

He had come to the mountains to learn.

Althui knew, as everyone knew, of old ruins and an even older teacher. A hermit, or perhaps an apostle, devoted to knowledge. In the snowflakes, he'd heard it said, they read the secrets of the world. Pure mathematics, unknowingly grasped at with failing hands by the brightest doctors of the cities and skies, was revealed in these mountains, in the harmonies between the peaks, and in the shapes of the ice that fell.

It was, with an inevitability that was with hindsight embarrassing, a difficult task to have Althui's expectations met. Nevertheless, the expedition had managed to fall short in shattering style. He'd gone around Terroval, hat in hand, collecting coins from the charitable to buy the essentials and the niceties.

He still had his boots, warm leather, and the thick cloak and robes, now always wet and sculpted with frost. He had also hung onto his few scraps of spells, and a staff without any certainty of magic, but certainly with a reputation and legend for it. He had not hung onto his tent, nor his horse; his clean-shaven appearance had been replaced with a brown-bearded and weary one when his razor disappeared down a ravine.

Althui also had a wizened teacher, just about.

Orascho was tall, thin, and looked like a ghost had been stretched out over a skeleton. His thin blue skin was covered in almost as many ravines and ill-coloured glaciers as the mountains themselves. Tiny, black eyes with blue flames within them always looked both startled and offended at every detail of Althui, and indeed of the world at large, they had the displeasure of seeing. His black trousers and jackets were all torn.

Two horns protruded from his forehead, thick and black. The left one was broken off only a few centimetres from the skin, while the right one came to a point.

'From nothing you'll find out,' he'd snarled when Althui had asked him where the horns had come from. It had taken several days of sleeping in these cold, snowy mountains among Orascho and his business for the elder to even somewhat directly answer a question. It wasn't much of a start, but it was some of a start: start-shaped. Startesque.

It wasn't that time had come for the old castle that was in these mountains. The small bricks that made up its square turrets had been of red brick, and in the right light, they still sort of were. A moat was still identifiable around the five towers, and investigable too, when Althui made a habit of falling into it through thin powder snow. Time had not come here, simply rot and gravity and geological movement: but neither had upkeep, nor care, nor strategic importance, nor even the map-makers. From the battlements and machicolations, icicles leered down at Althui, possibly the first newcomer in many years to this remote corner of the world.

Orascho never paid them much heed. He trudged upwards and downwards, entering and exiting the castle along taut drawbridge-chains and through now-collapsed window arches, as was convenient. Along the ice drifts and snow pillars, he was capable of exchanging floors with remarkable dexterity and ceaseless grumbling, while Althui only dared to take what remained of the crumbling brick stairs.

When the nights came, almost pitch black, he slept among the howling wind in the corners of the old rooms. It, surprisingly, was not too bad. It was not comfortable, not any more, but these grand

halls had once been comfortable, were welcomingly haunted by the spectre of comfort, and in that Althui found some warmth. He felt confident, within a few days, to sleep on the highest remaining floor, and gazed at the flickering stars on their black, blue, red canvas above. He never closed his eyes, not consciously: he let the night sky distort and blur into his dreams, as the saints and wizards he had read about did. He dreamed, always, of being far away.

Althui thought he'd had it, once: Orascho must be here for the stars, seeking wisdom in their order at night, far from any interference. So, Althui elected to light a torch and find him, at night, to learn, instead of tagging along in the day. However, when darkness fell and the flame bloomed, Orascho simply yelled, 'extinguish that light!' And so he did.

'Does the light interfere with your stargazing, Master Orascho?' asked Althui.

'No.'

'Ah,' said Althui, and that was that.

After a few hours, once their paths crossed again after Althui's lonesome spell practice, the student asked, 'is there an order in the stars?'

'In the what?'

'In the stars.'

Orascho looked up with his thin blue eyes. Around them the wind howled.

'No. Don't think so,' he snapped, before trudging back off into the snow.

'But it's... daytime...' Althui was lost for words. The creature leapt around some brick walls and slid down the ice into the moat.

Orascho's responses were no longer or more detailed to any of Althui's questions. They were lacking in wit, or insight, or even offence. In the castle atop the mountain, the one Orascho had spent years within, he professed no interest of the tapestries, pennants, furniture, fireplaces, rusted swords or dented armour. When Althui pointed them out, Orascho would, at best, treat them with vague diversion, before continuing about his day, disappearing into the snow to reappear hours later.

'You must know what this is,' Althui said, holding a tapestry. It frayed at the edges, and many of the colours had disappeared, reducing the once-proud heroes into mere ghosts and negatives.

'Yes,' said Orascho, regarding the tapestry.

'You do?'

'It's a tapestry.'

'Ah. Of course,' Althui sighed. Before Orascho could disappear once again, he cried, 'but a tapestry of what!' Althui's eyes gleamed in anticipation.

Orascho paused, one foot on the snow and one on the brick. He turned back. His thin black air blew in the wind, flaked with snow. 'I don't know,' he said after a while, his voice equal in gravel and boredom to every other answer he gave.

Once he disappeared, Althui sat down glumly on a fallen pillar. 'Neither do I, I suppose.'

The day after, Althui determined to get some use out of the trip: if Orascho could not be excited, then let it be use of his own design. By the night's canvas, he had determined East and North: finding the old chapel of the castle was a trivium after that. It was at what must have been the ground level, extending over the moat, over the edge of the mountainous plateau, far enough that Althui wondered what the terrain must have been when the castle was in use, and prosperous, and presumably a great deal closer to the sea. Columns and broken arches lined and filled it: no different to several other rooms in the abandonment.

