

# AILA AND THE MAGIC OF THE FAIRIES

## Prologue

Some say that the first sentence of each story is its gateway towards another world. Fairy tales, however, use the same time-worn words as passage. Hence...

Once upon a time, there was the land of Avotour, where life shone with joy. Rimmed by mountains in the west and fringed by the sea in the east, this blessed realm reflected a just balance in all things: warmth and cold; plains and vales; fields and forests. Legends recounted that fairies had lived in harmony with mankind for centuries, an accord which could have lasted an eternity so long as it was enforced by one, single rule: love between a fairy and a man could not be. Sadly, what was forbidden befell: a sole gaze sufficed for two mislead souls to wander astray and disobey the most absolute command. Passion blossomed. Fairies, families and friends sought to have them part ways, but to no avail. The lovers did know of the horrendous fate that awaited them, as their very bodies distilled venom to one another, yet they elected it over an existence of separation. Isolated and disowned, they eventually fled from their country toward a distant and secluded place where their illicit love gave birth to twins. Their condemnation was then a certainty: the malice that devoured them from the inside was worsening with every day that passed. So they kissed their offspring one last time while they still could, entrusted them to Earth, and, hand in hand, immersed themselves in the water of a black lake. It was there that they bonded forever in death.

Thus ended this impious love. As to whether the two lovers had fathomed that they had just irreversibly bent the course of fate, none could tell.

The fairies and men of Avotour who had been scouring the land for them since their escape found their lifeless corpses beneath the waves. The trespassers were resting at the bottom of the lake, their arms and legs locked in an everlasting embrace. With but a thought, the fairies turned the lovers' flesh into crystal in a homage to their flame, despite the insanity that had fueled its light. Their inert silhouettes would thereupon be an eternal admonition for all to behold, so that such woes would never blight the realm again.

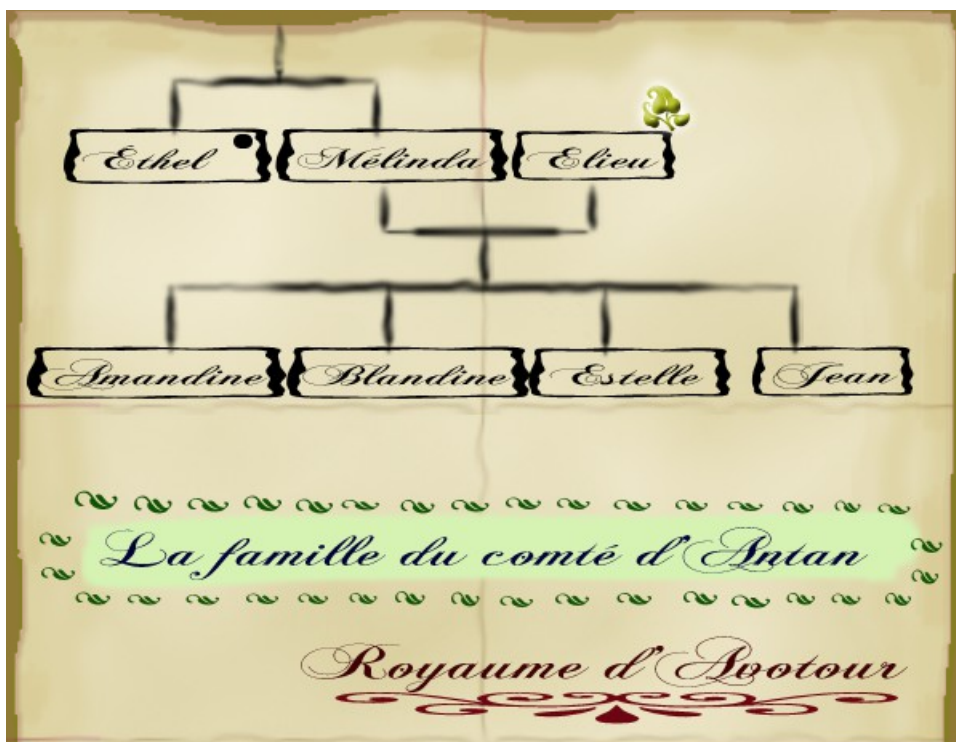
Of the babies, no one found the faintest track; it was as if they had never been born. Perhaps they had ultimately perished to the same bane that had claimed their parents?

It was fabled that men and fairies in Avotour took a grave decision in the wake of this tragic event: the winged folk would remain by the humans' side as faithful guardians, yet become invisible to their eyes lest temptation arise once more. It was also said that, one day, the fairies would return amongst mankind in hours of peril. Upon imparting their powers to a human being as a reminiscence of their ancient alliances, the winged folk would preserve the world from destruction.

And then life began to flow anew, unmoved by this dolorous rift... In Avotour, the fairies had disappeared for too long a time, and all the good its inhabitants owed to their unseen protectors faded out from collective memory. Their trace still lingered in boundless tales, akin to the ones troubadours chronicled before the reverential silence of the crowd gathered in public squares and inns. Thus, all remembrance of the winged folk dwindled as time went by, living in the distant echo of a handful exalted minds alone. As if the symbol of an era bygone, their presence was solely to be found in the realm's motto: *"The land of fairies Avotour was, is and*

will be”, and in a few popular sayings.

It is while a terrible danger was casting its shadow on Earth, under the guise of a thousand tentacles as dark as a moonless night, that our story began: a tale of a young girl like many others. Or so it seemed, for someone, somewhere, had retained her for an exceptional destiny. The day was drawing to a close as Aila sat on a rock. She stood fairly tall for her age and her black, braided hair fell on her back. Today, tears were dawning in her onyx-tinted eye. The burden she was carrying felt far too heavy for a girl who had not known more than sixteen winters. How had she managed the feat of losing everything on birth? And how could she mend all the wrong she had suffered? She was daughter to one of the most valorous fighters in the realm of Avotour. And yet this tangible fact proved not enough for her to be worthy of his attention. Such was her grim reality. Her father, Barou Grand, was a giant of a man with a fiery beard and an azure gaze; a being of force as tall as he was wide, enlivened by the might of a leviathan. Twenty years prior, a small contingent of Hagan barbarians had made an incursion in Avotour. These bloodthirsty pillagers from beyond the western fringes had long been yearning for the taste of conquest, and on this day their sight was set on the county of Antan. They ambushed the manorial coach whereas it was carrying Lady Mélinda and her closest follower, Eféé. The whims of chance decided that Barou, who was happening by amongst a nine man strong fellowship, heeded the call and rushed to the rescue. Although outnumbered by the twenty foes he and his companions were facing, Barou single handedly slew ten Hagans. The noble women gaped with both bewilderment and awe as he hacked down the barbarians left and right, but the colossus as for him saw nothing save for the sparkling jetstones of a young, dark-haired maiden with an enchanting smile. Once the equipage returned to the safety of the castle walls, Barou sallied forth and vanquished the enemy during the last major battles which restored Avotour’s peace. His courage and gallantry rose in fame to become the most beautiful symbols of the country, to such an extent that the men who were warring beside him could have attended him to the very jaws of death with eyes closed and tranquil spirits. History wrote down that love brought Barou, the future great hero, to rout the Hagans, who would thence cower in the shade of their bitter defeat, never to march against Avotour again. All that remained for Barou was to win over the dark-eyed damsel’s heart.



