

# THE CHILD OF LIGHT

*A Legend of Aetheris — Christmas 1236*

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## PART 1 — The Darkest Night

Winter had descended upon Montségur like a curse.

For months, the Cathar fortress had stood defiant against the grey sky, besieged by the armies of the King of France and the crusaders come to purify this land of what they called heresy. The stones of the citadel, battered by the glacial winds of the Pyrenees, seemed themselves to shiver beneath the weight of so much suffering.

Below, the crusaders' camp spread like a dark wound across the valley. Thousands of tents, thousands of fires, thousands of men come to accomplish what they believed to be divine will. Amongst them, concealed in shadow, were the Hunters of the Cercle du Vallum, an ancient, secret brotherhood whose mission transcended the quarrels of faith held by ordinary men. They fought not for the king nor for the Church. They fought for the Wall, that invisible barrier separating the world of the living from the darkness that rumbled beyond.

And this evening, something troubled them.

Something ancient.

Something powerful.

But up above, within the walls of Montségur, the Cathars thought neither of the Hunters nor even of the crusaders. This night was different. This night, despite the siege, despite the hunger gnawing at their bellies and the cold biting at their bones, a fragile light glimmered in their hearts.

It was the night of the Nativity.

The night when, according to scripture, a child had come into the world to save humanity.

In the narrow lanes of the Cathar village, nestled against the flanks of the fortress, a few candles flickered at the windows. The Perfecti, those men and women who had renounced earthly possessions to devote themselves to the light, prayed in silence. Their voices, murmurs barely audible, rose like wisps of smoke towards a sky heavy with clouds.

The snow had begun to fall at dusk. First a few timid flakes, then a denser, steadier fall, gradually covering the thatched roofs and the paths of beaten earth. The world seemed to hold its breath, suspended between two ages, between two destinies.

And at the heart of this silence, in a small stone house with shuttered windows, a woman cried out.

Not a cry of terror.

A cry of life.

Blanche clutched the sheets between her fingers, her brow beaded with sweat despite the cold. Her belly, round and taut, contracted with a violence that left her gasping. Around her, three women busied themselves, their precise movements betraying the urgency. One held a basin of hot water, another prepared clean linens, the third murmured ancient prayers, words that did not quite belong to the language of men.

And in a corner of the room, seated upon a wooden stool, an old woman watched.

The Elder.

Her white hair, plaited in a long braid that fell to her waist, gleamed with an almost silver light in the glow of the candles. Her eyes, a deep grey like a stormy sky, never left Blanche. She did not move. She did not speak. She waited.

For she knew.

She had seen, in her visions, what would be born this night.

And it would change everything.

Outside, the wind howled suddenly, rattling the shutters. The candle flames wavered, casting dancing shadows upon the stone walls. Blanche let out another cry, louder, more piercing.

The child was coming.

And with it, a light the world had not seen for centuries.

## **PART 2 — Blanche**

Blanche was three-and-twenty years old, but this night, she felt as ancient as the mountains surrounding Montségur.

She had been born in this village, daughter of a weaver and a healer. Her mother had taught her the secrets of plants, the whispers that soothe fevers, the gestures that ease pain. Her father had taught her patience, that of the loom, where each thread must find its place for the whole to take shape.

She had grown up amongst the Cathars, cradled by their songs and their prayers. For them, the world was a battle between light and darkness, between spirit and matter. They did not fear death; they saw it as liberation, a return to the source of all things. But they cherished life, every life, as a fragile miracle to be protected.

Blanche had loved a man.

His name was Guilhem. A shepherd with calloused hands and a gentle smile, who wandered the mountain slopes with his flock. They had married in spring, beneath a brilliant blue sky, surrounded by their own. She had believed their happiness would last forever.

But war had come.

The crusaders had swept across the Languedoc like a black tide, burning villages, slaughtering those who refused to abjure their faith. Guilhem had gone to fight with the other men of the village. He had never returned. They had brought his body to her one autumn morning, pierced by three arrows, his face still turned towards the sky as though seeking the light even in death.

Blanche had wept.

She had screamed.

Then she had discovered she carried his child.

This child was all she had left of Guilhem. All she had left of hope in this devastated world. For months, she had protected it in her womb, whispering lullabies at night, promising it a better world even if she no longer truly believed.

And now, the child was coming.

'Breathe, Blanche, breathe,' Mathilde the midwife commanded.

Blanche tried. The air burnt her lungs. Her body was nothing but pain, successive waves that overwhelmed her then receded, leaving her but a few moments' respite before returning, stronger still.

She thought of Guilhem.

*You should have been here, she thought. You should have held my hand.  
You should have seen your child born.*

A tear rolled down her cheek, mingling with the sweat.

'It is nearly done,' murmured Mathilde. 'I can see the head. Push again, my child. Push!'

Blanche gathered what remained of her strength. She gripped the sheets so tightly her knuckles whitened. And she pushed, with all her soul, with all her being, as though pushing against the darkness itself.

In her corner, the Elder rose.

Her grey eyes illuminated with a strange light, not natural, not human. She took a step towards the bed, then another, as though drawn by an invisible force.

'It comes,' she murmured. 'The Breath comes.'

