“I’m willing to accept five hundred for five.” The marked man took a deep drink from the thick-cut glass tumbler and set it gently back on the stone desk. Grape brandy - native to Adalos and strictly regulated - was no little courtesy. The smooth, sweet flavour lingered on his tongue as he felt the pleasant burn grow in his chest.
The man sitting opposite had skin the colour of light leather which wrinkled into a smile. His long, brown hair was tied back by a twine headband decorated in small strips of copper. A strange sort of crown, even if he wouldn’t admit it so.

“Well that’s excellent! Both parties happy, eh? A rarity for most, I should think. ” The man picked the clay jug off the granite desk and moved to pour more brandy into the marked man’s glass.
“No, no more thank you. Maybe later.” The marked man spoke softly before leaning back in his chair and flexing his fingers.The negotiating was over now. Mostly.

“A fair decision. You’ll have to try some of our coppershine later, Solmon. Very popular. We’ve just had a new distillery in Dhaaldram for it.” The man poured himself some of the pale amber brandy before plucking a sheet of parchment off a wooden shelf behind him, “Do you want a drafter or shall we just sort it ourselves?”

“I’m sure we can sort it ourselves. But there’s a few details I need to mention. Can you provide detailed schematics for your machines, your process to make them and your alloy compositions? ” Solmon listed them off smoothly, as though by rote. He needed to get every advantage he could. He watched the man carefully. Had he pushed it too far?

“Oh yes, I can provide that. That’d be no trouble at all,” The man unstoppered an inkwell and dipped a quill in the sinuous black substance, “Anything else?”

Solmon unconsciously touched his neck. “Yes. One more thing. I need to see one. Working. You’ve promised that they’re what we want, but let me be the judge of that. Show me one. Can you do that, Aldrahn?” Maybe a bit too insolent. He watched the *Daito-Taen* calmly.

Aldrahn let out a short laugh. “I probably should’ve started with that. Yes, come follow me. There’s a place for it,” He got up and walked to the door behind Solmon, “It shouldn’t take long.” For the leader of a nation, he was awfully…chirpy.

Solomon nodded and downed the remainder of his drink before standing. He clasped his cloak around himself and followed Aldrahn; he was maybe a head taller than the man, though that was to be expected around these parts. Adalan people were not known for their height. Aldrahn walked amiably through his home as his butler came up and exchanged some quick words with him
“The guild wish to discuss recent exports for their goods, it seems a few convoys have been delayed by the storms…”
“Yes, I should be able to meet them tonight . How many want to talk?
“Tharan speaks for the metalworkers and Dagan for the woodworkers, though I should warn you, Dagan seems more impassioned about this matter than usual…”

Solmon lazily glanced around Aldrahn's home as they walked down the stairs, his eyes flicking across the many book spines that were stacked all across the shelf walls. The *Daito-Taen* was certainly a well read man, the books seemed to cover everything from agriculture to religious texts, but it was hard to tell how sharp he really was.

The city of Dhaaldram was set at the base of a mountain, with great caverns below and great towers above that had dominated the city's silhouette as Solmon rode in. Yet, Aldrahn's humble house was set away from the base of the fortress; Those great towers were primarily for the use of the guild and the bank, as Aldrahn himself had insisted. The man preferred things simple.

"-that'll be all, Drenno, thank you," Aldrahn unlocked his door, "If you could leave the letters on my desk, I'd appreciate it."

Solmon pulled his hood over his head and wrapped his cowl around his lower face. It was about midday and a warmer clime than he was accustomed to, but the cloak remained unnaturally cool. "How far?"

"Not far." Aldrahn began to walk.

Solmon couldn't help but look up at the towers as they walked along the paved street. A stone behemoth that bore a slanted base, reaching far into the sky like some needle thin mountain. He could now see huge, haughty aqueducts that lined the mountainside above, growing faint from the thin fog up high. The people of Dhaaldram had wholly conquered the mountain. Impressive, from the hands of men.

There were people milling about the streets, pushing carts, attending stalls and bartering viciously. The air was thick with dust, the oily scents of food and the shared breath of a bustling city. Solmon kept his head down but fingered the sword by his hip. Crowds were uneasy places. Too many people for him to watch. A man had followed Solmon on his journey here, he was certain of it- he'd seen shadows on the ship and felt eyes on the road- and let the Gods damn him to the Shadow and back if he didn't catch that godforsaken whoreson. Always, always one of those *mongrels* tailing him, even if he couldn't see them. He'd find the bastard, corner him and shove his sword through his bloody- no. Solmon closed his eyes. No. *No.* He breathed out slowly and loosened his grip. It was not the time for such thoughts. It didn't matter. He forced his eyes open.

"... and I'm sure you've seen our main church. Are you a religious man, Solmon?" Aldrahn pointed to a familiar, geometric building carved from slabs of pale stone.
Seemed like the churches were similar across countries; Solmon sharply exhaled through his nose -the closest he was getting to a laugh- and spoke after a moment's hesitation.

