and this is what we are expecting from you. You have to do it, Aila. Efée cannot have done all this in vain!'

She watched him intently before looking away.

'I need some time to think about it, Bonneau. I need air.'

She rushed out of the house.

Aila was pensively sitting on a rock in a field at a little distance from the castle. What was she going to do? What would become of her? What would she have to give up to be able to move on? She was nervously tearing off leaves from little twigs she then piled up beside her. She was well aware that the choice she would make would change her life dramatically. Lady Melinda, Hamelin and Bonneau had made up their mind a long time ago, they had already accepted to lose Barou. She had not. If she stood up against her father, she would forever lose her last hope to have him love her. What was then the right choice to make? How could let it put an end to her wild hopes? Her head was buzzing with all those questions while their answers escaped her. The sound of footsteps made her raise her head, and she saw Aubin approaching her.

'I've been looking for you, Aila. I'm sorry.'

She leaned her head against his chest before sitting up.

'Aubin, we need to talk; there are serious matters I have to share with you.'

Aubin stared at her inquiringly, and then sat down beside her.

'Tonight, Bonneau gave me mother's legacy.'

She looked into his eyes gravely.

'Now I have a portrait representing her. Have you ever seen her, Aubin?'

'Yes, father keeps one too, it is hidden in a drawer. I would have been a good thief, for he never knew I often looked at it.'

Aubin laughed softly.

'She left me her wedding dress and her jewels. They are beautiful.'

'So? When will you be wearing them?'

Aila gave a smile, but quickly became serious again.

'Aubin, she wrote me a letter.'

She saw her brother's eyes open wide and felt his disappointment for never having had one. She cheered him up.

'Don't worry, she certainly wrote one for you too and you'll have it when some important event happens in your life. When you wear her wedding dress maybe?'

They both laughed strainedly.

'Aubin, it is a very painful legacy that she left me in her letter. I don't know what to do.'

'Go on, tell me.'

'There is this law that allows me to change fathers.'

'Why not, then?'

'Aubin, to do it, four relatives have to testify that he is incapable of giving me his love, protection and support.'

Aubin turned pale.

'Do you want me to testify?'

'No, I don't, Aubin. Mummy took care of everything before dying. Bonneau, Lady Melinda and Hamelin have already written their testimonies, or are going to.'

Aila felt overwhelmed by her conflicting emotions again.

'What about the fourth testimony?' Aubin enquired becoming more nervous.

'She wrote it.'

A heavy silence fell. Aubin shook his head.

'By the fairies, it's going to be a terrible blow for him. His friends, his wife...' Aubin murmured.

'And there's you too, Aubin. Your life is going to be upset too if I do it.'

'What do the testifiers say about it?'

'They made a promise to mummy. They will all keep it despite their esteem for Barou. They are ready to accept the consequences, whatever they may be.'

'By the fairies...' was all Aubin could say.

'What do you think I should do, then?'

'I don't know, Aila. Father is going to be devastated to see all his closest friends let him down, and his own wife having turned against him...Devastated...'

'I'm aware of it.'

Aubin leapt up. Aila felt a pang of despair as she thought he was leaving, but he started to pace up and down briskly, sighing and mumbling to himself. Aila's eyes followed him, resisting as much as possible the tension in the air. Suddenly, she had made her decision.

'Aubin!'

Aubin stood still in front of her and spoke first.

'You've got to do it, Aila. Father can't stop you from becoming what you're meant to be. He's an admirable man. If only you knew how important he is for me...'

His voice broke.

'I know it, Aubin, and I don't even understand how you could fulfil your role as a brother while loving him so much.'

Aubin laughed mirthlessly.

'You have charisma like him, even though you're not aware of it. You see, he knows that I'm just an average fighter, that I'll never follow in his footsteps, but still he encourages me and I'm improving, I know I am, little by little. He could have disowned me too; on the contrary, he has remained a confiding and loving father. I know why his men are ready to follow him even to their death, because I would too, without hesitating. What obscure reason in his life could account for his behaviour towards you? I don't have the slightest idea. I've tried to find out though, but Aila, I've failed.'

Aubin stopped talking, panting, his face contorted. His words were as many stabs against himself.

'If I were you, I would do it. I know how painful it is to grow up without one of your parents' love. *You* have grown up without either's love, while he was alive and living so close. Do it, Aila, but don't ask me to do more.'

He turned his heels and ran away.

'Aubin!' she shouted.

But he was already too far away.

Night had covered everything for a long time now when she reached the cottage. A plateful of cold soup and some bread had been displayed on the table for her, but she was not hungry. She put her things on her chair, slipped in her big shirt then under her cool sheets, and fell asleep instantly.

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