Mathilde cast her an intrigued glance, but had no time to respond.

For at that very moment, in the distance, a bell tolled.

Midnight.

The night of the Nativity had begun.

And the child chose that precise moment to be born.

## PART 3 — The Birth

Blanche's cry mingled with that of the newborn, two voices intertwining in the night like threads of the same cloth.

Mathilde received the child in her arms. Her movements, though honed by dozens of deliveries, trembled slightly. She cut the cord, cleaned the small body covered in blood and fluid, then wrapped it in clean linen.

'It is a girl,' she announced, her voice moved. 'A beautiful little girl.'

Blanche stretched out her arms, short of breath, her eyes brimming with tears.

'Give her to me. Please. Give her to me.'

Mathilde approached the bed and delicately placed the child against her mother's breast. Blanche closed her arms around her, holding her as though fearing she might be snatched away. The baby ceased crying almost instantly. Her small eyes, still creased, half-opened, and Blanche saw within them something extraordinary.

A light.

Not the reflection of the candles. Not an illusion born of fatigue. A light of its own, gentle, golden, that seemed to emanate from the child herself.

'By all the saints...' murmured one of the women.

Blanche did not hear her. She saw only her daughter, that perfect little face, those tiny fingers closing upon the fabric of her gown. She felt her heart beating against her own, two rhythms seeking each other, finding each other, harmonising.

'My daughter,' she breathed. 'My little daughter.'

It was then that it happened.

The fire in the hearth, which had burnt low for hours, suddenly rose. The flames climbed, high, vivid, devouring the wood with a new hunger. Their colour changed from ordinary orange, passing to gold, then to white, so intense that the women had to avert their gaze.

'What is—' Mathilde began.

She had no time to finish.

The water in the basin began to tremble. Not as though someone had struck it, no. It rippled from within, drawing concentric circles that widened, crossed, formed impossible patterns. Then it rose. A few drops at

first, then more, suspended in the air like liquid diamonds, slowly spinning around the bed where Blanche and her child lay.

The women retreated, terrified.

'Lord, protect us,' stammered one of them, crossing herself.

But it was not finished.

The floor vibrated beneath their feet. Not violently, gently, like a beating heart, like a deep breath. The stones of the house, centuries old, seemed to awaken, to resonate with an energy they had long forgotten. Cracks appeared in the mortar, not destructive, but luminous, golden veins pulsing to the rhythm of that vibration.

And finally, the wind.

The shutters, though firmly closed, flew open. But instead of the glacial cold of winter, a warm breeze rushed into the room. It carried a scent of spring, of wildflowers, of earth after rain. It caressed the cheeks of the petrified women, made the flames dance, lifted Blanche's hair.

And at the centre of it all, the child.

Her eyes were wide open now. And they shone.

With a radiance that contained fire, water, earth and air.

With a radiance that contained the Four Breaths.

Silence fell as suddenly as the wonder had begun. The flames resumed their normal size. The water fell back into the basin. The floor ceased its trembling. The wind fell silent. The shutters closed gently, as though pushed by an invisible hand.

Only the Elder had not moved.

She stood at the foot of the bed, her grey eyes fixed upon the child, silent tears flowing down her wrinkled cheeks.

'The Four Breaths,' she murmured, her voice broken with emotion. 'They are within her. All four. United as they have not been since... since...'

She did not finish her sentence.

She had no need to.

All the women present had understood.

This child was not ordinary.

This child was a miracle.

Blanche, trembling, gazed at her daughter. Terror should have overwhelmed her. She should have feared this creature who had made the elements dance at her birth. But meeting her child's gaze, that golden, luminous, innocent gaze, she felt but one thing.

An infinite love.

'My little light,' she whispered, kissing the baby's forehead. 'My little star.'

## PART 4 — The Gift

The Elder approached slowly. She extended a wrinkled hand and placed it upon the child's head. Her eyes closed, and her lips moved in silence, forming words in a language no one else understood.

Then she opened her eyes.

'What will you name her?' she asked, her voice grave.

Blanche did not hesitate.

The name had come to her during her pregnancy, whispered by the wind, sung by the streams, carved into her dreams. She had known it before she even knew the child would be a girl.

'Aélys,' she replied. 'She shall be called Aélys.'

Aélys.

The name floated in the air of the room like a prayer.

The Elder nodded slowly, her grey eyes gleaming with approval.

'Aélys,' she repeated. 'She who bears the light. It is a true name. A just name.'

She turned towards the other women, who still stood near the wall, not daring to approach. Fear showed on their faces, but also wonder. They had seen things this night they would never forget.

'What you have seen must not leave this room,' said the Elder, her voice firm. 'No one must know. Not yet. Not whilst the child is unsafe.'

'But... what is she?' Mathilde the midwife dared to ask. 'What has happened?'

The Elder sighed. She took a few steps towards the window, slightly parted the shutter and gazed outside. The snow still fell, silent, covering the world in a white mantle.

'There exists a legend,' she began without turning. 'A legend as old as our faith. It tells that in the beginning, before men, before even the angels, there was the Breath. A primordial force, born of light itself. This Breath divided into four: fire, water, earth and air, to create the world we know.'

She turned towards Blanche and the child.