Revered for his deeds by the king and the realm, Barou was rewarded with a title and a manor, the land of which he rented to tenant farmers in the place of hiring serfs of his own. Freed from his lordly obligations, he left for Antan to beseech Efée's favors. The latter fleetly succumbed with grace to this discrete yet endearing court, and espoused him six months later under the blessing of Count Elieu and Countess Mélinda. Husband and wife stayed at the castle, where Barou was elevated to the station of fencing master, to the great pride of its denizens. His renown beckoned young men of high birth craving for recognition, which led him to found a college destined to hone their skills. Little by little, a gigantic training field was leveled in Antan, soon to be enhanced with a riding hall, then a racecourse, so that every need could be fulfilled. Proof that not much was needed for happiness to become a reality... What kind of daughter would not be honored to have a father the likes of hers?

Today, Aila's life looked bleak to her. Everything could have become so wonderful nonetheless: she was a desired child. Well, at least in appearance. She had an adorable and devoted mother, a father impatient to cherish his heir... Until he discovered that Aila was nothing more than a girl. From this decisive instant onward, Barou's daughter vanished from his existence as if she had never been conceived. Efée, exhausted from the delivery, had not understood how irreversible the fracture that had been carved in this moment was. She had done her best to nurture her infant with love thereafter, in an effort to compensate for her husband's unsettling demeanor. To shield Aila, whom her father had repudiated, she had solicited everyone she valued around her. Mélinda, the chatelaine of Antan, regularly fostered Aila with her children as if one of her own. Hamelin, Antan's mage, took upon himself to be her preceptor. His interest in books, albeit second to none, had been challenged with the arrival of the baby. The man of magic had been seduced, or is "taken aback" the right manner to phrase it? Fascinated? At any rate, this probably had been the one and only time when Hamelin came to pat a newborn's head with tenderness, his eyes filled with sudden gravity. And above all, there had been Bonneau, her uncle and brother to Barou. Day after day, he had sheltered his young niece an inch further inside the haven of his wing.

Efée, torn between her two loves, was not able to comprehend how Barou could behave as an impassioned, gentle and thoughtful husband, whereas he simultaneously portrayed unbearable indifference whenever his daughter was discussed. Even as she was painfully recovering from Aila's birth, she could perceive the harrowing scar that the lack of a male descendant represented for Barou. Loumie, Antan's soul awakener, had advised her against another pregnancy resorting to the firmest tone. But Efée had been giving it much thought ever since. She wished to redeem the balance that had disappeared from her life. She wanted a family; a genuine one, with a father caring for his children. What oddness could have taken hold of an honest and benevolent man's mind so that he would come to reject his unique daughter so? During her last endeavor to discover the motives behind Barou's disinterest, she had pushed the conversation far enough for him to stall any attempt to talk about it further. She had never seen him in such a state of mind, inflamed by a serrated and icy fit of wrath. He had been so insurmountable, so inexorable! Thus, a full year following Aila's birth, and despite Barou's reluctance and Loumie's stern opposition, she became pregnant once more. The hope of rejuvenating the ties of her kin trembled deep down in her heart.

Efée's daily life had been naturally split in two. When dusk came, she would commend Aila to her uncle, whereas she would tend to her every need during sunlight while Barou dedicated himself to his duties as a fencing master. Barou was her champion, and excelled in all sorts of combat. In addition to being a fist fighter without equal, it was a well-established fact that no bladed weapon could hide its secrets from him. Venerated by his students, respected by his peers, Barou was only waiting for a son to walk in his footsteps. Efée knew it; she would give him the boy he had been longing for! Everything would improve afterwards. As her pregnancy progressed, she was growing ever more drained and Loumie, out of worry, frequently visited her

to assess her condition. When the future mother could not stand anymore, Mélinda ask after her each day, bringing back Aila among her children upon departing. Bonneau, who had been very present as well, strove to relieve Efée: he took his little niece to groom the castle horses on his back using a leather strap that he knotted around his chest. This unusual means of transportation did paint a smile on the face of anyone who came across, yet nobody dared mock it. The uncle, who cared more for his niece than her father did, owned the deference of all.

Bonneau, brother to Barou, looked nothing like him. He was indeed tall, but shared no other characteristics with the praised colossus. He had inherited from a darker shade of hair than his brother had, and from a thinner frame that nevertheless allowed him to rival Barou in strength. Just like him, Bonneau had developed extraordinary agility, paired with an impressive sense of balance. In his company, one of Aila's earliest falls ended in a magnificent, fresh pile of humus, to the vivid disappointment of her uncle, who however managed to scrub her clean on his own and return Aila to her mother neat as a newly minted coin. When the tale, which had traveled from mouth to ear all around the castle, made its way back to Efée's, her grin erupted into a frank, warm laugh. She intimately felt the conviction that her makeshift plan had been a wise one and that Bonneau would emerge as the right man to handle this situation. Another layer of flawless steel had just been added upon Efée's resolve to protect Aila.

When the time of delivery arrived, Aila was only halfway to her third birthday. As a forthcoming father deserving of this name, Barou hurried to his wife's bedside and refused to forsake it, in spite of Loumie's constant upbraiding. By the fairies, a man had nothing to do there! But whether she accepted his presence or not, Loumie forced herself to tolerate this intrusion, for Barou's will to stay was not one to be broken. Belatedly so, the fiercely hoped-for son breathed in his first gust of air and the couple savored unforgettable delight. Barou was so radiant with glee that Efée sensed faith spark anew inside her with the coming of this little boy. Loumie, as for her, appeared more taciturn than she had ever done. Due to their profound glee however, neither of the new parents paid her marked sullenness any attention.

Efée's illusions shattered in but a night; the birth of Aubin had not changed Barou's disdainful attitude towards his daughter in the slightest. Aila signified no more to her father today than she did the day before, and Efée's emotions plummeted into grief. She held her husband dear, yet his reaction was slicing an insufferable wound in her existence; a wound he seemed to neither hear, nor understand. She felt so frail that she settled to act for Aila's good forthwith. In spite of her weakness, Efée wrote several letters, her children by her side, in order to relish the moments spent united while she still could. Absorbed by her design, she received Mélinda, Bonneau, and, lastly, Hamelin. The decline of her strength did not impede her from consuming many an hour convincing and planning. Her elocution had grown arduous, her breathing convulsive, but completing this project was of imperious necessity: her daughter's fate depended on it. As he helplessly witnessed his beloved wife's condition worsen with each sunset, Barou deserted the training fields in favor of her sickbed. None would have thought of addressing him the most trifling reproach, for the love they shared had been exemplified across the lands of Avotour. Aspiring to allay the sensibilities of all, Efée had tasked Loumie with the palming of Aila whenever her father was to enter the room. An apparent peace had thus been preserved within the household...