"Every man is a religious man. Everyone believes in something, be it the Gods, or the absence of Gods, or-" Solmon's mouth switched and he stopped for a moment, "Sorry. That was unnecessary. Yes. I believe. I believe in all the seven Gods and the Order that proceeds them. My work is easier if I do."

“Of course of course, I should’ve known. There’s rarely a sigillist that doesn’t believe. Tell me, what is it like to get those dreams? I’ve never had one myself.”

“Sometimes they’re comforting. Promising even. Sometimes they’re damning. Hopeless. It all depends on what the Order dictates.”

“But isn’t it strange, having your future splayed out-”

Someone was looking at him.
Solmon stopped walking. The flesh on his nape prickled. Someone was looking at him, no, more than that, someone was *observing* him. Perceiving him, intently. Solmon’s skin crawled. His hand slowly drifted to the firm hilt of his blade.
“Solmon?” Aldrahn had stopped a couple paces ahead.
The marked man slowly turned around. His eyes flicked erratically across the streets, scanning the windows, the rooftops, the shadowed alleys before they locked with another’s. A boy. Maybe a young man, with short brown hair, a soot-smeared, bony face and quiet eyes. He wasn’t hidden, in fact, he was just sitting plainly at a table with another youth who were dicing. The boy turned away, abashed, looking down at the ground. Just a boy. Yet Solmon’s mind itched with a faint recognition. Had he seen him before? Or had he seen a flash of his face in a dream? Solmon stared at the boy’s face for a moment longer, attempting to dredge up the memory, but it was worthless.
He shook his head and turned around. Not a hunter. Just a boy. He’d probably meet him again soon enough.

“Are you okay?” Aldrahn had a touch of concern in his voice.

“Yes. I mistook someone. Ignore me.”

Aldrahn shrugged and they carried on walking. There was a brief silence as distant bells rang across the air, but the city remained largely lively. Solmon realised they were walking to the great towers, circling around the base of the mountain towards the tall, sun bleached walls of the fortress. Thin buttresses branched out from the towers like inverted tree branches, and flung a web of shadows across the streets.

“How many people know about this operation?”

“Not many. Guild members I trust. They’ve little reason to sell this information.” There was a great courtyard outside the towers with controlled rows of greenery: staunch trees grew up from clipped patches of grass amidst the expanse of sharp-cut tiles. The grand wooden doors at the base of the tower were open, with scribes scurrying in and out. The inside was spacious with great torches blazing along the walls; an imperial staircase carved from polished granite rose to the first floor, and the side walls were riddled with doorways and corridors. There were faint clangs of smithery that rang across the hall.
Aldrahn walked through a doorway, down some stairs, winded through some more corridors before finally stopping at a blank stone wall. He muttered under his breath “Now, where is it?” as he pushed against the mortared stone. Solmon couldn’t quite catch what he did, but there was a click, an “ah, there” as a door sized piece of wall swung inwards.

They entered into a fairly large room, again carved from rock, but the air was bitter. Iron tools hung from hooks on the walls. There was a furnace embedded in one end with a roaring fire, and beside it stood a mottled anvil.
“I think they’ve gone for lunch.”
Aldrahn swung the door shut and led Solmon to a side room. This chamber had wooden walls with tables covered in alchemical instruments: Vials of a yellow solid, coiled glass tubes connected to flasks of murky liquid and an array of bottled black powders. A small operation.
“Better safe than sorry,” There were racks to the side where a handful of the elongated devices lay, and Aldrahn grabbed one, “Don’t want those flames anywhere near my chemicals.” He handed it over for Solmon to inspect.

It had a long and slender body of rich, oiled wood that expanded near the back as a shoulder brace. A thin hollow tube of metal extended along and past the wood, strapped to it by bands of copper, and a small collection of metal levers and bits jutted out from the right, near to the rear.

“The lock…looks different.” Solmon inspected the mechanism. There was a small piece of metal that had a piece of flint screwed in between its jaws; He slowly cocked it back, feeling it push against an unseen spring, before it gave a definitive *click* and stopped moving.

“Your, ah, *antagonists*, shall we say, seem to use a lock with a spring loaded wheel and pyrite. From what I’ve heard at least. We managed to make those, yes, but we’ve also managed to iterate a more accurate and efficient lock. A flint lock, if you will. Here, let me show you.” Aldrahn took a vial of black powder off the side, flicked open a cap on the lock and poured a bit in. He shut it, lay the gun vertical and poured the rest of the powder down the muzzle.
“Could you grab me a piece of cloth and a ball?” Aldrahn motioned to the side where several small squares of cloth lay beside a tray of lead balls. Solmon obliged, carefully observing. Aldrahn placed the wad of cloth and the ball at the muzzle and, using a thin metal pole, rammed the whole thing down the barrel.
“Have you fired one before?” Aldrahn laid the pole to the side.
“Never.”
“Then, best I do it,” The *Daito-taen* hefted the musket up to his shoulder, “Oh gods, this is one of the ones without sights.” He shut one eye and peered down the barrel, towards the far wooden wall, “If you’ll excuse my aim, Solmon.”