'But sometimes, very rarely, the Breath chooses to reunite. To incarnate itself in a human being. A being capable of wielding the four elements as one. A being of pure light.'

'And Aélys...' murmured Blanche.

'Aélys is that being,' confirmed the Elder. 'The last time such a child was born was more than a thousand years ago. It is said that Mary of Magdala herself bore this gift, transmitted by Christ in person. Since then, the Breath has fragmented, dispersed across bloodlines. Some women are born with an affinity for fire. Others for water, earth or air. But never all four together. Never... until this night.'

She approached the bed and once more placed her hand upon Aélys's head. The child slept now, peacefully, as though the wonders of her birth had been but a dream.

'This child is a hope,' said the Elder. 'A hope for us all. Her bloodline shall carry the Breath across the centuries. And one day, perhaps in hundreds of years, a woman of her blood shall rise to accomplish what we can only imagine.'

'But the crusaders...' one of the women interjected. 'If ever they learn...'

'They must not learn,' cut in the Elder. 'No one must learn. Especially not...'

She broke off. Her eyes narrowed, as though sensing something in the distance. Something dark.

'Especially not whom?' asked Blanche, suddenly anxious.

The Elder did not respond immediately. She seemed to be listening to something the others could not hear. Then her face hardened.

'The Cercle du Vallum,' she said at last. 'They are here. In the crusaders' camp. And they have sensed the birth of Aélys.'

A shiver ran through the room.

'Who are they?' asked Mathilde.

'Hunters,' replied the Elder. 'Not ordinary hunters. They track all that threatens the Wall, that barrier between our world and the darkness. They believe they protect humanity. But their fear blinds them. For them, a being like Aélys is not a miracle. It is a threat. An abomination to be destroyed before it can grow.'

Blanche clutched her child tighter against her.

'No,' she breathed. 'No, they shall not touch her. I will not let them...'

The Elder placed a soothing hand upon her shoulder.

'Calm yourself, my child. We shall protect her. All of us together. But this night... this night shall be long.'

She straightened and faced the women.

'Stay here. Barricade the door. Let no one enter. I shall go warn the Perfecti. If the Cercle comes... we shall be ready.'

She moved towards the door, but stopped at the threshold. She turned one last time towards Blanche and Aélys.

'You have given birth to a miracle, Blanche. A miracle that shall change the world. But miracles... miracles always have a price.'

With these words, she disappeared into the night.

And somewhere, below the mountain, in the camp of shadows, men in armour were already raising their eyes towards Montségur.

They had sensed the light.

And they were coming to extinguish it.

## **PART 5 — The Camp of Shadows**

The crusaders' camp spread at the foot of Montségur like a slumbering beast, its thousands of fires glowing red in the night like eyes of ember. But set apart from the main encampment, concealed in a fold of the valley, stood a cluster of more modest, darker tents, which the ordinary soldiers instinctively avoided.

The quarter of the Cercle du Vallum.

Here, no songs, no laughter, none of those sounds of revelry that animated the rest of the camp on this night of celebration. The Hunters of the Vallum did not celebrate the Nativity like the others. For them, this night was a night of vigil, a night when the barriers between worlds grew dangerously thin.

At the centre of the tents, beneath a pavilion of black canvas marked with a blood-red cross, Commander Renaud de Montfort was consulting an ancient map by the light of a single candle. He was a man of fifty years, with a face hewn as though by a billhook and a gaze of steel. Twenty years in the service of the Cercle had whitened his hair and hardened his heart. He had seen things most men could not have borne. He had killed creatures most men could not imagine.

And this night, he sensed something.

Something abnormal.

The Wall was vibrating. He perceived it in his bones, in his flesh, in that sixth sense all Hunters developed with time. A disturbance. A wave. Like a stone cast into a perfectly still lake.

No. Not a stone. A boulder. An entire mountain.

Renaud rose abruptly, overturning his chair. His heart pounded. Never, in twenty years of service, had he sensed such a signature. The four Breaths. Together. United in a single source, up there, in the accursed fortress.

*Impossible, he thought. The four have not manifested together since the time of Mary of Magdala.*

And yet, he sensed it. As clearly as he sensed the biting cold of this December night.

The canvas of the tent lifted. A man entered, young, breathless, his eyes wide.

'Commander,' he said, kneeling, his voice trembling. 'You have sensed it too?'

'How could I not sense it, Geoffroy?' replied Renaud, his voice dangerously calm. 'Every Hunter in the camp must have perceived it. Such a wave...'

'What does it mean?'

Renaud took a few paces within the tent, his hands clasped behind his back. His mind was racing, analysing the implications.

'A birth,' he murmured. 'At exactly midnight. The night of the Nativity. It can only be a birth.'

A child bearing the Four Breaths.

It was both a threat and an opportunity. Such a creature, if it grew, could become the most powerful the world had ever known. It could strengthen the Wall to levels never before reached. Or destroy it. For the Breath was a neutral force, neither good nor evil. All depended upon its bearer.

And the Cercle du Vallum took no chances.

'How many men have you under your command this night?' asked Renaud.

'A dozen, Commander. The others are...'

'A dozen will suffice. Choose your five best. We ascend.'

Geoffroy paled.

