

# Chapter One

*The mark of those who have passed the Trials of Dusang has ever been the gules tassel. It remains the gules tassel, even when they have no sash from which to hang their honor.*

*Sash Law*

Gilliam slithered through Somfaux's market with the practiced ease of the pickpocket he had once been. Despite the red tassel dangling from his belt, the crush of shoppers ignored him. On the first day of the summer market, not even a dusang mage who'd once been a thief could stand between a Somfaux burgher and a bargain.

The throng of people, their minds fixed on their business, both comforted him and drove a scream to his throat. For them, nothing had changed. For him, the world tilted at a dangerous angle, and he could smell the stink of his own funeral pyre.

A child darted through the crowd, jerking his mind away from his worries, a candied plum in her hand.

"Oi!" A tall woman leant out from behind her stall and shook her fist.

Gilliam stepped sideways as the girl flashed past him. The vendor glared. Gilliam ran his hand through his curly black hair as he smirked. She responded with a thumb thrust under her index finger.

The exchange lifted his somber mood. Getting the better of a merchant—even by proxy—brightened the darkest of days. He let the swirl of the crowd carry him past the stall and toward the edge of the giant square.

Beyond the market lay quieter streets, leading him out of the walled inner city. With the boisterous vendors and shoppers behind him, his good humor faded. The news from the rechtshus lay leaden inside him, like a rock tied to the trodden tassel dangling from his belt. For once, the law itself wasn't the problem, and some of the rechtsprechers were even angry on his behalf.

No, it wasn't the law.

It was the sashed.

He needed advice. And that drew him back to his old haunts, where his story had begun, in the shantytown beyond the always-open gates. Somfaux had long ago outgrown its walls, and much of the town's trade happened on the ramshackle roads outside those ancient defenses.

Gilliam turned off Stink Street, passed the tanners guild, and headed for the Drunken Boar. He paused in the tavern's door, giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness of the cave-like interior. A banked fire was the only source of light, his sight of the flames blocked by a heap of cloth that snored like a saw grating through a log.

On the other side of the tavern, a lanky man rested his arms on a slab of wood with the doorknob still sticking out of the side. Two rickety boxes propped up the makeshift bar.

As Gilliam entered, a grin creased the lanky man's face. "Ho, Gilliam."

"Nantier." Gilliam crossed to the bar, the rushes limp under his boots. Each step released a sweet stink as it should. The cloying perfume of lavender in noble floor coverings stuck in his craw. "Sweet day to you."

"And you." Nantier tapped an ale and pushed the wooden mug across the counter. "Haven't seen you in a dog's age."

Gilliam suppressed a wince as he sat on a rickety box. He should've come to visit more often. And he'd only come now because he had no one else to talk to. "I've been working the Inners." He turned his mug, staring at the good brown ale. The excuse rang hollow. "Shantytown has been mine a long time."

Nantier's help had ensured that, nearly three years ago.

The lanky man leaned on his door again. "Don't be frettin'. You got a city to conquer. Speakin' of, how are the Inners?"

"Everything was good 'til today." Gilliam lifted the tassel dangling from his belt. Gules, the nobles called the color, but he knew blood red when he saw it. It marked him as a dusang mage, one of only two in the Empire who had magic but not a sash.

Two years ago, when the priests had told him he could face the gravastor in the Maiden's Bridge Cave and learn magic, it had seemed like a gift.

The giant beetle spirit had terrified the ever-living shit out of him, but it hadn't killed him, and he'd stood beside the insect on Blood Gate Night. From the far north, elämää had spun through the spirit caves that connected the Empire, and he had helped to return that power to the people.

It had been...amazing. He'd felt like a hero.

After surviving Blood Gate Night, life had been glorious. His plan to conquer Somfaux's underbelly had prospered with just the threat of magic to back him up. He'd all but solidified his hold on souvees of Somfaux. Thieves, footpads, thugs and quick talkers alike, they all knew better than to cross him.

Nantier frowned at the thick red threads of Gilliam's tassel. "Summat wrong with the magic?" Worry etched the words. Somfaux had gained prestige from having their own dusang mage. There was even talk that the town should be called a city now.

"Not the magic, exactly." His suddenly dry mouth drove Gilliam to sip at his ale before continuing.

Though he'd barely touched magic since that night, the presence of the gravastor lingered in the corner of his mind. The spirit had seemed a little darker in the last year, as though a faint shadow lay over its shining form. As he had every time since Blood Gate Night, Gilliam pushed the thought away.

The nobles probably already knew. And anyway, no one had said he had to do anything. And he had problems of his own. The spirit could look after itself.

Scratching the spot on his arm where the gravastor had bitten him, he met Nantier's worried gaze. "Do you know what a sash duel is?"

"Summat to do with nobles?"

