

# PART ONE

## The Pond

### I

**F**orest...

At night it whispered to him from the frontiers of sleep where even dreams feared to go, and he would follow it there, to the places he'd known. On waking, a spicy note of pine sometimes lingered on his cheek, and as he strode to work on the hard pavement of New York City as he used to stride through the trees, it seemed he could feel soft, damp earth underfoot.

When everyone had left the office for the day and the great city glittered into splendor outside his window, he would take the few mementos of his boyhood from their drawer: a Roman coin and three pottery shards; a small rolled-up banner with the family coat of arms; a quartz crystal. He'd study these treasures as if for the first time, close his eyes and sigh, for at that moment the forest wrapped its silence around him like river mist. In these weightless arms, he could drift far from the alien world that had eaten at his soul for so long, and he could whisper truthfully, for indeed it seemed so real: *I am home!*

Charles Fontaine possessed a host of memory-ways for slipping into his past. His uncle's domain in the Belgian Ardennes was full of them: the steep forests where oak and yew had witnessed centuries of passages and knew Charles's especially well; and the alley of beeches leading to the pond where the herons fished. (He could walk *that* path in a blindfold.)

And Villa Antioch, of course.

His grandfather had constructed the fading, turreted retreat in the early 1900s in a particularly remote part of the forest and it still had no neighbors. From the terrace, you could look out across an unkempt meadow to the river, and beyond it, to the ruins of Blancheron Castle perched on their lonely ridge.

And then there was the river itself: that moody, unreliable Semois. The tight serpentine wound through sudden fogs and dizzying escarpments and folded epochs between its coils. History grew deep roots here. Its breath was still warm.

A stone bridge spanned the river near Villa Antioch, built by the Romans during their occupation of Gaul. According to the villa's current tenant, Charles's uncle, a horseman occasionally rode across the bridge at dusk. "It's your ancestor, lad: Stephen de la Fontaine!" Theodore liked to tell his wide-eyed nephew of an evening, when vapors blurred the ancient arches. "Depending on the weather, of course," he twinkled. "And how much Merlot you've had at supper."

Strangely, memory always seemed to guide Charles to a single boyhood afternoon. *How was it*, he wondered, *that seventeen years had not diminished its brightness?*

## II

*Nothing is as ancient as the forest, Charles. Except stones, of course. Not even time is as old as stones.*

It was the last summer he would spend in the Ardennes before moving with his father to America. He'd been Charles de la Fontaine back then, a diffident, searching sixteen-year-old from Brussels, and the words had been those of his beloved uncle, Theodore de la Fontaine, professor of history at the *lycée* in Bouillon and local eccentric. Theodore had been wandering the Ardennes and clambering about its medieval vestiges since his own boyhood and knew a thing or two about ancientness.

"Uncle, wait!"

They'd crossed the stone bridge and started up the ridge via a near-vertical path. Autumn had already tainted the summer with morning brume and cold rains and the footing was slick.

"Do you feel it, lad?" Theodore called over his shoulder. "The twelfth century breathing on your neck?" His voice was uncharacteristically somber. They both knew this would be their last scramble up to the Blancheron ruins for a long time.

"Of course I feel it," Charles muttered, lagging behind. He always felt the past on his neck in his uncle's company.

"You'd better remember it, then," Theodore said. "You won't find anything like it in America." The battered leather satchel he carried on forest expeditions swung out from his shoulder and narrowly missed his nephew.

Charles peered up the steep, wooded ridge: a perfect natural defense of rock and trunk. No wonder his ancestor had chosen the spot for his castle. Trees took root in fissures and grew with ghastly deformities, and the rocks themselves, raw sculptures of schist and shale, seemed to have

been tossed about by a sullen spirit. Maugis, perhaps, the enchanter of Ardennes lore. The notion filled Charles with foreboding. Maugis was a shape-shifter; a ne'er-do-well. He could wrap himself in water...melt himself into mist. You never knew in what cave or pool he might be lurking.

Charles grasped a birch trunk and leaned out to watch the river glisten far below. *Stephen de la Fontaine had probably scabbled up this very same shale nine centuries ago*, he thought. Then, with a frisson: *Someone else might have, too*.