'We... we ascend? But Commander, the fortress is impregnable. The siege has lasted months and...'

'We are not attacking the fortress, fool,' cut in Renaud with contempt. 'We are infiltrating. I have had all the secret passages of this mountain mapped. There exists one, ancient, forgotten by all, that leads directly to the Cathar village.'

He seized his sword and girded it to his waist.

'Our mission is simple,' he continued. 'Find the child. Eliminate it. Before it becomes a threat.'

Geoffroy hesitated.

'Commander... it is the night of the Nativity. To kill a newborn, this night of all nights...'

Renaud's eyes blazed with anger.

'The Nativity? You dare speak to me of the Nativity? Listen well, boy. Christ himself entrusted us with the guardianship of the Wall. He sacrificed his life so that we might protect this world from darkness. And you would have me let live a creature that could open the gates of Hell?'

He approached Geoffroy, towering over him with his full height.

'A child is but a child. But a child who bears the Four Breaths becomes an adult who bears the Four Breaths. And an adult with such power... that is the end of all we defend.'

He stepped back.

'So, are you coming? Or would you rather stay here whimpering about the Nativity?'

Geoffroy lowered his eyes.

'I am coming, Commander.'

'Good. Assemble the men. We depart within the hour.'

Geoffroy left the tent, leaving Renaud alone with his thoughts. The Commander turned towards the map spread upon his table, towards the point marked with a red cross indicating the fortress of Montségur.

'An abomination,' he murmured. 'That is all you are, little creature. An abomination to be smothered in its cradle.'

He did not know, could not know, that this 'abomination' would one day be the ancestor of she who would save the Wall he claimed to protect.

The irony of History is sometimes cruel.

## **PART 6 — Aldric**

Amongst the men Geoffroy assembled that night, there was one who was not like the others.

Aldric de Servian was two-and-twenty years old. He was a tall, slender young man, with chestnut hair and eyes of a dark green, almost forest. He wore the armour of the Hunters of the Vallum with a stiffness that betrayed his inexperience: he had joined the Cercle but two years past, and this was his first major mission.

But it was not inexperience that distinguished him from the others.

It was doubt.

Aldric had been born into a family of minor nobility in the Languedoc, too poor to aspire to honours but too proud to mingle with the common folk. His father had been a knight, killed in the crusade against the Albigensians when Aldric was but eight years old. His mother had raised him alone, transmitting to him the values of honour and justice.

'A true knight protects the innocent,' she would tell him. 'He never strikes one who cannot defend himself.'

These words had accompanied him all his life. They had guided him when, at twenty years of age, a recruiter from the Cercle du Vallum had proposed he join their ranks. He had been told of a sacred mission: to protect the world from the forces of darkness, to maintain the Wall, to combat evil in all its forms.

Aldric had accepted with enthusiasm.

But two years within the Cercle had eroded that enthusiasm.

He had seen things. Things he had not been told during his recruitment. He had seen Hunters burn entire villages on mere suspicion. He had seen women accused of witchcraft tortured until they confessed crimes they had not committed. He had seen children torn from their mothers because a scout had 'sensed' something within them.

And each time, he had remained silent.

Each time, he had told himself that his superiors knew better than he. That they had their reasons. That the evil they did was necessary for a greater good.

But this night...

This night was different.

'You have heard the orders?' his companion asked him, a stocky man named Bertrand.

Aldric nodded without responding. They stood at the entrance to the assembly tent, adjusting their weapons and equipment. Around them, the other Hunters did likewise: hardened men, with closed faces, who seemed not the least troubled by the nature of their mission.

'A baby,' Bertrand insisted in a low voice. 'We are going to kill a baby, Aldric. On Christmas night.'

'I know.'

'And it does nothing to you?'

Aldric clenched his jaw.

'Those are the orders.'

'The orders,' repeated Bertrand with bitterness. 'Always the orders. Do you know what my mother said when I left to join the Cercle? She said: "Do not become a monster in God's name." I wonder what she would think if she saw me tonight.'

Aldric did not respond. But Bertrand's words found an echo within him, awakening questions he had buried for too long.

*What is a monster?*

*One who is born with a power he did not choose?*

*Or one who kills an innocent because he is ordered to?*

Commander Renaud appeared, interrupting his thoughts. His face was marble, his eyes two shards of ice.

'We are ready,' he announced. 'You know the mission. We enter, we find the child, we eliminate it, we leave. No witnesses. No mercy. Is that understood?'

A murmur of assent ran through the group.

'Good. Move out.'

They set off, dark silhouettes melting into the snowy night. Aldric followed, his heart beating an increasingly erratic rhythm as they moved away from the camp.

*A baby.*

*We are going to kill a baby.*

He thought of his mother, of her words, of all she had taught him.

*A true knight protects the innocent.*

But who was innocent in this war? The Cathars whom the Cercle helped massacre? The child just born with a power she had not asked for? Or the Hunters themselves, convinced they served a just cause?

Aldric did not know the answer.

But he sensed, in the depths of his being, that he would discover it this night.

One way or another.

## PART 7 — The Ascent

The secret passage of which Commander Renaud had spoken did indeed exist.