He brought himself to the other side of the bare brick expanse, to the largest empty arch of them all, and found glass underfoot. Now Althui had the clarity of certainty, he got to work. He had brought his scraps of magic, and his chinks and inks, and he began to recite some words by certain pillars and others by symbols he drew on the floor. The wind blew strong and died down again, and by the time the spell was complete, and some of the pages were almost defeated through use, even the snow had almost entirely disappeared. Althui would have appreciated the view of the world below, of the cut and ruined mountains, if he was not so close to the completion of his work.

He struck the ground with his staff, and instantly felt the air change. The few flakes that remained in the air began to dance this way and that. The currents and paths of the wind were changed: to very precise effect in the area around the old window, and with great force too; but Althui was no great mage, and so like a stitcher of tapestries, he had left the magic tangled and untidy out of view, causing great and chaotic gusts across the old castle and over the empty space.

These extraneous charges roared and fought, away from Althui, but in his sphere of grace, the magic, the intended magic, took form. The panes of glass shifted along the floor, before tilting themselves forwards or backwards to stand on single edges or points: then they rose, lifting into the air. Some span, some moved forwards and backwards, and they danced and drifted past each other, finding their positions in the frame.

It took a minute for the shattered glass to complete its ballet. The frame of stained glass was now visible: it depicted an old man on a blue field, with a full white beard, and a full suit of grey armour. In one hand he had a hammer, and in the other, a clenched fist, stained in white instead of grey.

Althui panted. He wanted to cheer, but wanted more for the glass not to fall.

'You must know what *this* is,' he said to the air.

'It's a racket,' Oraschon grumbled. By Althui's estimation, he had seen only the last few seconds of the display, but everyone alive for miles around must have heard it in its entirety.

'I don't mean the spell — the window, fool!'

Oraschon studied it. 'No.'

Every piece of glass fell suddenly, some shattering on the floor, and some tumbling into the ravine. 'It's an Antion! Virgil Antion! An icon of Virgil Antion? Hello?!' Althui turned with an anger that surprised himself, even in the moment. 'Don't pretend for a second you don't recognise him.'

'Certainly not any more.' Oraschon didn't even seem to take any particular joy from the magic's sudden failure: that was the worst part.

'Oaf!' yelled Althui. 'I was told you would be a wise teacher, among the ruins in this mountain. Put aside "teacher" for now — you're barely an adult. The separation between you and a newborn babe

is only seen on your brow, and in your bones. No,' he ranted, 'it's worse, for a child at least years to learn about the world. I don't know what this isolation is to you, but you haven't even the temerity to greet it with curiosity. This!' He began to storm off, pulling his cloak about him, and gathering the arcane effects. 'It's a miracle you even recognised it as a magic, distinct from any other force around you that you blindly accept.'

'I recognised the music, a little bit.'

'What?' Althui spun around, trying to find the suddenly distant speaker, but Oraschon was gone.

Hours passed, and a night, too, and Althui made up his mind to leave.

When he left, the snow was neither the strongest nor weakest it had been; the wind neither the cruellest nor the gentlest; the sunlight neither the brightest day nor the dimmest night. Oraschon was there, obviously not to see Althui off, but instead with his back turned, kneeling on the ground, a few metres from the furthest brick arch that served, with some imagination, as an entrance to the castle.

'I am leaving, Oraschon,' Althui said.

'Yes,' he replied.

Althui sighed. 'You were useless. And disappointing.'

'I'm not here for you.' Oraschon replied.

Despite that, curiosity got the better of Althui. He took a few steps forwards, to see what Oraschon was curled around. It was stone, grey stone, mostly spherical with a few legs reaching into the snow. Small cylindrical vents extended from its upper hemisphere. Faded writing was carved into it, so faded that Althui could only make out a few isolated, meaningless letters. Oraschon ran his bony fingertips along its surface.

'What is that,' Althui intoned.

'It was left here... by the king.'

Like a child trying not to scare off a cat, Althui knelt down. His eyes flitted to the device and to Oraschon. 'Which King?'

'Oh... the King here, of that I'm sure. Decades ago, a few... this place was lower down then. You must have needed a moat then. Before me.'

'Who made it?'

'Not the King. I think the letters are *N C O M*. Perhaps, each one used to mean a name, like the inscriptions of the old dragons, with single letters and only so many names to choose from...'

'And what does it do.'

'Oh it does...' and then the spell was over. Oraschon tilted his head down, breathed in deep, and then stood up. 'This,' he said, in the same unforgiving and gravelly voice.

'And what is this,' Althui asked, already expecting the answer.

'I don't know.'

'Of course.'

And so Althui left.

And no one returned to Oraschon for almost a year. The snow is the same, winter or summer.

But eventually, someone new, not from Terroval, and slightly younger, climbed the same mountain. They had no spells, not of Althui's kind, although they had charts and instruments, some of which they were able to hang onto in the perilous journey up the mountain. They were frustrated too with Oraschon's indifference to the stars, and the tapestries, and the valleys and snow around them.

In frustration, several days in, they found the old chapel, and knelt to pray for strength and warmth by the stained glass window standing proud and improbably with little frame around it. After a few minutes, they became aware of Oraschon standing nearby.

'And what's this, then,' they asked Oraschon wearily.

'I think... it's an Antion.'