Efée had foreseen that death would soon come to scythe her down; it was only a matter of hours. She had accomplished everything she could for Aila, but her heart did not beat any less heavily however. She was about to abandon her husband, her children, amongst which her daughter who needed so much of her tenderness. How could Aila, whom she treasured so, manage to advance in strength and confidence despite Barou's shadow? When life had been silenced to a soft murmur in her chest, Efée glanced one final time at the man she had loved more than she loved herself, her hand atop his, smiled to Aubin whom Barou was holding in his arms, and snuggled a rag doll fondly, hidden beneath the blankets. A symbol of the love she had

always experienced for her daughter. Her inner light died out asudden. Stygian darkness engulfed the hearts of all who had once esteemed Efée.

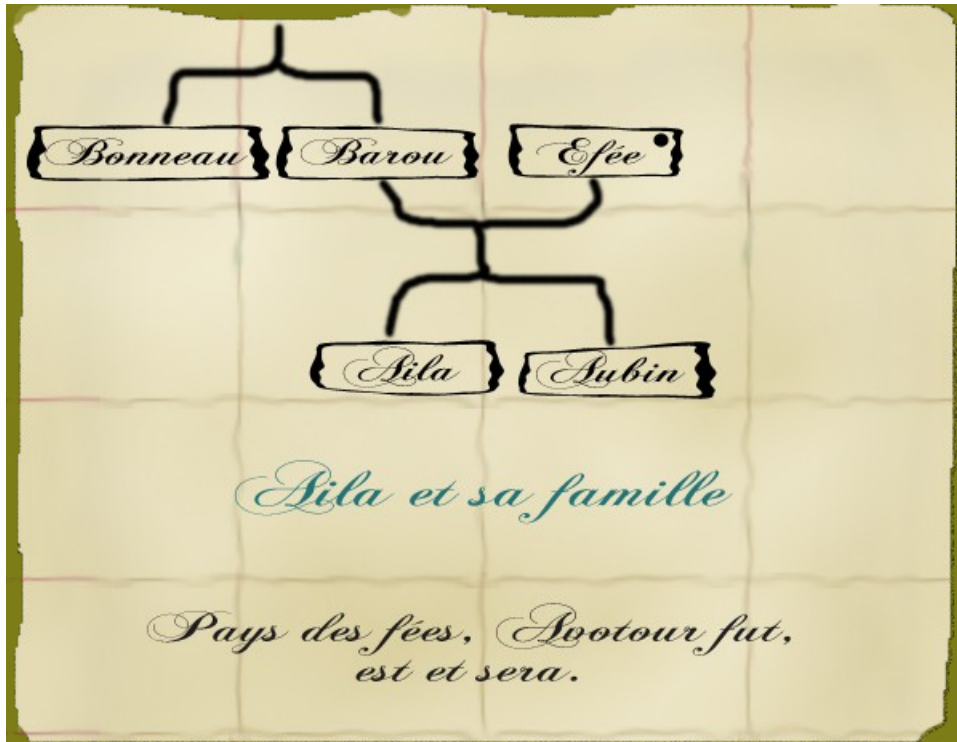
The castle was mourning her departure as suffering mercilessly smote Barou, this giant of a man. In the memory of his wonderful spouse, he nevertheless weathered the storm and carried on, his son held close and friends kept near.

Definitely ousted from her homestead, Aila sought refuge at Bonneau's house, which adjoined the stables. She was trying to understand, with the heart of a nearly three-year-old girl, where her mommy had gone, why she had a brother with whom she lived not and a father who never looked at her. However hard she thought, no answer was to be found. Aila closed herself from the world outside and ceased to speak as a result. Yet, her uncle did commit himself to his niece, making every effort to have his home become Aila's. Although his dwelling constituted in but a sole room, Bonneau created a private space by means of a windbreak he had received from Mélinda. As furniture, he gave her his wardrobe and bed. Once this done, Aila's uncle drilled a hole in the ceiling and installed a ladder to access a minuscule sleeping area he lodged in the attic. Each day, he cared after her as if his own daughter; fed her; dressed her; took her out. She accompanied him whenever he tended the horses or trained with his kenda, a combat staff seldom seen in the realm of Avotour. These sessions stretched late in the evening, with Bonneau tirelessly repeating the figures he traced even as he sat in the saddle and Aila keeping assiduous watch. She never complained. In truth, there was not a single move to escape her vigil so long as exertion did not strike her down flat on the ground. Bonneau taught her to ride a steed, to tame and heal them. He educated her in the ways of herbs, decoctions, and massages. She retained and repeated without a word.

Hamelin, the mage, encountered more difficulty to lecture a child who stood silent during her apprenticeship of reading. And still each time she raised her innocent eyes, legacy of Efée's black, where an immense gleam of insight blazed, he knew muteness was no obstacle for her learning. So he went on with his lessons as we would have with any other pupil. From time to time, Hamelin probed Aila's gaze for its meaning before moving on or starting over. Both writing and calculus, she acquired very fast. The mage gave her books to read in a week; she brought them back on the morrow or the day after. While he was more than startled by her alacrity in deciphering and assimilating any concept that she was presented with, Hamelin came to accept this notion and offered her his guidance with enthusiasm. The mage had little patience for the other children's incessant babbling and their pronounced ability to turn their mouths into windmills, hence his relief to school one who hushed for once... He pledged to bestow the entirety of his knowledge upon her and hustled to tutor Aila in the fields of plants, anatomy, languages of the countries sitting beyond Avotour's borders, history, sciences, law and so many more domains for which he had a passion. Oblivious before Hamelin's compulsion to leap from pillar to post whenever a topic had caught too much of his attention, Aila followed the mage in the daedal maze of his erudition.

Despite her quietness, Aila was accepted by all and appreciated as well; she was growing up, obliging and agreeable, even though rare were the moments when her face exhibited a smile... All the while regretting the fact, everyone had explained her muteness by invoking all the hardships she had endured. The only ones who rejected her without any second thought were her father's students. They had chosen a side. Barou's side. The reason beneath their master's disregard had to emanate from her worthlessness! Aila needed to remain leagues from the training field, for there she was greeted with contempt and scorn she could not respond to. But she could not help it. She wanted to have a glimpse at her progenitor, the hero, and to observe Aubin mature within Barou's fatherly enclosure. Aubin behaved as a genuine, if smaller shadow... Although her brother strove to mimic Barou in all things, Aila, just by looking at him, felt assured that he would never reveal himself nearly as adroit. Where did this certitude come from? She did not know. Yet she was convinced that Aubin did not display the radiant energy

that imprinted the soul of the great...