Concealed behind a frozen waterfall, on the mountainside, its entrance was so narrow one had to slip through sideways. But once inside, the tunnel widened, winding through the rock in total darkness that only their torches could pierce.

The air was glacial and damp, laden with a scent of earth and millennial stone. The silence was disturbed only by the sound of their footsteps and the crackling of flames. No one spoke. Each was locked in his own thoughts, his own apprehensions.

Aldric walked at the rear of the group, just ahead of Bertrand. The glow of his torch cast dancing shadows upon the tunnel walls, creating grotesque shapes that seemed to watch them, to judge them.

*You are going to kill a child, the shadows seemed to say. An innocent newborn. Is this why you joined the Cercle?*

He shook his head, banishing these thoughts. He had to concentrate. The mission. The orders. That was all that mattered.

And yet...

'We are close,' murmured the Commander at the front of the group.

The tunnel had begun to climb, ever steeper. The Hunters progressed in silence, their fluid movements betraying years of training. They had done this dozens of times: infiltrate, strike, disappear. It was their speciality.

But never to kill a baby.

At last, they reached the end of the tunnel. A narrow opening gave onto the outside, concealed behind a bush of frozen brambles. The Commander signalled a halt and risked a glance outside.

The Cathar village.

It was there, nestled against the flanks of the fortress, its houses of stone and thatch covered with fresh snow. A few lights still shone at the windows: the Cathars kept vigil, despite the late hour. Christmas night.

'Geoffroy,' murmured Renaud. 'Where exactly?'

The scout closed his eyes, concentrating on that sixth sense that allowed him to perceive disturbances in the Wall.

'There,' he said, indicating a house set apart from the others. 'That is where I sense the signature. It is... powerful. More powerful than anything I have ever sensed.'

Renaud nodded.

'Perfect. We move. Standard formation. No noise. No mistakes.'

They slipped from the tunnel, one by one, melting into the shadows of the village. The snow muffled their steps, unwitting accomplice to their murderous mission. The few Cathar guards, frozen with cold and exhausted by months of siege, saw nothing.

Aldric followed the movement, but each step cost him more. His heart beat so loudly he felt the entire village must hear it. His hands trembled, not from cold, but from something else. Something he dared not name.

Fear?

Or shame?

They approached the house Geoffroy had indicated. Through the closed shutters, a faint light filtered. Voices could be heard within, women's voices, gentle, murmuring. And sometimes, the light gurgling of an infant.

The child.

She was there.

The Commander made a sign. The Hunters positioned themselves: two at the rear of the house, two at the sides, and the last two, including Aldric, at the main entrance with Renaud.

'Ready?' whispered the Commander.

Silent nods answered him.

'Then let us go.'

With a powerful kick, he smashed open the door.

## **PART 8 — The Intrusion**

The door flew apart, projecting fragments of wood into the room.

The women screamed.

Blanche, who had been dozing on the bed with Aélys in her arms, sat bolt upright, her heart pounding. Her eyes, still veiled with sleep, widened in horror at the sight of the dark silhouettes invading her home.

Men in armour. Swords. Red crosses upon their chests.

The Cercle du Vallum.

'No!' she cried, clutching Aélys against her. 'No, no, no!'

The other women retreated against the wall, terrified. Mathilde attempted to place herself before the bed, but a Hunter shoved her brutally, sending her crashing to the floor.

Commander Renaud entered last, his gaze sweeping the room until it came to rest upon Blanche and the child in her arms.

'It is she,' he said, his voice cold. 'There she is.'

He took a step forward.

'Give me the child. And no one shall be harmed.'

Blanche shook her head, tears of terror streaming down her cheeks.

'No. I beg you. She has done nothing. She is but a baby...'

'She is not "but a baby,"' cut in Renaud. 'She is an abomination. A creature that threatens all we defend. Give her to me, and I promise you a swift death for her. Without suffering.'

'NEVER!'

The cry came from the door to the adjacent room. The Elder appeared, standing straight despite her great age, her grey eyes blazing with ancient wrath.

'You shall not touch this child, Hunter. Not whilst I live.'

Renaud regarded her with contempt.

'An old Cathar witch. What an impressive threat.'

'I am more than that,' replied the Elder. 'And you know it.'

She raised one hand, and the air in the room seemed to charge with electricity. The candle flames wavered. A breeze from nowhere made the Hunters' cloaks snap.

Renaud frowned.

'A manipulator of the Breath. Interesting. But you are but one, old woman. And we are six.'

'Seven,' Aldric corrected despite himself.

All eyes turned to him. He had spoken without thinking, by pure reflex, and immediately regretted his words. The Commander fixed him with barely veiled irritation.

'Seven,' he conceded. 'All the more reason not to resist.'

The Elder did not flinch.

'You may kill us. All of us. But this child shall live. It is written.'

'Nothing is written,' retorted Renaud. 'Save what we write ourselves.'

He raised his sword.

'Last chance. The child.'

Blanche clutched Aélys tighter. The baby, awakened by the chaos, began to cry, a sharp, piercing wail that seemed to resonate beyond the walls of the house.

And something strange occurred.

The candle flames suddenly rose, high, vivid, golden. The water in the bucket near the hearth began to boil. The floor trembled beneath their feet. And the wind, that impossible wind, returned, blowing through the room despite the closed walls.