"Maybe Duke Godfrey passed by here," Charles shouted ahead to his uncle, letting go of the birch to climb on. His boot let loose a volley of scree. Humidity clung to his chestnut curls and pressed them against his temples.

Theodore halted, breathing heavily. It always amazed Charles that his uncle could haul his heavy bulk up the ridge at all let alone wander for hours through the forest.

"Well, I don't know about that," Theodore said. "Bouillon Castle is over twenty kilometers away, after all. And Godfrey died in Jerusalem in 1100, remember—before Blancheron was even built. Stephen de la Fontaine didn't come back from the Holy Land until 1103, as you know."

"Yes, I know," Charles sighed. He'd already spent eight summers with Theodore and knew more about the medieval goings-on in this corner of Belgium than most post-graduate students. He'd taken to the subject with all the zeal his uncle possessed even if, at times, Theodore tended to repeat himself unduly.

Uncle never said much about Godfrey, though. Of all the figments that roamed these woods—fairies, gnomes, will-o'-the-wisps, witches—the presence of Godfrey of Bouillon was the most confounding.

There were many intriguing holes in his story, for one thing. For another, historians could never quite reconcile the fact that a leader of the First Crusade, who'd performed unspeakable acts with a sword that most scholars of medieval history could hardly have lifted, had also been remembered as a man who was modest, virtuous and kind. He'd been tall, fair and handsome, too, as it happened, so it was no wonder that he'd become an icon of chivalry. He'd powered popular imagination for centuries—and Charles's for all of his boyhood—until modern critics finally weighed in and declared the fair duke from the Ardennes a murdering thug.

*Godfrey...Godefroid...Godefroy...Gottvart...* Charles knew all the variations of the name. *The Duke of Lower Lorraine*. The nobleman haunted these woodlands even when no mention of him was made.

"Such an outsized historical figure for such a modest little realm!" Theodore liked to say. He never missed a chance to remind his nephew that technically, Godfrey was Belgian, not French. "Oh, all right, lad. He might have been born in Boulogne, it's true, which is in France. But he also might have been born in Baisy, which is now in Belgium. You decide."

Guiltily, with forbidden hero-worship, Charles would read late into the night about the medieval neighbor whose afterlife had turned out to be so troublesome. And what light work it was to cross nine centuries!

*August 15, 1096*. A Saturday. (Theodore was a mine of interesting tidbits.) Partly cloudy, with a slight breeze lifting the banners. The air reeked of dung and sweat. The scene played out clearly before Charles's eyes:

## THE HERON LEGACY

Godfrey, a descendant of Charlemagne himself, appeared at the gates of Bouillon Castle not on a sleek charger but on his sturdy *ardennais*, a horse described by Julius Caesar as rustic, hard and tireless. The duke seemed pale; distracted. He glanced back over his shoulder, memorizing, perhaps, the gray stone contours of his home. *Or was he looking for someone in the crowd?*

“What was he feeling that day, do you think?” Charles pressed his uncle, as it was he who’d taught him that history lived in such details. “Godfrey was leaving everything behind, wasn’t he? His duchy...his beloved mother.”

“Yes, you’re right,” said Theodore. “He probably wasn’t feeling the exaltation of a pious Christian heading to Jerusalem, I can tell you that. Just think of all the noise and smell of departure! The terror of the unknown. Legend is rarely as glorious as it seems, lad. No, indeed. How would *you* feel before riding a horse through hostile territory for over four thousand kilometers? In truth, Godfrey probably slept badly the night before and woke up with indigestion.”

*Why did he never marry?* Charles wondered. *Did he go to Jerusalem not planning to return?* Godfrey haunted history books with the same elusiveness that he haunted the woods around Villa Antioch, and thus the duke, whose castle brooded above the same river as Blancheron, kept Charles awake late into the evening. The boy would glance up from his books and hold his breath, wondering if he might have company in the shadows of the turret room where he lodged during the summer. Sometimes he would get out of bed and look down at the Roman bridge far below, considering that perhaps the horseman who clattered across the stones at twilight was not the ghost of his own ancestor at all, but of someone else.