## Chapter 1

Aila's life changed dramatically when she was twelve. Foremost, on account of Barou's most conceited and uptight womanizer of an apprentice, who went by the name of Dudau and had seen about fifty winters pass. As he came across Aila in an isolated location of the castle, the idea of having his way with her sprang into his mind. A most entertaining idea, it seemed to him. Aila never quite learned what the boy was trying to perpetrate with the young girl that she was at that time, but her ignorance did not deter Dudau one bit. He was closing in on her, a contemptuous and swaggering sneer on his features, when he heard the voice of a child erupt from behind. The voice shouted with steadfast assurance:

- Do not touch her!

Dudau turned around to meet Aubin, who was no older than ten back then. He was assuming a fighting stance! Bursting with laughter, Dudau forgot for a split-second that the little boy was Barou's son and walked toward him. Such was one of this vain being's many flaws: thinking had never been what he did best. Aila's brother hurled himself forward like a cannonball and found himself lying on his back a moment after. The impeccable hook of his opponent had lifted Aubin off the ground before sending him back to it with brutal force. These were life's harsh teaching methods: although Dudau stood out as an inept and arrogant boy, his huge frame had given him a certain form of crude efficiency. Everything could have ended on this, but the great clumsy oaf, as a way to collect some old debts from Aubin, started to give him the foot whereas he rolled in the dirt. Once again, Dudau heard a voice behind him. This time, it was hoarse and thick:

- You stop right there!

Dudau turned around and saw Aila darting in his direction, her skirt hitched up. A concupiscent snarl appeared on his face before twisting into a grimace. With a well-aimed kick in the groin, Aila bended the boy in two. Then, as she raised her two joined hands using all her strength, Aila smashed Dudau's chin with a fit of vigor that she had not anticipated. In all likelihood, Dudau had not either. He collapsed to his knees. She hit the staggered apprentice on the neck and finished her attack with a kick right in the head before he could even touch the ground. Aila remained motionless for a moment as she sought to regain control over her pounding heart and the usage of her legs, which, all of a sudden, were giving out under her weight. She came to Aubin with trembling steps. He could not move, but he had watched the whole scene and was still conscious. Aila knelt beside him. First, using her hands, she felt her brother's spinal column as she softly moved upwards to his nape, in order to detect any hematoma or displacement that could have occurred during the fight. She had proceeded like this so many times before with horses that the gesture proved effortless. Then, she scanned each of her defender's limbs to make sure he did not have any broken bone. Aubin observed her every move. Aila finally held up his face with both hands to inspect his jaw and cranium.

- Will you stand if I help you? She asked, her voice shaky.

He nodded, unable to talk still. It was the wrong move to do, as an acute needle of pain pierced through his skull and made him nauseous. It had been necessary to wait for the hammering inside Aubin's head to calm down before he could stand with Aila's support. He did not go far, though. The dozen meters they covered proved enough trial for his stomach to tense up and Aubin emptied its contents on the ground, hanging onto Aila's arm. In spite of his state, Aubin reflected that getting acquainted with his sister by being pummeled to oblivion, and vomiting afterwards, was far from what he could have dreamed of.

- You've been brave. Thank you, Aubin, she told him.

Aila's voice seemed like a murmur after all these years of silence. A couple of tears began to flow down her eyes. She was but a twelve-year-old girl, after all... Ever incapable of stammering a word, Aubin settled to hold her hand gently. He was happy to witness the humble beginnings of a smile on his sister's lips; a smile that he unfortunately could not give back.

The walk back to the stables appeared very long to them as they leaned on each other, yet they fortunately did not come across anyone. Aila saw her brother to the backroom and returned with an ointment that she spread with lightness everywhere his face tinted itself with shades of violet.

- I'm leaving you the pot. For the time being, apply the cream three times a day, she specified. Once the hematoma becomes less sensitive, you'll have to deep massage it and then your skin will quickly turn back to its former color. You may also use the cream on your other contusions.

She smiled at him again. Aubin was laboriously articulating his thanks when his eyes, discerning a shape behind Aila, widened. His sister noticed his expression and, without even turning around, whispered:

- Good day, Bonneau. Could you tell me where Maël's liquor is stashed?

- Up there, on the house shelf.

- I'll go get it, she explained before vanishing from the room, leaving Bonneau with Aubin.

- What happened to you, my boy? The children's uncle inquired as he knelt near him.

His nephew swallowed his saliva. Bonneau was feeling every last square inch of his body, and his gestures were identical to Aila's mere moments before.

- Dudau! He was about to assault my sister.

- And you beat him?

Aubin noted Bonneau's appreciative gaze whereas, behind him, he was simultaneously meeting Aila's panicked look. She had just come back and it seemed like she was begging Aubin not to mention her.

- No, it wasn't me, he let out, lowering his eyes.

- I'm the one who knocked him down, Aila confessed.

Her uncle, speechless, turned around and scrutinized her with a frown.

- Ah! He only said.

Addressing his nephew, he then added:

- We're going to have to find a prettily packaged story if we are to avoid any trouble with Barou... Dudau was thrashing you and I intervened to stop to fight. We won't go any further, it's of no use to extend the lie beyond that. I believe Dudau will prefer this version to the one where he was beaten by a girl who's three years younger than he is. Barou is not going to like this anecdote anyway and the boy won't be staying for much longer here...

- There, Aubin. It's a pain-relieving liquor, she described as she moved closer. You don't need much. Hardly more than a little spoonful, four times a day. Don't drink it unless you're in great pain, because it will make you feel sleepy.

- Come, my boy, Bonneau said while getting up. I'm taking you back to Barou. You'll guide me to Dudau on the way and I'll pick him up as well.

Aubin, this time helped by his uncle, straightened and gave a regretful glance to his sister.

- Farewell, Aubin. I will never forget what you did for me.

- No. It's not farewell, Aila. From this day on, I'm coming back to see you. I promise.

And so the boy left, staggering across her modest home with Bonneau's support.

Everyone, Barou included, fell for the made-up story. Dudau was expelled forthwith, before he could even admit that his attempt at assaulting Aila had resulted in a shameful defeat.

Life continued as usual, but Aila began to feel her uncle's gaze regularly linger on her in an odd manner. Bonneau had not asked any question following the brawl, yet she knew full well that he had been wondering about it ever since. She was on the brink of talking the whole incident over with him. However, silence appeared a more comfortable solution, and she



reverted to muteness. Therefore, nobody learned that she had talked again, except for Bonneau and Aubin.