The Four Breaths.

Responding to the cry of their bearer.

Several Hunters retreated, frightened despite their training. Even Renaud seemed troubled for an instant.

But only an instant.

'She is more powerful than I thought,' he admitted. 'All the more reason to eliminate her now!'

He raised his sword above Blanche and the child.

'In the name of the Cercle du Vallum and the protection of the Wall, I condemn this creature...'

'NO!'

The cry resounded through the room.

And this time, it did not come from Blanche.

It did not come from the Elder.

It came from Aldric.

## PART 9 — The Choice

Aldric never knew exactly what had happened within him at that instant.

Perhaps it was the sight of that terrified mother, clutching her child against her with the strength of despair. Perhaps it was the baby's cry, innocent, vulnerable, ignorant of the fate awaiting her. Perhaps it was the memory of his own mother, of her words, of all she had taught him about honour and justice.

Or perhaps, simply, he had reached his limit.

The limit of what a man can accept doing in the name of a cause.

Before even realising what he was doing, he had drawn his sword and interposed himself between Renaud and the bed where Blanche and Aélys lay.

The silence that followed was deafening.

'What are you doing, boy?' asked Renaud, his voice dangerously low.

Aldric did not retreat. His hand trembled upon his sword's hilt, but his voice remained firm.

'I refuse.'

'You refuse?'

'Yes. I refuse to kill a child. A newborn. On the night of the Nativity. It is... it is monstrous.'

Renaud stared at him as though he had lost his mind.

'Monstrous? MONSTROUS? What is monstrous is this creature that could destroy the Wall! What is monstrous is your cowardice before your duty!'

'My duty,' replied Aldric, 'is to protect the innocent. That is what I was taught. That is why I joined the Cercle. To protect. Not to slaughter babies!'

He took a step forward, his blade pointed at his former commander.

'If the Cercle has been reduced to killing newborns, then the Cercle has lost its soul. And I refuse to be part of it.'

A shocked murmur ran through the other Hunters. No one had ever opposed Commander Renaud. No one had dared.

Renaud himself had passed beyond surprise. His face was now a mask of cold rage.

'You are a traitor, Aldric de Servian. A traitor to your order, to your mission, to your God.'

'If my God wishes me to kill children, then he is not my God.'

The words hung in the air, heavy with consequence.

Renaud raised his sword.

'Then you shall die with them.'

He attacked.

Aldric parried the blow just in time, the clash of metal against metal resounding through the room. The two men faced each other, their blades clashing with fierce violence. Aldric was younger, faster, but Renaud had the experience of dozens of battles. They were evenly matched.

The other Hunters hesitated. Should they intervene? Help their commander? But against one of their own?

The Elder did not give them time to decide.

She raised both hands and spoke words in an ancient tongue, so ancient it predated Latin, Greek, perhaps even humanity. A wave of invisible force struck the Hunters, hurling them against the walls. One struck a beam and collapsed, unconscious. Another was thrown through the window, disappearing into the night.

Chaos reigned.

Aldric and Renaud continued their duel, indifferent to the rest. Their swords traced mortal arcs through the air, each blow struck with the intention to kill. Blood began to flow: some from Aldric, gashed at the shoulder; some from Renaud, scratched across the face.

'You think you can defeat me, boy?' gasped Renaud. 'I have killed demons more powerful than you!'

'Perhaps,' replied Aldric. 'But you have never faced someone with nothing to lose.'

He feinted left, then pivoted right. His blade found an opening in Renaud's guard and sank into his flank, between two plates of armour.

The Commander screamed in pain and retreated, one hand pressed against his wound. Blood, black in the dim light, flowed between his fingers.

'You... you shall pay for this...' he growled.

But he knew he had lost. Wounded, weakened, with half his men out of action, he could no longer lead the assault.

'Fall back!' he ordered the Hunters still standing. 'FALL BACK!'

The survivors obeyed, dragging their wounded comrades towards the door. Renaud was the last to leave. At the threshold, he turned towards Aldric, his eyes burning with hatred.

'You are dead, Aldric de Servian. The Cercle shall hunt you to the ends of the earth. You shall never know peace. Never.'

'Then let them hunt me,' replied Aldric. 'At least I shall die with my honour intact.'

Renaud spat at his feet, then disappeared into the night.

Silence fell upon the house.

Aldric stood motionless for a moment, his sword still raised, his breath short. Then, slowly, he lowered it. His legs trembled. The adrenaline of combat was ebbing, leaving exhaustion in its wake.

He turned.

Blanche was watching him, Aélys clasped against her breast. Her eyes were full of tears, but not of terror. Of gratitude.

'Thank you,' she murmured. 'Thank you...'

Aldric did not respond. He did not know what to say.

He had just betrayed everything he had believed in.

And yet, for the first time in two years, he felt at peace with himself.

## **PART 10 — After the Battle**

The Elder was the first to break the silence.

She advanced towards Aldric, her steps slow but assured, her grey eyes scrutinising the young man as though they could read his soul. And perhaps they could.

'You are bleeding,' she said simply.

Aldric looked down at his shoulder. The wound he had received during the combat was bleeding profusely, soaking his tunic with dark red. He had not even felt it.