The dismissal in Nantier's voice evoked envy in Gilliam. He slugged back another swallow of bitter ale. "Aye, summat to do with nobles. They can challenge down the sash ladder and kill each other, and it ain't murder."

Nantier snorted. "Legal throat-slittin. But what's that to do with the likes of us?"

Gilliam waggled the tassel. "I don't have no sash, but there's some that say the tassel is enough. That I shouldn't have the protection of the rechtshus and should be open to a duel."

That's what his friend Aenor had explained in terse words at the rechtshus. Duke Merin de la Cham, lord of Etendulat and hero in his own right, had sent a chevalier, one Jacques de Peltier, to sniff around Somfaux asking questions about Gilliam. And when the rechtshus questioned noble involvement in a burgher's affairs, this *Jacques* had said that the rechtshus protected peasants from nobles because nobles had magic, so really Gilliam didn't fall under their protection.

He teased out the threads from his tassel as he explained the situation, fear roughening his voice toward the end. He was a dab hand with a dagger. But the chevalier would have trained all his life in magic and sword alike.

"Ha!" Nantier slapped the bar as the story ended, his expression dark. "That ain't right. If'n they want you to be a noble, you should be sashed, not just tasseled."

"That's what I said, but this fella was sent from Iselra by Duke Merin hisself." Gilliam rubbed his palms against the rough canvas of his pants. "And all we got here is the rechtshus, and they're not too sweet on me on account of... you know..."

"Aye. They're right prejudiced against the souvee life." Nantier grinned, but the smile faded fast. "How close are you to gettin dead?"

"Probably less than a day if Jacques finds me." Gilliam stared down into his mug again. Lacings of ale clung to the sides in sad droplets. "That's why I came. You reckon I should run?"

Nantier tapped another ale, a frown drawing his brows together. "No. Where would you run to? They'd know you."

"The north might leave me be." A pre-emptive shiver at the thought of northern winters ran through Gilliam.

"What business would you do up there in the snow?" Nantier snorted. "But speakin' of the north, why don't you call on Lance?"

Gilliam separated the threads of his tassel, laying each one on his black drawstring pants.

Lance, one of the secret aliases of Louis de la Roche, the Duke of Laroche.

Gilliam's fingers trembled as memories of the crazy days when he had met Lance mingled with the dire situation of the present. Nearly three years before, the dangerous and celebrated hero of the Empire had come to Somfaux. Back then, Lance was just his mother's agent—an assassin with a terrifying reputation working without his sash, but not the man the Empire knew and feared as Duke Louis de la Roche.

They'd worked together briefly and destroyed one of Gilliam's competitors for dominance of the souvees of Somfaux.

Afterward, they had parted on good terms, but not as friends. Three years on, Gilliam still sold Louis' agents information, but it had been a long time since he'd heard from the man himself.

"It's risky." Gilliam brought the threads of his tassel together. "He ain't his momma's errand boy no more. Ain't in disguise. Don't do his own killin'. Wouldn't he just side with Duke Merin and make it worse? Been goin' on two years since I heard from him direct."

"Worst he can do is say no." Nantier shrugged. "You're up to your arse in the water and the eels are nibblin' your balls. It's him or run north, and that would be his duchy, anyway. If you go there, he'd know, from what I heard."

Gilliam nodded. "He'd know. And he's always been fair to me. But..." He struggled to find the words to frame his reluctance. A knot of pride, fear, and sheer stubbornness tightened in his chest. He had built his life without a noble's hand guiding or lifting him, and the thought of bending now scraped him raw.

And Duke Louis de la Roche was no ordinary lord. He was the most feared man in the empire, his elämää limitless, his command over magic without peer. They said that if you whispered his name in the dark, he would hear you. And if you insulted him, the shadows themselves would strangle you. Even though Gilliam had met the man, he hesitated to draw on that slender thread.

And he didn't want to bend the knee before the sash.

"Well, I reckon he owes you." Nantier shot Gilliam a sharp look. "You and I, we've kept his secrets. Never leaked even a rumor about who Lance is. Not even when the rechtsprecher was sniffin' around after his friend. We kept our mouths shut though we'd have made a heap of shekels just by sayin' what he'd done here in Somfaux that year. Figure the least he can do is protect you from them as call him equal."

"Huh. Hadn't thought of it that way exactly." The knot in Gilliam's chest eased. Calling in a favor was different from begging for help. "But you got it right. We *have* kept his secrets."

"You got a way to contact him?"

Gilliam's thoughts turned to the blood crystals Louis had pressed on him the day after Blood Gate Night. "*In case you need to reach me personally.*" Well, he had need now. "I do at that. Thanks, Nantier."

"For what?"

"For helpin' pull me head out me ass." Gilliam drained his mug and slapped it back on the counter along with a handful of kwarts to pay for the ale. "I'll come by more often, but I gotta go find me a bluron bird."



Gilliam in Somfaux Market