A few months later, under the first sunrays of a glorious morning, Aila heard a noise coming from behind while she was out for a stroll before returning to the castle. Upon turning around, she discovered that it was Aubin ambling toward her.

- Hello, Aila! I thought I'd be visiting you sooner than this!

- Aubin? What are you doing here?

- The training sessions have been postponed; they won't be starting before half an hour... I had some time ahead of me, so, when I saw you leave a bit earlier I felt like I had to jump on the occasion to discuss with you. I hadn't been able to since... Well, since Dudau. Father has been constantly on my back. I remember the days when I wouldn't lift my nose from his tracks akin to a hound on its trail, like I was afraid to lose him. Now it's the other way around even as I am craving for a breath of fresh air...

- You do express yourself much more than the first time we met!

- I sure do, now that my jaw functions again! As for you, it looks like you haven't informed anyone that you had renounced silence...

Moderately on the defensive since Aubin's arrival, Aila relaxed:

- Indeed I haven't. It is easier to hush...

- ... Than it is to express your emotions? I know...

They were both feeling awkward, detailing each other as if it was the first time they met. Which was almost the case. Both were discovering their sibling without daring to come any closer.

- Why would you want to get to know me? Aila inquired. I'd wager I do not fall into your father's favorite topics of discussion...

- And you'd be right to, there's no need to even mention the issue. Be that as it may, you're still my sister... And my classmates just won't stop chattering about you! Curiosity got the better of me; I couldn't help but want to know who you were and why you weren't a part of my life.

- I'm not the one who's going to shed any light on this; I am clueless myself... I believe he became the man he is the day I was born. Nobody knows why, or has seen fit to tell me about it.

- That's rubbish! Father would have had a much better fighter to succeed him than he does with me: you're one bloody good scrapper!

He let out a deep, weary sigh and shrugged out of sourness.

- Oh! You're not quite as bad as you make it sound, but it won't work out if you're afraid to wound your opponent, Aila explained with a soft voice.

- And how could you know I am afraid? He promptly replied.

There was a dash of aggressiveness in his tone.

- I know it because you've piqued my curiosity as well. I wanted to see you. You're swift and efficient... You could acquire the strength you lack through training, but fighting isn't really your thing and it shows...

- And then there's you. You look itching to smash people's faces in! Aubin answered, teasing.

- I am. I've built up enough hatred for that!

Aila clenched her teeth.

- Oh...! I understand, I'm sorry. I have to go now, but we'll be seeing each other again as soon as I can, Aubin added.

- I trust your word on this and... I would be glad if we could.

They exchanged a smile upon parting. It was on this day that she settled to let others hear her voice again.

'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.'

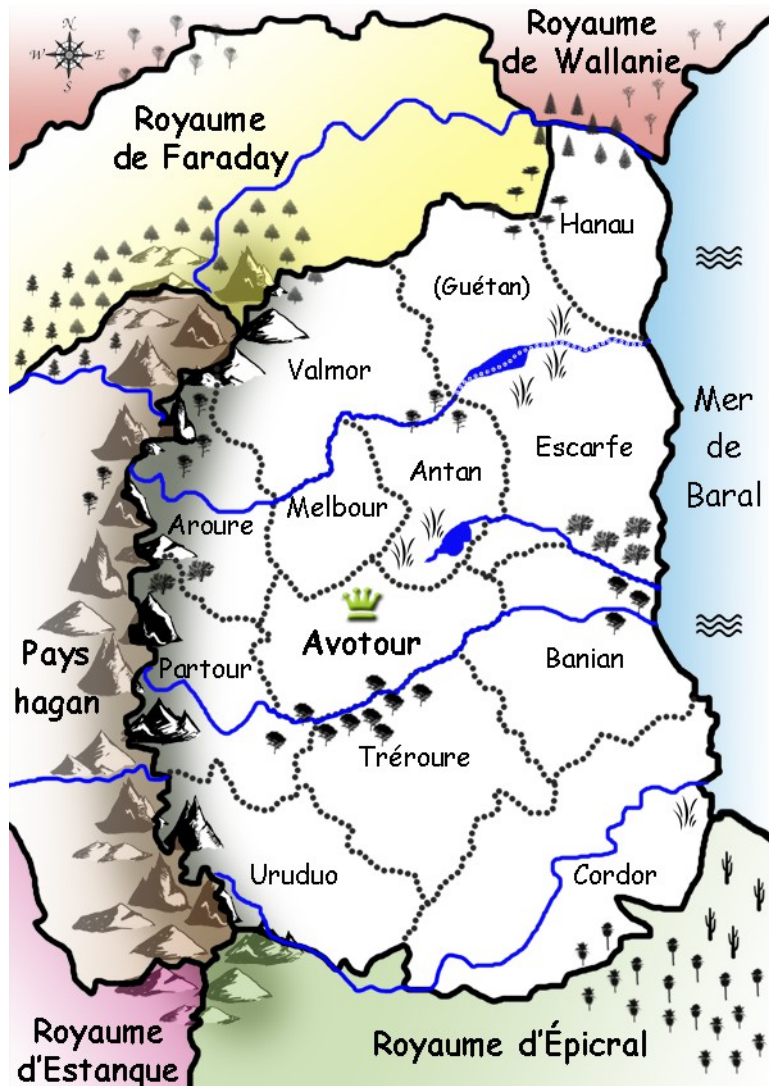
'Whereas *you* like a fight!' he replied laughing at her.

'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 happened two years later. Bonneau was tasked with the delivery of an important message as well as returning with the answer quickly thereafter. Once again, the realm had been thrown into a state of turmoil, but this time the feuds originated from within. The letter contained a non-aggression and mutual-protection pact between Antan and the bordering county of Melbour, along with their pledge of allegiance to Avotour's king Sérain. It was the first, essential step for the country to oppose other fiefs that stood on the brink of rebellion against the crown. Bonneau had taken his young niece, now a seasoned equestrian, on this mission. Their visit of the capital, which bore the same name as the county of Melbour, had constituted the perfect occasion for Bonneau to pick up a new kenda at a specialist shop. He

knew the importance of the missive, but had not envisioned –and none at Antan had either– the amount of ruckus this lowly alliance would cause. On their way back, as they were one day away from Antan, Aila and Bonneau found themselves surrounded by seven mercenaries. The smirks on their faces proved that they were overconfident in their ability to crush the couriers. Since Aila was carrying the message destined for Elieu, Bonneau offered her to escape while he would be holding off the mercenaries.

“No!” had been her sole answer, after which she vigorously added:

- Pass me the new kenda. I might just find some uses for it.

Bonneau pulled the kenda from a satchel and heaved it to Aila. He then brandished his own. The leader of their opponents snickered.