'It is nothing,' he replied.

'It is not nothing. Sit.'

It was not a suggestion. Aldric obeyed, letting himself fall onto a stool near the hearth. The other women were beginning to rise, dazed, gradually realising they were still alive.

The Elder approached him with clean linens and a phial containing a greenish liquid. She set about cleaning his wound with expert movements, indifferent to his grimaces of pain.

'Why?' she asked without raising her eyes.

'Why what?'

'Why did you save us? You are one of them. A Hunter of the Vallum. You could have let us die and accomplished your mission.'

Aldric thought for a moment. The question deserved an honest answer.

'Because... because there are limits. Limits a man must not cross, even for a cause he believes just. Killing a child... a newborn... that was beyond those limits.'

The Elder nodded slowly.

'And now? You can no longer return to your own. The Cercle will consider you a traitor. They will hunt you, as your commander said.'

'I know.'

'You have no more home. No more family. No more place in this world.'

'I know.'

She finished bandaging his wound and straightened, looking him in the eyes.

'Then stay with us.'

Aldric blinked, surprised.

'What?'

'Stay with us. With the Cathars. You have proved this night that you are worth more than those who trained you. You have proved that you have a heart, and a soul, and an honour that the Cercle tried to tear from you.'

She placed a hand upon his good shoulder.

'Here, you shall find a new family. A new purpose. And perhaps... perhaps the redemption you seek without knowing it.'

Aldric did not know what to reply. Everything he had known, everything he had believed in, had just collapsed in a single night. He was lost, adrift, without anchor.

But something in the Elder's words found an echo within him. A possibility. A hope.

'I... I accept,' he said finally. 'I shall stay. I shall protect you. It is all I know how to do.'

The Elder smiled, a rare, precious smile that illuminated her wrinkled face.

'Then welcome amongst us, Aldric de Servian. Or should I say... Aldric of the Perfecti.'

## **PART 11 — The Promise**

Later, as dawn began to break upon the horizon, Aldric found himself alone with Blanche and Aélys.

The other women had retired to rest, exhausted by the night's events. The Elder had gone to alert the other Perfecti, to organise defences in case the Cercle attempted another attack. The Cathar village, shaken by the intrusion, was slowly catching its breath.

Aldric sat near the dying fire, staring at the embers without truly seeing them. Blanche, upon the bed, gently rocked Aélys, who had fallen back asleep.

A peaceful silence reigned. The first true silence in hours.

'You could have died,' Blanche said finally.

Aldric raised his eyes towards her.

'Yes.'

'Why did you risk your life for us? You do not even know us.'

He thought for a moment.

'My mother,' he said at last. 'She always told me that a true knight protects the innocent. That he never strikes one who cannot defend himself. I had forgotten those words. This night... this night, I remembered them.'

Blanche gazed at him for a long moment, her eyes bright in the light of the dawning day.

'Your mother must be a wise woman.'

'She was. She died three years ago.'

'I am sorry.'

'Do not be. She would be proud of what I did this night. I know it.'

Another silence settled, but it was not an awkward silence. It was a silence of understanding, of two souls recognising each other despite the impossible circumstances that had brought them together.

'She is special, is she not?' asked Aldric, indicating Aélys with his gaze.

Blanche stroked her child's hair.

'Yes. More than I could ever have imagined.'

'The Elder says she bears the Four Breaths. That such a gift has not manifested for centuries.'

'So she says.'

'Then... was the Cercle right to fear her?'

Blanche raised her eyes towards him, and her gaze hardened.

'No. They were wrong. Aélys is not a threat. She is a promise. A light in this darkness. And I refuse to believe that a light can be evil.'

Aldric nodded slowly. He understood. Better still, he felt the same. Looking at this small being asleep in her mother's arms, he did not see an abomination. He saw a miracle.

A miracle he had almost destroyed.

The thought made him shiver.

'I wish to make a promise,' he said suddenly.

Blanche looked at him, surprised.

'A promise?'

Aldric rose and approached the bed. Slowly, with an almost religious reverence, he knelt before Blanche and Aélys.

'I swear to protect this child,' he declared, his voice grave. 'This night, and all the nights remaining to me. I shall be her guardian, her shield, her sword. Whilst I live, no harm shall reach her.'

Blanche felt tears rising to her eyes.

'You do not have to do this. You have already given so much...'

'It is not an obligation,' cut in Aldric. 'It is a choice. My choice. The first true choice I have made since I joined the Cercle.'

He extended his hand and, with infinite gentleness, brushed Aélys's forehead. The child stirred in her sleep, a smile passing fleetingly across her tiny lips.

'I shall protect you, little light,' he murmured. 'I swear it.'

At that instant, the door of the house opened. The Elder entered, stopping short at the sight before her: Aldric kneeling, his hand upon Aélys's forehead, Blanche in tears.

She said nothing. She had no need to say anything.

She simply advanced and placed her wrinkled hand upon Aldric's head, as she had done for Aélys a few hours earlier.

'You have spoken an oath,' she said. 'An oath of protection. An oath of light against darkness.'

'Yes.'

'Then know this, Aldric de Servian. This oath shall not die with you. It shall be passed on. From generation to generation. Through your blood, your line, your descendants.'

