

1.

The thirst. It's the first thing I have to fight every morning. Every time I wake up. My tongue, dry and rough, the roof of my mouth parched, that thick, stale taste clinging inside. I haven't eaten since yesterday morning. I'm holding on. I know a good infusion of Sorge leaves is waiting for me. My father makes it every day. It helps keep the hunger at bay. The mentholated taste, steeped and slightly bitter, mixed with a faint illusion of fresh bread, gives us that feeling of fullness everyone is chasing here in Alen and across three-quarters of the southern countries. I force myself to get up. Another day of dryness and suffocating heat awaits me, as always. My feet touch the clay floor, already warm. Once on my feet, I fold my straw blanket back onto my earthen bed, straightening it slightly. I glance through the only window or rather, the small porthole that passes for one. A single ray of sunlight slips through, lighting up the room. It doesn't take much to brighten this little clay sphere I call a bedroom. "Bedroom" is a generous word, anyway. I

sleep here. That's it. Aside from my bed, a small bedside table, and a wardrobe pressed against the wall, there's nothing else. It's enough for me. I don't like staying inside this hut. It feels too tight, too confining. I'd rather be outside, in the open air. In fact, that's where I spend most of my time, three quarters of it. The rest I use to sleep and to prepare whatever little food I manage to gather. I push open the wooden door and step out of the room. It takes me less than ten steps to reach the kitchen. Clay countertops, built-in storage, a small round wooden table with two chairs, that's what a kitchen in Alen looks like. Of course, not all of them are identical, but most follow the same design. When I walk in, my father is stirring a pot set over heated granite slabs. I've always thanked fate for the existence of those stones. Black as coal, they let us heat whatever we need. All it takes is rubbing one against another, and warmth is born. The faster you rub, the more intense the heat becomes.

ME

— Good morning, Father.

FATHER

— Good morning, Liliacéane.

He barely dares to look at me. My father and I have nothing in common. Everyone in the village of Alen would tell you the same. He is dark-skinned, with an unrefined face. His eyes constantly carry a quiet sadness, a lack of joy. He's tall, lightly built, yet seems fragile. He neglects his tightly coiled hair cut in a rough, rounded shape so much that it's as dry as the straw scattered across the fields of the Alen valley. I am his opposite. That's what people say. Because of my mother. She was beautiful. She was killed for it.