- What do you think you’re doing with that little stick of yours?

- Shall we go, Bonneau?

Aila’s uncle almost asked her whether she was sure about this, but he chose to abstain, deliberately opting for brashness.

- That we shall, Aila.

Both spurred their horses and charged the mercenaries barring their way with a savage battle cry. The element of surprise worked in their favor. Their opponents remained flatfooted as they beheld an old oaf and a little girl gallop at full speed toward them, weapons drawn. The realization of this mistake came swiftly, albeit a bit late, as some were unhorsed by a forceful blow and trampled by the nervous mounts. During the first passage, Bonneau struck down two. Aila, one. The circle shattered, uncle and niece scampered off without a look back. The mercenaries’ leader, assuredly the smartest of the lot, had led his steed away from the fight. He rapidly rallied the three men he had left and engaged the pursuit. Aware of their only relative head start, the fugitives forced their mounts forward. The tired horses would not be able to keep up with this hellish pace for long however, and the mercenaries would eventually catch up on them. They had to find another solution...

- Bonneau, over here! Aila shouted out, pointing at a cluster of trees on their right flank.

They concealed their steeds behind a thicket. Aila then brought out a bow that she assembled with haste, proof of a lasting experience. She positioned herself in a good spot to fire at their enemies under her uncle’s stupefied gaze.

- Can you give me the arrows, I’ve no time to install my quiver, she asked, designating the six that stuck out of her backpack.

Bonneau acquiesced. Focused, she shot once, nocked the arrow that her uncle was handing in the blink of the eye and shot again. Two of the mercenaries fell to the ground. The ones still standing hurriedly escaped in the undergrowth, far from their sight.

- Damn it! I haven’t killed the leader! He’s the most cunning of them all: he’s exchanged his hat with another! What do we do now? They have bows too; they’re not going to let themselves be taken by surprise again...

Bonneau was staring at her blankly; he was visibly hesitating between exploding and sighing. Preferring the second option, he sighed, then mumbled:

- I do agree the moment isn’t exactly ideal, but since when do you know how to wield this weapon? Since when do you own a folding bow –a most rare piece of gear, it seems to me? Since when do you know how to fight with a kenda?

- Bonneau, I understand that you might be upset, but please... I’ll explain everything later, I promise, she pleaded.

He filled his lungs with a deep breath.

- Let’s leave the horses here. I hope you’ll manage to move stealthily as well, and that you’ll stand ready to kill again...

Aila blushed without a word, and then she nodded. They walked away for a short distance before ducking behind the cover of a small cluster of trees, their senses sharpened.

Aila's uncle whispered:

- Since we're not coming to them, they're bound to attempt an approach. Draw your bow and await my signal. You leave the leader to me, understood?

He punctuated his sentence with a stern look. Aila gave him another nod.

Time went by. They remained there, motionless and silent, as Aila's limbs were growing numb. Dusk was nigh when a faint noise came to their ears from the right. Neither of them budged. For a handful long minutes nothing occurred, save for the wait and the ever-taller shadows that twilight was weaving amid the forest.

- We could put their horses down for a start, the murmur of a voice suggested.

The sparkle of an arrow tip appeared in the light of the setting sun. Bonneau's fingers brushed Aila. She shot where she had estimated that the archer was. A muffled shout echoed in the air and Aila saw her arrow plummet to the ground. It was attached to a human body. A loud thud followed when the two landed.

She realized that her uncle had disappeared. However, the leader of the mercenaries was now standing before Aila, his sword aimed at her. More exactly, aimed at her throat. She was trapped...

- It's over, pretty thing, the man told her, sniggering.

Out of desperation, Aila dove to the right. She felt the sword point scrape her skin, and then her warm blood flowing from the wound.

- Come out, Aila. We may be on our way again, Bonneau's voice assured.

She emerged from the grove and glanced at her uncle, who was pulling his knife out of the heart of the last mercenary.

- And that too, can you do it? Throwing a dagger?

She shook her head.

- Well, I'll teach you then. For the time being though, I'm going to patch you up so that this mean-looking gash I see on your neck doesn't become a hideous scar.

Bonneau was finishing dropping off branches into the fire. They had found a little cabin, lost in the midst of the forest. It was well hidden and sat a safe distance from the scene of the last fight. Bonneau and his niece shared some strips of dried meat, along with cheese and bread.

- You've learned the profound emotion that overwhelms your senses when the specter of your own death looms over you. It is a moment of unbelievable intensity in the life of any human being. Unforgettable, yes... Everyone chooses their path in its aftermath, depending on their experience. What were you thinking about back then?

- I was thinking about mom. I was wondering whether there would be at least one person to be proud of me...

- She would have been. Your mother was someone out of the ordinary. She would have admired her daughter as she blossomed into a woman just like her.

- But she didn't act like an assassin! Aila replied with vivacity.

- She did once. When your father saved her, she killed a man who had eluded our vigilance and was threatening Mélinda. This remained our secret and none at the castle got wind of it.

- And you know it because you were there when it happened, am I right?

- You are.

- And so there had been two men to fall for the same woman?

Bonneau stared at his niece. He looked amazed by her perspicacity.

- Indeed. She saw him first. A thousand times I had fancied that, if she had lay her eyes on me first she would have succumbed to the man I was...

He sighed before continuing:

- ... But this was only a dream. They were made for each other...

- And was this the reason why you never married? The reason why you took me in?

She raised her big, dark eyes toward him. They were burning with the desire to *know*.

- Yes... Well, yes and no. At first, I looked after you as a way to please her, but I soon stopped doing it for this one reason. That choice I shall never regret. You're the child I will never have and her daughter as well, the not-so-little detail that makes a world of difference... And you are an extraordinary person on your own, Aila. So... Where did you learn to wield a bow?

- Aubin... Lady Mélinda and Aubin had bestowed this bow upon me for one of my birthdays. We kept this to ourselves...

- What about the kenda? I suppose that watching me exercise before repeating the moves behind my back sufficed.

- I've been observing you since I am a toddler. Imitating you seemed like child's play to me in these conditions.

- And putting your life on the line? Where did you learn *that*?

- What do you want from me, uncle? She retorted with an acerbic voice. When you're the daughter of a man who's never acknowledged you, when too many people consider you're nothing but rabble because the great hero surely has his own reasons for acting like that. When you're certain you're the fighter he's been seeking, and that, despite this, he'll never grant you even a brief look...

Her voice shattered. Tears began to flow along her cheeks. Bonneau got up in order to step aside and leave Aila to her sorrow, but he changed his mind at the last moment:

- You father is only a man. And then again, this man is only your father... Many people close to you have cherished, loved and gave very, very much to a daughter who wasn't theirs. They do not deserve your disdain; they deserve your *esteem*. It is your duty to be worthy of their commitment!