A crack of thunder split the air, like the sharp snap of a whip that left a loud, ringing silence. Solmon hadn’t flinched, but his hand was resting on his hilt again, if unconsciously. A thick plume of metallic, sulphurous smoke diffused across the room and Aldrahn let the musket swing down.

“How’s that? Not bad, right?” The man was grinning.
Solmon exhaled through his nose again and walked to the wall. It was already covered in spherical indents and broken splinters of wood, but he found the lead ball that had sunk deep into the wood.

“Not bad at all.” Too deep to dig out right now. He turned around, “Very impressive in fact, Aldrahn. But this seems like a fairly small operation right now. How long would it take you for the five hundred muskets?”

“A year, maybe. I can fund quite a lot of smiths to make individual, mundane parts, and have a small team create and assemble the more important elements.”

“Won’t the funded smiths put two and two together? Mention their strange commissions?”

“Oh no no, that’d be unlikely. They’d be making hollow metal tubes, metal poles, that sort of thing. Strange, yes, that's for sure, but if they could work out what was happening, I’d be bloody impressed!”

Solmon nodded, “This is good. I’ve seen what I need to see now.”

“But Solmon, this hardly seems fair.” Aldrahn grinned as the marked man narrowed his eyes. “I have proven the capabilities of my end of the bargain,so surely, is it not only fair that I see your end?” Aldrahn smiled boyishly, “Please, show me fabled powers of the esteemed Cahlian sigillists. You promised five amongst your best, and you are no doubt one of the best.”

The corners of Solmon’s lips just barely quirked up.

“You are quite a prudent man. Very well, I can show you what Cahel Rul’s sigillists have to offer, but know this: You shall not have me. You shall have five among the best, five fully fledged sigillists that have wholly passed their teachings at the tower, but you will not have our very best,” Solmon flexed his fingers beneath his cloak, “I can do many things. But I am not a performing monkey to be jibed and jeered at. What is it that you want in our sigillists? I could cleave mountains and sunder castles, I could shatter rock with a pen and ink, I could split the skies open and call down the powers of the very Gods,” Solmon looked down at Aldrahn and stared into his eyes, “What is it that you want?”

“Show me,” Aldrahn spoke slowly and without looking away, “How you might kill a man.”

The silence stretched out for a while, punctuated only by the faint crackle of the forge fire.

“Hah.” Solmon forced out a laugh, “Yes. Killing. Why else,” He breathed, “Fine. I’ll show you how a sigillist kills.” He walked slowly to the wall speckled by gunshots, and stood there, “You’re going to load your gun and shoot at me. And then I will come over and ‘kill’ you.”

“You want me to shoot at you?”

“Anywhere you like. And defend yourself however you like too.”

Aldrahn shrugged and began reloading the gun. Solmon unhooked his scabbard and held the covered blade in his right hand, whilst his left hand thumbed his cloak. He didn’t need to check; his life had always hung on his sigils.

“Ready?” Aldrahn hoisted the gun up.

“Are you?”

Aldrahn let out a laugh. And then fired.

The thunder shook the room again but there was a new sound: A dissonant *clank*, like a bell being hit by an axe, which rang with a flash of sparks right before Solmon’s face. But no bullet bit his flesh. The man hadn’t even flinched, he’d already leapt half the span of the room, and by the other he’d brandished his sheathed sword. With his left hand he grabbed the musket, tore it from Aldrahn’s grasp, and threw it down before slamming into the man with his shoulder hurling him against the wall. Solmon lunged forward and grabbed him by the throat, choking him against the wall so that his feet barely touched the ground.
“Now imagine I stab you,” Solmon scraped his sword against the wooden wall, “or burn you or crush you.”

Aldrahn’s teeth were grit but he was looking at Solmon with a glint in his eyes.
The *Daito-taen*’*s* hand flashed silver as he thrust a dagger towards Solmon’s gut; Another *clang* echoed out as the blade ricocheted off something a handspan away from the cloak.

“Now I’d cut off your arms” Solmon let go of Aldrahn and the man collapsed onto the floor, heaving breath and rubbing his neck, “Was that sufficient?”

“*Haah, hah*…” Aldrahn gulped down air and turned to face Solmon, “I, *hah*, I think that was *exemplary*…*hah*. Thank you.”

Solmon buckled his sword back onto his belt before he helped the man up.

“Let’s get this down in writing, eh?” Aldarhn rubbed his neck again, “Gods, you were like a vice. Hopefully some coppershine can soothe this out. Hah.”

Solmon followed the man out. He didn’t say a word, just looked back at the guns with a sickening feeling in his gut.