Her grey eyes began to shine with a prophetic light.

'One day, in centuries to come, a man of your blood shall stand beside a woman of Aélys's blood. And together, they shall accomplish what we can only imagine. They shall be the promise fulfilled. The union of light and protection. The Breath and the Steel, united at last.'

Aldric felt a shiver run through his entire being.

'How can you know this?'

The Elder smiled.

'Because I see it. In your eyes. In hers. In the invisible threads of destiny that already bind you to one another. This night, you did not merely save a child, Aldric. You sealed the future.'

She withdrew her hand and stepped back.

'Now, rest. Dawn is breaking, and with it, a new day. A new beginning.'

She left the room as silently as she had entered.

Aldric remained kneeling a moment longer, the weight of her words pressing upon his shoulders. Then, slowly, he rose.

Blanche was watching him with an expression he could not decipher. Gratitude? Wonder? Perhaps both.

'Thank you,' she said simply.

'No,' he replied. 'Thank you. And her. This night, you have restored me to myself.'

He moved towards the door, then stopped at the threshold. He turned one last time.

'I shall watch over you. Both of you. Until my last breath.'

And with those words, he stepped out into the dawning light, leaving Blanche and Aélys bathed in the first rays of day.

The light of a new beginning.

## **PART 12 — Epilogue**

The years passed.

Aélys grew under the benevolent gaze of her mother, of the Elder, and of Aldric, who had become her most devoted protector. She was a curious, lively child, with eyes that seemed always to see beyond appearances. The gift she bore within her manifested gradually, first through small wonders, then through acts of ever greater power.

She learnt to master the Four Breaths under the Elder's tutelage. Fire obeyed her emotions, water her desires, earth her will, wind her thoughts. She became what the Cathars called a 'Perfecta', not in the religious sense, but in the literal. An accomplished woman, balanced, in harmony with the forces of the universe.

The siege of Montségur ended in March 1244.

The fortress fell, as History had foretold. More than two hundred Perfecti were burnt alive upon an immense pyre at the foot of the mountain. But neither Aélys, nor Blanche, nor Aldric numbered amongst them. They had fled in October 1243, guided by a vision of the Elder's that had shown them what was to come.

The Elder herself had remained.

She had chosen to die with her people, to join the flames rather than live in flight. Her last words to Aélys had been:

'The light never dies, my child. It transforms. It is passed on. Bear it with pride, and pass it to those who shall come after you.'

Aélys never forgot those words.

She had children.

Daughters, all of them, as though destiny itself had wished to preserve the female line of the Breath. Each carried within her a portion of the gift, some stronger, others weaker, but never did the flame entirely go out.

Aldric lived to an advanced age. He never married, devoting his entire life to the protection of Aélys and her descendants. It is said he died peacefully, in his sleep, a smile upon his lips, as though death itself were but a passage to another form of service.

But before dying, he had fathered a son.

A son born of a brief and intense love with a woman he had met upon his travels. A son he had named Guillaume, and to whom he had passed on the story of that Christmas night of 1236. The story of the choice. The story of the oath.

Guillaume had sons.

Who had sons.

Who had daughters.

Generations of protectors, bearing within them the memory of Aldric, the rebel, the traitor, the saviour. Some joined the Cercle du Vallum, perhaps unaware of the irony of their blood. Others remained apart, simple guardians without banner, faithful to the original oath. And amongst these descendants, one particular line distinguished itself, that which would pass on to its daughters an empathetic heart, a profound sensitivity to the suffering of others, as though Aldric's very soul watched over them through the ages.

And the line of Aélys continued also.

Daughters who bore daughters. Priestesses, healers, ordinary women who carried within them something extraordinary. The Breath, fragmented but never extinguished, crossing the centuries like an underground river.

Sometimes, the two bloodlines crossed. A descendant of Aldric protecting a descendant of Aélys without even knowing it. History repeating its pattern, again and again, preparing the ground for the moment when all would finally be fulfilled.

And then came the year 2025.

In an Oxford library, a young librarian with Venetian blonde hair and sea-green eyes was leafing through an ancient manuscript. Her name was Clara. She knew nothing of her heritage, nothing of the centuries of transmission that had led to her. She did not know that Aélys's blood flowed in her veins, that the Breath of the Four Elements slumbered in the depths of her being, waiting to be awakened.

She raised her eyes.

And met the gaze of a man.

Tall. Dark-haired. Eyes of a deep brown that seemed to carry the weight of the world. His name was Michael. He did not yet know that he descended from Aldric de Servian through his mother Eleanor, a woman of remarkable empathy who had passed on to him, despite the rigid upbringing imposed by his father Edward, that profound sensitivity to others, that instinct for protection that had slumbered in his blood for eight hundred years.

Their gazes met.

And something awakened.

Something ancient. Powerful. Destined.

The oath spoken one Christmas night, nearly eight hundred years before, began to be fulfilled.

The Breath and the Steel.

The Light and the Protection.

Clara and Michael.

They did not yet know it.

But they were the beginning and the culmination.

The alpha and the omega of a story that had crossed the centuries.

And somewhere, beyond the veil of time, Aélys smiled.

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**THE END**