Bonneau heard a faint sob. As he turned around, he added, before vanishing into the darkness:

- Killing a man for the first time is no easy thing. Think it through, and find the inner strength you need to stomach it. We'll start your training upon coming back to Antan.

After they returned to the castle, Bonneau never spoke to her about what had happened ever again. He undertook to monitor her now-demanding training, correcting her flaws, perfecting her perception, her acuteness, her analytical skills. He completed Aila's instruction by teaching her everything he could.

From this day onward, the pace of Aila's life went from a trot to a gallop. In accord with the sound of the bells that pealed every two hours, from six in the morning until ten in the evening, the young girl repeated the same activities, atop which Bonneau piled some more specific exercises each night. More and more often, Aila accompanied him on his missions. Sometimes, they encountered bandits or enemies. Killing them was not always necessary, yet whenever she had to, she cut them down without hesitation. She also spent time with Mélinda and her daughters as they traveled to the neighboring villages to offer bread and attentions. Although she did not understand why, Aila grudgingly consented to these journeys.

Aila had specialized in the arts of healing, thanks to her understanding of horses and plants. Her lessons with Hamelin continued as well, and she discovered new books filled with unusual stories. Especially the ones on fairies whom, to Aila's great surprise, Hamelin seemed to venerate. Since she did read and count fluently, Aila had trouble seeing why Hamelin would insist so much that she crammed her head full with his whole library. Well, not exactly the whole library. There was this peculiar corner from which the mage never returned with any volume. Assuredly, these had to deal with fairy magic...

Aila had always been an obedient girl: she was waiting for Hamelin to judge that the time was right for her to delve into these forbidden works. Nevertheless, fairies were no more to Aila than they were to everyone else in Avotour: myths. And so was their magic. Truth be told, Aila

was not feeling as impatient to unravel these mysteries as Hamelin had been in his youth. She did not relish these peaceful moments any less however: it was a pleasure for her to broaden her knowledge of plants and explore the legends of foreign countries, in the comfortable solitude of her study hall. She would have never admitted it, but the story of the Black Prince and White Lady stirred her to great extent, as did the one of the lovers caged inside a crystal coffin, deep beneath the surface of a distant lake.

Until now, she had never dreamed of a knight to whom she could become a lady, but recently this fantasy had been swirling back and forth in her mind... Unfortunately, the only boys –her brother, and the castle servants– whom she interacted with were not ones to enliven her heartbeat overmuch. The others, as they were devoted to Barou body and soul, would not have even deigned to look at her. Ah! There *had been* one! The little kid whom she had been seeing for a year before he definitely disappeared from her life. Every time they ran into each other, the boy greeted her with a smile. In all obviousness, he was having fun at her expense, but she survived that as well. The same could not be said when it came to resisting Mélinda’s latest caprice: upon beholding the fine young damsel bloom beneath the fighter, Mélinda had decreed that her rather masculine-looking wardrobe was to be modified.

Antan’s lady presented Aila with skirts and corsages, and, for her fifteenth birthday, with a splendid robe akin to her daughters’. Of course, this new attire proved quite unsuitable for horse riding. So, in order not to hurt anyone, Aila settled to cut through the middle of her skirts, both front and back, after which she stitched them together by the center to form something resembling a large pair of trousers: skirt-like at rest and the advantages of trousers for everything else! When Mélinda uncovered the trick, Aila dreaded her reaction for an instant. Yet, true to her form, Mélinda gave Aila her ever filled with kindness and compassion look and impishly added:

- Did the ball gown that I offered you meet the same fate?

Aila blushed so intensely that even her ears reddened.

- Why no! I would never have dared, lady Mélinda...

- Tell me; is this outfit comfortable to wear?

- Oh yes it is! It’s very practical for horse riding.

- Well then, maybe I should try it!

Behind them, Amandine, Blandine and Estelle, the damsels here at Antan, were discreetly giggling all the while giving Aila conniving glances.

And so it was done. Mélinda and her daughters began using “Aila skirts” for all their outside activities. Their entourage grew fond of the novelty, and this frivolity spread like a blessing into the hearts of all, especially when this new trend propagated beyond Antan’s boundaries!

The country was going from bad to worse. The frequency of quarreling between the counties had increased by significant and alarming proportions, as if each was just waiting for their neighbors to show their back before they could betray and stab them. Once again, the Hagans had been massing at the borders. They had perceived the fragility of the realm; they were preying on either the weakness of certain counties or the perversity of others. Akin to a malevolent shadow, insecurity had stretched its darkness everywhere while great woes that knew no cure were brewing. Elieu was often away in an attempt to save what could be saved, attended by reliable men, but people at the castle were worrying. And quite rightly so. One night, ill tidings threw everyone into grieving affliction. An assassin had wanted to murder liege lord Sérain of Avotour. Tragically, if the king survived, it were his wife and last born who died in his arms instead. One week of bereavement had been ordered in the county of Antan. Mélinda seemed to be even more affected than the others were, and her distressed expression had not escaped Aila. She took advantage of a moment of freedom from Bonneau’s obligations and came

to knock at Mélinda's door. One minute-long wait after, a voice invited her in. She timidly pushed the panel and witnessed the many efforts that Mélinda was displaying to offer her a serene composure.

- What do you desire, Aila?

The young girl felt very stupid. What mischievous fairy had brought her all the way here?

- I was asking myself whether there was anything I could help you with. You look so sad...

Mélinda's face distorted all of a sudden and her eyes became watery. Tears freely flew along her cheeks thereupon. Aila came closer and, with a tender gesture, wrapped her arms around the chatelaine. She remained silent, as silent as she had been when she was but a little girl. Mélinda wept without a sound, and then she pulled herself together and clutched Aila tightly. Before long, Mélinda had straightened and was holding Aila's hands.

- How I wish for Efée to be still among us, she sighed. I miss her so deeply... She had been my friend since childhood and we had shared so much. So, when you entered, for a fleeting instant I thought it was her. You are the portrait of your mother, Aila. A touch slenderer, perhaps. Your intonation, your black eyes and hair, this energetic, inimitable gait, the way you stare at people as if you saw right through them, as if you saw everything they cannot see on their own. There is so much of her within you... She was an exceptional woman. You couldn't even suspect, and neither could Barou for that matter, to which extent she was. You are redoubtable, Aila, and she would be so proud of you.

Never had Mélinda talked about her mother with so much passion. Aila was aware of their friendship, but she could sense something else; something that Barou did not know as well... The chatelaine went on with her story:

- You are wondering about the cause of my mourning. The queen who died was my sister, and the young girl my niece.

Aila's eyes widened. She almost could not refrain the heartfelt appeal that rose from inside. Mélinda continued:

- Apart from sir Elieu, my blood ties with the royal family are and must remain a secret. I left the court of Avotour a long time ago, and in no instance shall I set foot there ever again! My home is here, in Antan...

Mélinda was not looking at Aila anymore; she sounded like she was talking to herself, fixing her gaze at something across the window.

- Efée was my bodyguard, and she fought like a wildcat, with both grace and vigor...

Mélinda turned toward Aila, awaiting a reaction from the young girl. Aila felt her heart sore: her mother had been a fighter! The ground crumbled beneath her feet.

- Do sit, Aila.

The chatelaine pointed at an armchair close to hers. The young girl let her body fall in it more than she actually sat on it, took her head in her hands and strived to get a grip on herself. She was overcome with emotion. Her mother, whom she had always pictured as a sweet and feminine woman, frail and fragile, the exact opposite of her, had actually been a warrior! But why didn't anyone tell her before? And she resembled her mother! This discovery had wreaked havoc within her inner self... Aila, the girl who had been rejected by her father, who had been desperately seeking something that she could claim as a family heirloom. Then suddenly, in the most unexpected fashion that could be, it was there. Aila was hesitating between incredulity and the urge to jump right into the ceiling! *She looked like her mother! She was her worthy daughter!* At long last she discerned, for the first time of her life, the feeling of truly *existing*, of becoming a unique person, of identifying herself with someone, of sharing a bond with a family... She had never experienced this so acutely. Raising her head toward Mélinda, she stammered:

- Why today?

Mélinda stared at her with solemnity.

- Because our world is growing more brittle as years pass, and that we will soon have to count

on women like you. Because I intend to stand by my word and honor the promises that I have made to your mother, no matter the cost, and because telling you the very truth was among these promises. It is only the first step along the journey, however...

- How is it that *he* doesn't know? Aila inquired, thinking about Barou.

- On account of an infinite love... Your mother would never have taken the risk of hurting her husband, whom she profoundly loved, by showing herself as a near equal. He was her hero, and she became the hero's wife out of love. This had been her choice, but I expressed my disagreement with her; upon several occasions, we had argued over this subject. I was having difficulty accepting that she would remain shrouded by the shadow of a man, even if this man were Barou. Then I eventually respected her decision. She wanted to live a spouse's life; she wanted to be a mother and never think again about those fights that she couldn't bear anymore...

- Just like Bonneau... Aila mumbled to herself.

Mélinda heard it:

- I had always wondered whether *Efée* would have fallen in love with Bonneau if he had been the one to appear first before her eyes, in lieu of Barou... In the end, I believe she wouldn't have. It had been Barou because it had to be Barou...

The beginning of a smile stretched Aila's lips as she listened to Mélinda. Bonneau had asked himself the same question, and he had ended up giving the same answer. She cleared her throat:

- Lady Mélinda, why did she accept that fact that Barou ignored me? Did she love me less than she loved Barou?

The tears that she had managed to retain until now were burning her eyes. Mélinda sighed. Once again, she set her gaze on the window, as if the sight of the sky attracted her more than everything else in this world, before turning back to Aila.

- I had often asked myself this question until she gave me the answer... Our friendship wasn't devoid of discord, and we had happened to oppose one another on issues such as this one. She remained inflexible whenever she took a decision... I can only share this with you, even though you cannot fully understand it today: a time will come when her love for you surpasses the one she felt for her hero, and on this day it will be Barou's world that totters, not yours anymore...

Silence settled in the room. Aila busied herself with detailing them, but Mélinda's quarters were so bare that the task proved arduous. At the center sat a bed, a very simple one, adorned with a thick, color-faded feathered blanket that looked just warm. The canopy had disappeared, but she did remember that there had been one in the past though. Likewise, she noticed that several elements of decoration had gone missing, including the magnificent marquetry kitchen trolley that she had admired so many times before, when she was little... She opened her mouth to question Mélinda about this, but meeting her gaze made her change her mind. She decided to take her leave and greeted the chatelaine goodbye.

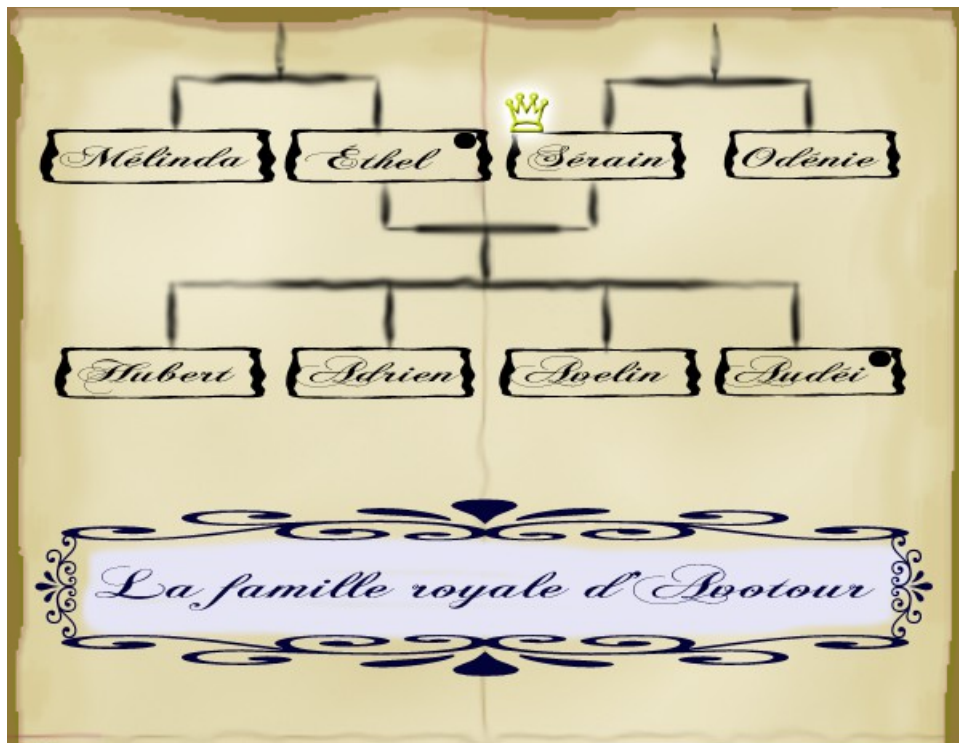
- Aila! One last word...

She turned around and waited. Mélinda resumed:

- Barou is a man to whom I vow the utmost esteem. He has never suspected what your mother had imposed on herself, and I wanted you to be aware of this fact. His behavior may elude your comprehension, but he is nonetheless someone dear to my heart. If I ever have to wound him, then I will do so for the sole sake of duty, not hatred... You may now return to your occupations.

For a heartbeat, Aila scrutinized the chatelaine's eyes with care. She exited the room thereafter, closing the door on these cryptic words...





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